March 2021

Making Room for Fat Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education

Wesley Heath

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MAKING ROOM FOR FAT STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The College of Human Sciences and Education

by

Wesley Heath
B.A. Manchester University, 2014
M.A. Ball State University, 2016
March 2021
I dedicate my dissertation to my grandmother, Charlene “Susie” Holsinger (June 18, 1941–July 15, 2020). Grandma Sue spent much of her life in education; she worked for decades as a custodian at Anderson Community Schools, and after she retired, she began working as a teacher’s aide for special needs students at East Side Middle School. Grandma Sue loved helping others, and she understood that education requires a lot of helping hands; from teachers and administrators to custodians, every job matters. She supported me as a first-generation college student, and she made it a point to tell me every time we spoke how proud she was of me, my work, and my education. She passed away two weeks before my proposal defense at the age of 79, and I think about her every day.

I love you Grandma Sue, and this dissertation is dedicated to you.
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ABSTRACT

Sizeism is often called the last acceptable form of prejudice in our social world. Weight discrimination has been widely documented in job searches, doctors’ offices, promotions, wage gaps, education, and even courtrooms. Despite decades of critical weight scholarship, little research has been done on fat higher education employees. Using the critical theory and the fat studies theoretical framework, this phenomenological study explores bias, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by fat student affairs professionals on college campuses. Four overarching research questions were identified and focused on the following topics: the limitations of physical space on college campuses, perceptions of available resources, stereotypes of fat bodies, and discrimination against fat employees. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, and six salient themes emerged involving health consequences, lack of support, and prejudice in the workplace—all of which are leading to participants’ interest in leaving higher education. To combat this, participants noted that they practiced self-advocacy, formed support groups, and helped raise awareness around issues of fatness on campus.

Participants also noted resources that should be added within higher education to increase job satisfaction. This study adds to the literature the experiences of fat student affairs professionals, as well as the policies and practices that impact their recruitment and retention within the field of higher education.

Keywords: fat studies, fat stigma, weight discrimination, sizeism, higher education, phenomenology, critical theory, health at every size (HAES), student affairs professional
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Weight-based stigma and discrimination has been considered by many to be the last justifiable form of prejudice in our social world (Bowden, 2012; see also Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013), and that “persons with obesity are considered acceptable targets of stigma” (Kahan, 2016, para. 2). For many scholars, the medical industry’s biased message on obesity combined with the stereotypes that fat individuals are largely unaware of their health and unmotivated to lose weight led to the “war on obesity” that utilizes guilt and shame as weapons to convince society to become thinner (Cameron, 2015). For example, in 2012 a news anchor in Wisconsin received an email from a viewer who claimed that the anchor’s size was promoting unhealthy choices to viewers and asked her to reconsider her role in the public sphere (Bowden, 2012). More recently, HBO talk show host Bill Maher utilized his platform to call for an increase in weight-based prejudice: “Fat-shaming does not need to end. It needs to make a comeback” he stated (Bill Maher as quoted in Dicker, 2019, para. 3). We live in a society that teaches weight bias to children as young as three years old, and it is believed that shaming someone for their weight helps motivate them to make healthier decisions (Brody, 2017).

Weight bias, or negative judgment toward fat individuals, has been well documented in “employment, education, the media, health care, and even in relationships with family members, parents, and teachers” (Brody, 2017, para. 7). Researchers have also found explicit weight bias within the judicial system (Schvey et al., 2013), pointing out something important about society’s perception of large-bodied people: they simply do not have the same morals as thin people. In other words, “thinness has come to symbolize important values in our society, values
such as discipline, hard work, ambition, and willpower. If you’re not thin, then you don’t have [these values]” (Puhl, as quoted in Neporent, 2013, para. 6).

Weight shaming, or bullying someone based on their size, is believed to be a tool that can be used to motivate an “overweight” person into losing weight (Hunger et al., 2020). However, the use of shaming practices leads to internalized weight (or “fat”) stigma. Weight stigma, the internalization of negative beliefs about one’s own weight, has been well documented as a perpetuator of poor mental and physical health, which often leads to depression, anxiety, and even weight gain (Brody, 2017). Kahan (2016) calls weight stigma “one of the most damaging aspects of … our thin-obsessed society” (para. 1). “Fat stigma is rarely challenged and often ignored. In effect, it is the last acceptable prejudice” (Neporent, 2013, para. 13). Furthermore, one study found that while nearly all implicit attitudes (such as race and sexual orientation) in the United States have gradually decreased over time, biases related to weight have increased (Implicit Attitudes Can Change, 2019). In short, weight-based prejudice is not only common, but its presence is also a growing concern.

**Fat Studies and Higher Education**

As Bobbi Reidinger (2020), a researcher and doctoral candidate, points out, “fat bodies are routinely discriminated against in other areas of American society, [and] we have no reason to believe that discrimination is absent within the academy” (para. 4). Terah Stewart (2018), a doctoral student in a student affairs Ph.D. program, recalls dealing with fatphobia in everyday life and on college campuses. He states:

Fat people are told to diet, given suggestions to have surgery, and offered recommendations for extreme exercise which tell us that we can—and should—rid ourselves of our very selves. We are told that there is an ideal physical body, and fat(ter) bodies are not the ideal. As someone who has had to navigate an oppressive system at multiple social identity levels, fatphobia still seems to be an acceptable form of bias, including on our college campuses. (Stewart, 2018, p. 31)
College campuses are “extensions of society fraught by hierarchies and structures of dominance;” therefore, it is important to understand how “dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression, often expressed as fatphobia, fat hatred, and fat bullying, are being addressed within spaces and places of teaching and learning” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2).

In fact, research has already been conducted on college campuses and it is evident that fat faculty and students regularly experience bias, prejudice, and discrimination on college campuses (Cameron, 2015, 2016; Fisanick, 2007; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Stewart, 2018). Cameron (2016) notes:

To date, obesity stigma in higher education has been shown to negatively affect students’ experiences in higher education (Brown, 2012; Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Kingkade, 2013). It has also been said to negatively influence graduate school admission (Burmeister, Kiefner, Carels, & Musher-Eizenman, 2013), tenure and promotion processes (Fisanick, 2006), instructor credibility (Bacon, 2009; Longhurst, 2012), and faculty development (Murray, 2005; Pausé, 2012). (p. 112)

However, despite the numerous studies and personal testimonials that document weight bias on college campuses, very few solutions have been enacted. Dr. Puhl, a renowned author on weight bias, mentioned in a published interview that “there has been little systemic effort taken in the schools’ environment to address this problem…although many schools do have anti-bullying policies in place, many don’t mention body weight as a characteristic that is vulnerable to bullying [or discrimination]” (Matsumoto, 2013, p. 1). In fact, only one state, Michigan, offers protections against weight-based discrimination, and these protections extend only to public colleges and universities within its borders (Taking Legal Action, n.d.). Only a handful of other institutions offer such protections among the thousands of colleges and universities within the United States. In other words, despite growing concerns of weight-based prejudice within society and across systems of education, protections for higher education employees are exceptionally rare.
Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals are a meaningful part of the higher education culture and are often charged with supporting students’ personal, professional, and academic development dating back to the early 1900s (Long, 2012). Student affairs professionals are charged with “educating the whole student” (p. 7) and developing key competency areas outside of the classroom, such as civic engagement, leadership, and social justice (Long, 2012). For example, NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) outlines several focus areas within student affairs such as policy and advocacy, campus engagement, diversity, and career development (NASPA, n.d.). Many of these professionals also provide service to the functions of the university, providing care for students in less direct ways:

Student affairs represents such a wide and diverse range of functions that many student affairs professionals may be in direct contact with students infrequently. Many student affairs professionals … may serve primarily administrative functions, but their overall work is still centered around services for students. (Long, 2012, p. 8)

In other words, student affairs professionals oversee a variety of campus operations beyond student development, such as community and alumni engagement, health and wellness, and event management offices, touching nearly every functional area of the university.

Diversity and social justice initiatives have become staples of the student affairs profession starting in the 80s and 90s as student demographics began rapidly shifting:

The number of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students enrolled in higher education grew at all types of colleges and universities. Women students increased to more than 60 percent of college students nationwide … and [LGBTQ+] students were significantly more visible on college campuses. (Long, 2012, p. 5)

Student affairs associations began calling for increased diversity competencies among professionals in the field. The Task Force for the Future of Student Affairs (a NASPA and ACPA, the American College Personnel Association, collaboration) released a final report in
2010 that reaffirmed this notion remarking: “student affairs professionals must become more skillful in working with diverse learners and more attentive to policies that create barriers for those who may not fit the traditional image of a college student or of how college is experienced” (Task Force, 2010).

Today, diversity remains crucial to the field of student affairs; however, body size diversity is not mentioned. NASPA’s current website states: “encouraging an understanding of and respect for diversity, believing in the worth of individuals, and supporting students in their development are just some of the core concepts of the student affairs profession” (NASPA, n.d.). NASPA and ACPA, two of the largest professional associations for student affairs professionals, both have extensive diversity, equity, and inclusion statements and resources, none of which include body size or weight. For example, ACPA’s Equity and Inclusion statement recognizes “intersections of race, age, color, disability, faith, religion, ancestry, national origin, citizenship, sex, sexual orientation, social class, economic class, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, and all other identities represented among our diverse membership” (ACPA, n.d.). The acknowledgement of sizeism and weight discrimination within higher education is largely absent outside the field of critical weight scholarship and fat studies.

Fat studies research within higher education has uncovered weight-based discrimination, but studies have focused primarily on the experiences of faculty and students. The experiences of staff, and more specifically, student affairs professionals, have been overlooked. Moreover, NASPA and ACPA both provide affinity groups that to support professionals within the field in terms of race, sexuality, religion, etc.; however, neither group has identified support networks related to body size for the nearly 22,500 people in their combined membership (ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d.). Moreover, a survey conducted in 2020 indicates that there are well over 250,000
student affairs professionals in the United States (Bichsel et al., 2020). With over 80 percent of U.S. adults meeting the clinical standard of “overweight” (Hobbes, 2018), it is clear that the field of student affairs is not one-size-fits-all. This research is necessary to better understand the experiences of fat student affairs professionals by filling in the literature gap and informing the policies and practices of higher education institutions that support fat student affairs professionals’ recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction.

Keywords and Definitions

Before getting heavily into the research problem and the literature, it is essential to identify and define some of the commonly used words, phrases, and concepts used throughout this paper.

Fat, Overweight, Obese, and Larger-Bodied

Within the field of fat studies, the word “fat” is often used as the descriptor of choice to replace words like “obese” or “overweight.” As described by Lee (2012), “the fat community has taken ‘fat’ on, treating the word as a neutral descriptor in order to reclaim it and reduce its power as a negative” (para. 6). The word “overweight” is seldom used in fat studies as it implies that there is a normal weight that fat individuals are exceeding. “Obese” is a largely medicalized word with Latin roots meaning “having eaten until fat” (Lee, 2012, para. 6), and therefore carries stigmatization and perpetuates the stereotype that fat people eat too much.

“Larger-bodied” and “fat” are sometimes used interchangeably but carry different implications. “Fat” is often used by individuals who are a part of the fat acceptance movement but may still carry negative connotations for some people. For example, Stewart (2018) states, “I am fat. I use that word deliberately, because society tells each of us in overt and covert ways that being fat is bad” (p. 31). “Larger-bodied” is used as a less stigmatizing word of choice but has
little connection to fat studies or the fat acceptance movement. Recognizing that some individuals feel stigmatized by the word “fat,” participants in the study will have the option to select their own descriptor of choice. Words like “obese” and “overweight” are still used in this paper when quoting source materials.

**Weight Bias and Fatphobia**

Weight bias is defined as “an inclination of temperament or outlook” or “a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgement” about weight (Brownell, 2005, p. 9). Stewart (2018) defines fatphobia as “…a function of a pervasive and broad thin-centric cultural that places types of physical bodies in hierarchical terms, which fat being of the worst kind of bodies a person could have” (p. 31). In other words, weight bias or fatphobia refers to the negative beliefs and attitudes that some individuals hold against fat people.

**Weight Prejudice**

Weight prejudice is similar to bias but includes some level of action, whether overt or covert, such as microaggressions. It can be defined as “an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual” regarding someone’s body size or weight (Brownell, 2005, p. 9).

**Weight/Fat Stigma**

Weight stigma refers to “a mark of shame or discredit” that affects how fat individuals are perceived in the social world, and how fat individuals perceive themselves (Brownell, 2005, p. 9). Internalized weight stigma leads to a greater likelihood of depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Lupton, 2013).

**Weight Discrimination**

Weight discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of fat individuals due to prejudicial attitudes toward body size. Some scholars refer to this as sizeism. Lupton (2013) notes that
weight-based discrimination on a societal level has led to fat people being statistically “more likely to live in poverty, earn less income or be unemployed, have lower education levels, be employed in lower status jobs, and experience lower living standards” (para. 3). Weight discrimination can range from overt prejudicial actions against one person to systemic oppression more broadly.

**Fat Acceptance**

The fat acceptance movement is built upon researchers and activists who “challenge simplistic assumptions that thin people are healthy, virtuous, and responsible citizens whereas fat people are diseased, morally culpable, and unable to control their appetites” (Lupton, 2016, para. 7).

**Fat Studies**

“Fat studies is an academic area of research and scholarship…that [focuses] attention on the social, cultural, historical, and political aspects” of fatness and the way fat individuals are “portrayed and treated” (Lupton, 2016, para. 1). Fat studies is also a theoretical framework within the critical paradigm with a set of core tenets (Brown, 2016). Fat studies is also sometimes referred to as “critical weight studies” and works to answer questions like “what is it like to be a fat person in a fat-shaming world?” (Lupton, 2016, para. 11).

**Health at Every Size (HAES)**

HAES is a movement and a set of principles formulated by scholars and medical professionals who practice size acceptance over intentional, unhealthy weight loss. HAES focuses on holistic, healthy behaviors that are unique to the individual (Lee, 2012; Lupton, 2016).
Introduction to Conceptual Framework

This study uses critical theory, a theoretical framework utilized frequently within the field of fat studies, to take an interpretive phenomenological look at the experiences of fat student affairs professionals in higher education. Critical theory, fat studies, and interpretive phenomenology combined create a practical conceptual framework for this study as all three focus on individual lived experiences and how experiences manifest into greater social realities (see Figure 1 in Appendix A). Upon separation, each component provides something unique to the study: critical theory, for example, discusses power and privilege (Creswell & Poth, 2018); fat studies offers insight into activism, language, and the systemic oppression surrounding fatness (Cameron & Russell, 2016); and phenomenology offers an interpretive approach understanding the essence of a particular social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Critical Theory

Critical theory is often used within qualitative research to study “social institutions and their transformations through the meanings of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and [as] a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 29). Critical theory fits the parameters of this study because of its interest in answering real-world problems by informing policy and practice. As a theoretical framework, it is transformative and pragmatic (Creswell & Poth, 2018), both of which are also goals of fat studies (Brown, 2016). Moreover, critical theory functions as a foundation for feminist theory, critical race theory, disability theory, and queer theory, which have all been used by fat studies researchers (Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2010).
Fat Studies

Fat studies is a new field of research with a steadily growing body of literature. Fat studies is a field within the critical analysis framework in which common stereotypes, stigmas, and prejudices are studied as perpetuators of discrimination and systems of oppression against fat individuals. While fat studies is a relatively young field of study, only having been around for a few decades, it follows many of the core tenets used by critical theory predecessors (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009). Fat studies exists as a counter-narrative to the “harmful and oppressive assumptions, behaviors, and actions” of society’s discourse on obesity and weight-based health concerns (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, fat studies researchers argue that weight-loss culture and the idea of a perfect body contribute to creating systems of oppression, which disadvantages fat individuals.

Fat studies is not only a field of research, but it is also a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze and interpret data. Fat studies has four core tenets that guide researchers to focus on: (a) the interrelatedness of scholarship and activism, (b) language as a tool to empower dominant identities, (c) the problematic medical rhetoric that further marginalizes fat individuals, and (d) individuals’ experiences of stigma and discrimination (Brown, 2016). Each of these tenets is rooted in social justice with the goal of ending the marginalization of fat individuals.

Phenomenology

Critical theory, fat studies, and phenomenology are all qualitative frameworks through which social justice research has been conducted. Phenomenology is particularly useful for this study because it provides a method for investigating fatness as a social phenomenon. “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence…” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Phenomenological
studies often explore “what was experienced” and “how it was experienced” through a qualitative process, then analyze the data to find themes that provide a better understanding of a particular social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The use of a phenomenological approach for this study was essential for taking a critical look at how weight-based stigma and discriminatory practices have shaped fat student affairs professionals’ experiences. Moreover, phenomenology has provided an appropriate method for collecting and analyzing data related to the shared lived experience of fatness among the participants to answer the research questions and develop appropriate policy and practice implications for higher education institutions. Concurrently, critical theory and fat studies have provided appropriate lenses to interpret the data.

**Major Issues**

While the field of fat studies is quite expansive, covering topics from childhood socialization through retirement home caregiving, this study focuses on student affairs professionals’ experiences within higher education. A preliminary look at the prevalence of weight stigma, fatphobia, and weight-based discrimination was conducted to better define the program, inform the research questions, and guide the literature review. To help organize these thoughts, Cameron and Russell’s (2016) book, *The Fat Pedagogy Reader*, was utilized. This book was written for educators interested in combatting weight-based oppression through common social justice tenets, including education, anti-discrimination protections, and policy reform (Cameron & Russell, 2016).

**Education**

One of the trends within sources from major news outlets was a call for better education around the topic of fatness. Not only did these personal accounts reveal a lack of education
around the topic of weight discrimination, but they also argued that if something was not done soon, it might be detrimental. “While the ideal solution to weight bias ultimately depends on education of both lay people and health professionals, people currently struggling with weight problems can’t wait for a society-wide reformation that may help to absolve them of [their] personal responsibility…” (Brody, 2017, para. 19). For example, an article published in the *Journal of the Society of Laparoendoscopic Surgeons* in 2001 called for an end to weight stigma and prejudice stating that “it is no longer tolerable to discriminate against those who are obese and sustain the ‘acceptable’ prejudices of the past” (Kavic, 2001, p. 202). On the other hand, this same article called obesity a disease and a “societal health problem” that should be fixed through a variety of surgical options (Kavic, 2001, p. 202). A few years after this article was published, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* released data showing that weight reduction surgery was causing pre-mature deaths among patients (Flum et al., 2005).

Many of the personal accounts argued that medical professionals are some of the consequential contributors to furthering fat patients’ marginalization but maintained that they should be part of the solution. One study noted that “fifty percent of doctors found that fat patients were ‘awkward, ugly, weak-willed, and unlikely to comply with treatment’ and 24 percent of nurses said they were repulsed by their obese patients” (Neporent, 2013, para. 7). According to Ramos et al. (2017), a medical summit held in Canada listed educating practitioners within health-related fields about the misinformation of fatness to be one of their top three priorities. The first step, fat patients argued, is to learn more about body size diversity; “much of weight stigma is attributable to the lack of understanding, which leads to outdated beliefs” (Kahan, 2016, para. 10).
Fat studies scholars and practitioners believe that the Health at Every Size (HAES) model is an important education tool. HAES is described as “an alternative public health model for people of all sizes…that differs from a conventional treatment model in its emphasis on self-acceptance and healthy day-to-day practices regardless of whether a person’s weight changes” (Burgard, 2009, p. 42). The tenets of HAES include (a) maintaining holistic health that is unique to each person, (b) an appreciation of one’s own and of others’ bodies for each of their unique qualities, (c) eating well based on individual needs and interests, (d) the enjoyment of balanced physical movement for pleasure, and (e) a recognition of the diversity of bodies and their abilities (Burgard, 2009). There are currently two examples of the HAES model being used on college campuses, and both relate primarily to the student experience as opposed to the entire campus community (including employees). The first example is a student organization at California State University, Embodied, which promotes the tenets of HAES to college students during school functions and even created a “Love Every Body Week” that included a variety of speakers and activities (Vasquez, 2014). The second example is at the University of California Berkley. UC Berkley has dedicated dietitians that have been trained on the tenets of HAES and actively promotes the model online (Minkow, 2017). These examples speak to the potential impact of HAES and other weight-informed educational models on college campuses.

**Depiction of Fat Bodies and Discrimination**

Perceptions of body size, especially those perpetuated in media, are often linked to prejudicial actions and discriminatory practices. “Overweight people are usually shown in stereotypical ways—engaged in out of control eating or binging on junk food—and they are often shown as the targets of humor or ridicule” (Neporent, 2013, para. 17). For example, a video content analysis titled, “Headless, Hungry, and Unhealthy” found that 65% of fat adults and 77%
of fat children were portrayed negatively in media coverage, such as appearing “headless” on camera, accentuating their fatness and dehumanizing them (Puhl et al., 2013b). A project was recently initiated to archive stock images of fat individuals positively portrayed that could be easily accessed. “The images show people engaged in activities such as bike riding, shopping for fashionable clothes, and applying make-up—depictions that challenge the image of the slovenly and lazy obese subject” (Gurrieri & Brown, 2012, para. 10). In short, fat individuals face marginalization every day; “they’re looked at differently. They’re stared at, sneered at, and discriminated against” (Bowden, 2012, para. 3). How individuals are depicted in media correlates to how they are treated in the everyday world.

There seems to be a clear link in these stories between the images that depict fat bodies and the prevalence of weight-based discrimination. “As messages about body norms permeate social arenas, the discrimination fat professors face is unsurprising” (Reidinger, 2012, para. 4). Lindley et al. (2014) argues that, within the realm of fat studies, the social change theory calls for oppressed groups to confront these issues and “challenge the status quo” of their lived experiences (p. 181). In the world of academia, this confrontation is often done through research and telling the stories of the individuals that are directly affected. It is one of the core tenets of fat studies (Cameron & Russell, 2016). For example, research is needed that will explore the mechanisms in place for reporting bias and discrimination related to body size. Is body-size diversity accounted for in annual climate surveys on college campuses? If not, how do universities better understand the experiences of larger-bodied individuals to take appropriate actions? This information could inform administrators about current discriminatory practices, as well as what policies might need to be revised or added. In many ways, this study is the first step in exploring the lived experiences of fat student affairs professionals and providing appropriate
policy and practice implications related to body-size diversity within institutions of higher education.

**Policy Reform**

Policy reform is another topic of discussion that may be a major issue for fat student affairs professionals on college campuses. There are currently only four states that offer weight-related anti-bullying laws for youth: Michigan (Martin, 2017), New York, Maine, and New Hampshire (Brody, 2017). There are also a few cities that offer protections such as San Francisco, Binghamton, N.Y., Santa Cruz, and Washington D.C. (Martin, 2017; Nieves, 2000). In terms of federal policy, the United States has also added protections to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for individuals that have been diagnosed with “severe obesity” by their doctors (Brody, 2017). Given the lack of weight-discrimination policies by individual organizations and state laws, “fat people often rely on disability law and the premise of ‘accommodation’” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, para. 21). However, ADA protections only apply if the person’s weight was caused by a separate medical condition that is already covered by ADA guidelines (Brody, 2017).

Michigan is the only state in the United States that bans discrimination based on weight (Taking Legal Action, n.d.). The protections provided by the state of Michigan extend to employees and students at universities and colleges within the state. Therefore, it is not surprising that of the 21 higher education institutions identified within the United States that currently offer protections on the basis of weight, 18 of them are located in Michigan. The remaining three institutions include Indiana State University, the College of William and Mary in Virginia, and Point Park University in Pennsylvania (see Table 1 in Appendix B).
Despite the lack of existing protections, research has shown strong public opinions for adding weight to civil rights statutes. A study at the University of Connecticut found that two-thirds of adults would favor new laws that would make it illegal to discriminate based on weight (Jones, 2015). Another study conducted a nationwide survey and found that 75% of adults favored workplace non-discrimination laws for body size (Suh et al., 2014). Adding these protections would be a step toward ensuring that individuals of all body sizes receive equal access to education, fair interviews for career opportunities, and safeguards from losing their jobs or being denied promotions due to weight. This study explores the lived experiences of fat student affairs professionals and provides appropriate policy and practice implications related to body-size diversity within higher education institutions. As a result, this research also provides a better understanding of the current state of higher education regarding the body-size diversity of student affairs professionals and illuminates areas of research that need to be further developed.

**Statement of Research Problem**

Weight-based discrimination has been found in many aspects of society. For example, research has shown that medical professionals treat heavier patients with less care (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018), wage penalties are a reality for larger-bodied employees (Maranto & Stenoien, 2000), and 40 percent of fat personnel report that they are discriminated against within the workplace (Puhl et al., 2008). Overt weight-based discrimination is not new, but it certainly has not dwindled. New research is needed to explore why there has been little to no progress against weight stigma. Additionally, there are areas in our society that could be more thoroughly researched. For example, there are several studies that have found weight-related discrimination on college campuses (e.g., Brown, 2018; Ingeno, 2013; Parr, 2013), but they focused on the
experiences of college students and faculty. The experiences of fat student affairs professionals have not been explored.

**Purpose of Study**

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals and is two-fold. First, through a fat studies and critical theory framework, this study explores instances of bias, prejudice, and discrimination experienced on college campuses. Second, utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study explores the shared experiences of fatness within the higher education context and offers policy and practice implications for addressing body-size diversity within higher education institutions.

Qualitative inquiry provides the best method for addressing the central phenomenon of this study. Critical theory and fat studies frameworks are utilized due to their emphasis on social justice research with pragmatic implications. This necessary research helps address the existing literature gap that currently ignores body-size diversity among student affairs professionals and offers policy and practice implications for better supporting weight diversity across higher education. Additionally, this research provides a deeper understanding of the weight-based non-discrimination policy needs on college campuses. And finally, utilizing the core tenets of fat studies and the qualitative nature of critical theory, this study provides first-hand insight into the lived experiences of fat student affairs professionals.

**Research Questions**

Four overarching research questions helped guide this study as it explored the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses. The questions below focus on the following topics: college environments, available resources, stereotypes, and discrimination.
1. How have fat student affairs professionals been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the university environment?

2. What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat student affairs professionals?

3. How have stereotypes of fat student affairs professionals, if reported, been perpetuated on college campuses?

4. How have weight-based discriminatory practices and policies, if they exist, been used against fat student affairs professionals?

**Significance of Study**

While the experiences of those affected by weight-based prejudice and discrimination have been well documented, little is known about the specific experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses. What is known about the experiences of fat higher education employees is limited mostly to personal narratives. For example, Bobbi Reidinger (2020) published a personal narrative in *Inside Higher Ed* to discuss her experiences. She details instances where her fatness made others perceive her as less qualified. “When a fat professor makes their fatness salient inside the classroom, their fatness overrides their educational and occupational statuses, as students interpret this information as coming from an unreliable source” (Reidinger, 2012, para. 8). In addition to students, Reidinger (2012) also recalls instances of being ignored during IRB (institutional review board) meetings and ridiculed about her attire by colleagues (despite wearing professional slacks and a blouse).

This research helps stories like Bobbi’s become known and better informs fat studies literature. Beyond filling in the literature gap that explores the phenomenon of fat employees in higher education, this study has also generated new insights into the world of fat studies using
phenomenology’s interpretive analysis process. These new insights inform both the policies and practices used within higher education settings. Furthermore, as outlined in chapter five, research on this topic continues to be relevant and in need of further exploration.

As the field grows, there is a call for more intersectional work within fat studies (Cooper, 2010; Pausé, 2014; Russell & Cameron, 2016). Researchers have also noted the lack of men’s voices within the field of fat studies, which, they believe, is a result of being closely related to critical feminist scholarship (Russell & Cameron, 2016). Furthermore, there are gaps in the research about the role of higher education within the greater system of oppression studied in critical fat scholarship (Cooper, 2010). More specifically, there is little to no research about the experiences of student affairs professionals within these environments. This study adds a critical link to the missing voices within the higher education field while also taking a critical look at how their experiences inform diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices on college campuses.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Body-size discrimination is often referred to as the last acceptable form of prejudice (Bowden, 2012; see also Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013). The purpose of this study is to explore the bias, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by fat student affairs professionals on college campuses and provide policy and practice implications for addressing body-size diversity within higher education institutions. The literature review explores the conceptual framework and the research that informs this study. First, the literature review outlines a timeline of how fatness has been defined and perceived over the last several decades. Second, it details the theoretical and methodological approaches utilized in this study. And finally, it explores stereotypes, stigmas, prejudice, and discrimination and how those concepts may impact higher education professionals.

Defining Fatness

Because fatness is a central phenomenon to this study, it is important to understand how fatness is defined and how that definition may have shifted over time. In the introduction to The Fat Pedagogy Reader, the authors noted that “sometimes fat is used to describe food (e.g., fatty meat), something good (e.g., fat wallet), or something unlikely to happen (e.g., fat chance)” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 4). However, when fat is used to describe people, especially in westernized culture, it is interpreted as “reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, [and] transgression of boundary” (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001 as cited in Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 4). How society views fatness (and how fat individuals view themselves) is a critical component of this study because it directly impacts
how student affairs professionals may be viewed and treated in the workplace, as well as the resources that these staff members may benefit from.

The War on Obesity

The war on obesity has led to a misunderstanding of fatness over time, and it is a vital component to the theoretical framework of this study. First, critical theory is essential to understanding the role of power and privilege in social problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, fat studies asks us to understand fatness as an identity and not as a medical issue, which is directly connected to the war on obesity. Fat studies scholars have long argued for an end to the medical discourse on fatness, especially when biased research further stigmatizes fat individuals (Cameron & Russell, 2016).

During the 1990s, the medical industry and many politicians became increasingly concerned with the average body weight of Americans (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009). By the mid-2000s, media outlets began calling obesity a global pandemic in need of immediate action. “The war on obesity” is one of the phrases that media outlets coined during that time and is still used today (Gilman, 2008). Other countries around the world joined by unanimously declaring a “war on fat” and began referring to fatness as an “epidemic” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, para. 2). Ironically, a lot of the concern surrounding weight came from the U.S military’s inability to recruit soldiers for the actual war in Iraq due to the number of Americans who were categorized as “overweight” or “obese,” thus ineligible (Gilman, 2008).

Since then, the analogy of war has become a popular mechanism for trying to motivate Americans to lose weight. An article published by the O’Neill Institute at Georgetown University compared obesity to the war on terrorism and anthrax attacks:

These events… led to an overhaul of public health laws that enable governments to respond rapidly and effectively to bioterrorism and other public health emergencies. Yet
one of the biggest threats to national security [emphasis added] is something much more mundane: America’s obesity epidemic. (Reeve, 2014, para. 1)

A different article began by thanking the heroes of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, then quickly asked for heroes to stand up in America’s “at home war: the war on obesity” (Kaushik, 2013, para. 2). The author noted that if the country paid attention to statistics it could “motivate many more Americans to join this fight, and the nation [could] still beat what is literally one of the biggest challenges [emphasis added] facing it” (Kaushik, 2013, para. 10). That analogy of war, including “fighting” and “threats to national security,” reveals how the United States was planning on tacking this issue.

Since then, new voices have begun to speak out about the issues of weight across the country and globally. Hobbes (2018) describes his take on the war against obesity:

About 40 years ago, Americans started getting much larger. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 80 percent of adults and about one-third of children now meet the clinical definition of overweight or obese. More Americans live with “extreme obesity” than with breast cancer, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and HIV put together. And the medical community’s primary response to this shift has been to blame fat people for being fat. (para. 5)

Many scholars within the field of fat studies share Hobbes’s sentiment. They feel that the medical industry’s biased messaging on obesity combined with the stereotypes that fat individuals are unaware of their health and unmotivated to lose weight led to the “war on obesity,” which utilizes guilt and shame as weapons to convince society to become thinner (Cameron, 2015). This resulted in a society that teaches weight bias to children as young as three years old and allowing them to believe that shaming someone for their weight helps motivate them to make “healthier decisions” (Brody, 2017).

This miseducation (a core tenet of fat studies) has also led to a culture of self-blame among fat individuals. A study about men’s experiences with their weight found that participants
reported their weight as a personal failure (Lewis et al., 2011). These feelings eventually turned into internalized weight stigma and self-blame, both of which lead to worsening work-life balance and further weight gain (Lewis et al., 2011). Another study showed that self-blame for failing to maintain a thin physical appearance leads to a sense of personal embarrassment (Wardle & Foley, 1989). In other words, one’s inability to lose weight or to control their weight has a more significant impact on one’s mental state than on their size.

**Health at Every Size**

To combat the “war on obesity” rhetoric that has stemmed from this oppression, an innovative approach to health was formed: Health at Every Size (HAES). HAES functions as both a field of study and a healthy living model. In the early 2000s, medical professionals such as nutritionists, general practitioners, and food scientists began investigating the ways that weight prejudice, discrimination, and stigma led to biased scientific studies that claim “overweight” is synonymous with “unhealthy” (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2010; Hunger et al., 2020). This field of research focuses on ending scientifically motivated weight prejudice, increasing the understanding that wellness does not always mean losing weight, and promoting holistic health, which includes mental wellbeing (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020). Although HAES has many critics who argue that it is not based on science, Burgard (2009) argues that HAES has more scientific foundation than traditional weight-loss narratives because it removes the understanding of fatness as a personal failure and looks at the evidence holistically.

The core tenets of fat studies list HAES as a key component to its critical, social justice focus. There are several individuals involved in scholarship within fat studies, such as medical healthcare providers, sociologists, nutritionists, and psychologists. Fat studies also houses a few
educators who teach fat acceptance and the HAES curriculum. One study looked at faculty members who teach fat studies (sometimes referred to as critical obesity scholarship) on college campuses to better understand their experiences teaching about weight-bias (Cameron, 2016). While many of the participants explained that the work is difficult, regarding both students and colleagues, they mostly agreed that discourse on the topic was giving them hope for the future: “The importance of identifying strategies for reducing obesity stigma in higher education…cannot be understated, given the role higher education can play in forming (or changing) attitudes and beliefs about obesity, bodies, and health” (Cameron, 2016, p. 120).

Using the tenets of HAES, higher education institutions can provide better care for faculty and staff of all sizes. The health implications of body acceptance and respect go well beyond cardiovascular risks and reduce self-oppression, prejudice, and discrimination. Research suggests that fat individuals will be more likely to participate in healthier activities by adopting a HAES model, such as involvement with physical activity centers on college campuses (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). In short, removing the stigma that weight is “bad” could help everyone live better lives.

The Fat Acceptance Movement

Over time, the word “fat” has been reclaimed within some social circles. For example, an online blogging community aimed at helping fat individuals find community openly uses the word “fat” as a “neutral descriptor” in the same way that words like “short” and “brunette” are used to describe people (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1685). “Reclaiming the word ‘fat’ allowed participants to move away from the medicalized language of ‘obesity’ which equated fatness with illness” (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1685). For this reason, some scholars, researchers, and activists use “fat” a descriptor of their identity. For example, Stewart (2018) states, “I am fat. I
use that word deliberately, because society tells each of us in overt and covert ways that being fat is bad” (p. 31). Reclaiming “fat” is a major part of the fat acceptance movement.

The fat acceptance movement, however, is more than just language. It is calling for a complete shift in the way the world handles fatness. For example, it combats the idea that one’s weight directly impacts their overall health (Lee, 2012). Scholars and researchers within the fat acceptance movement critically examine the medical industry’s obesity rhetoric and work to fix the misunderstood ideal of thinness. In other words, the fat acceptance movement argues that you can be fat and fit (Lee, 2012). The movement is intricately linked to HAES and its core tenets of wellness at all sizes, but it adds a component: activism. Fat acceptance is about removing the stigma and stereotypes of fatness, limiting thin privilege (ways in which society rewards thinness), and calling out diet culture as a form of institutionalized oppression (Lee, 2012).

It is important to note that fat acceptance is not suggesting there is absolutely no connection between body size and health. However, “it does highlight when those claims are grossly exaggerated at the expense of shaming fat people [or] neglecting other aspects of health such as stress, sleep, mental health, and balanced eating” (Lee, 2012, para. 8). For example, Hunger et al. (2020) used a sample of 2.88 million participants from several Westernized countries to look at mortality rates in correlation with body size. They found that individuals categorized as “overweight” were among the lowest rates of mortality, and those classified as “underweight” or “normal weight” were among the highest rates of mortality (Hunger et al., 2020). “The idea that obesity per se is not a predictor of health went against decades of medical dogma, and that despite mounting, high-quality evidence like this, scientists pushed back” (Hunger et al., 2020, p. 77).
Fatness Today

Still, within the general social context, the understanding of fatness seems simple: “fat is bad” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, para. 1). Cooper (2010) adds to the complexity stating that fatness can be defined as “a pathological medical, psychological, and social phenomenon” (p. 1020). Despite three decades of HAES research, this belief transcends political parties and even nationalities. Countries around the world are still fighting their “war on fat” and still reference fatness as an “epidemic” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, para. 2). Like many marginalized groups, fat individuals also face absurd caricatures based solely on stereotypes. For example, “overweight” or “obese” persons are often depicted as undisciplined, non-active (or quickly exhausted), and unattractive (Robinson et al., 1993). The social understanding of fatness, albeit distinct from individual perceptions, can play a role in how fat individuals see themselves.

When social perceptions of fatness, including stereotypes, are internalized by individuals, these prejudicial thoughts turn into stigma. When stigmatized, fat individuals can experience a host of health consequences. For example, “internalized fat stigma may elicit adverse psychological responses, consistent with stress-based models of disease. Negative psychological outcomes including depression, body image dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem have also been demonstrated…” (Lindly et al., 2014, p. 180). However, the adverse effects of weight stigma are not limited to fat individuals.

Weight stigma has become so pervasive that it also affects individuals who are not considered fat. For example, Wardle and Foley (1989) conducted a quantitative study that compared three concepts: estimation of one’s body size, how satisfied individuals were with their body size, and a general “feeling of fatness.” This study found that low self-esteem was positively correlated with greater “feelings of fatness” regardless of whether the individual was
actually “overweight” by scientific measurements (Wardle & Foley, 1989). The findings detailed in Wardle and Foley’s (1989) research impacted the method used to recruit participants for this study. In other words, participant recruitment practices cannot rely on self-selection or convenience sampling because there is a strong possibility that even though participants may have feelings of fatness, they may not have any lived experiences related to being fat. For the purposes of this dissertation, participants were needed who have actually experienced the world in a fat body. Therefore, purposeful sampling with set parameters around fatness provided a better method of participant recruitment.

**Measuring Fatness**

There are scientific measurements of weight that many studies use to determine whether or not participants are fat. “Weight, like height, is a human characteristic that varies across any population” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, para. 22), and as such, there are ways to calculate it. For example, BMI, or body mass index, is used to calculate body fat by comparing your weight with your height. Most medical practitioners use BMI to determine a person’s health and to assess a patient’s risk factor (often cardiovascular health concerns) for illnesses. However, a correlation of BMI with commonly associated “weight-related” diseases only explains 9 percent of the outcomes (Burgard, 2009). In other words, 91 percent of health outcomes typically associated with BMI have no actual correlation to weight. In a separate study, Bacon and Aphramor (2011) discovered that when BMI is used as a factor in determining health risk, over a third of the population is misidentified. There is far more evidence that maintaining one’s weight with a steady diet and some physical movement is more apt to lead to a healthy life than someone who consistently fluctuates their weight trying to become skinnier (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Burgard, 2009).
Some studies, such as Lewis et al. (2011), used BMI as a parameter to participate in the study; participants with a BMI lower than 30 were excluded. However, other studies have avoided using BMI as a parameter for participation because of its connection to the history of weight stigma. For example, Williams (2018) noted that BMI was not used in their study because “it could be a potential source of discomfort and shame for [participants] who would need to disclose their weight” to have their BMI calculated (pp. 62-63). Instead, the researchers used self-reported clothing size for potential participants.

Since the purpose of this study is to explore bias, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by fat student affairs professionals on college campuses, parameters needed to be created that defined fatness in a way that (a) did not further stigmatize participants and (b) ensured that participants had shared lived experiences related to body size. For those reasons, participant recruitment for this study followed the suggestion outlined in Williams (2018) and based participation eligibility on self-reported clothing sizes. Therefore, fatness was defined as requiring the use of plus-size or big and tall clothing.

In summary, fatness is relative and subjective. “Fat is a fluid subject position relative to social norms, it relates to shared experiences, is ambiguous, has roots in identity politics and is thus generally self-defined” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1021). Following the tenets of fat studies that emphasize the importance of language and personal narratives, it is necessary to (a) develop a better understanding of the various conceptualizations of fatness and (b) respect the language used by the participants.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses critical theory, the theoretical framework outlined within the field of fat studies, and interpretive phenomenology to research the experiences of fat student affairs
professionals in higher education. Critical theory and fat studies are interrelated and often rely on qualitative inquiry such as phenomenology to collect and analyze data related to shared lived experiences within marginalized groups.

**Critical Theory**

Critical theory within qualitative inquiry is often seen as a research tool for social justice. “In its various forms, critical inquiry addresses power, inequality, and injustice…[it] seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and injustice” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe critical theory as “a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities” (p. 29). The use of critical theory is appropriate for this study because it addresses real-world problems and has implications for addressing policy and practice. As a theoretical framework, it is transformative and pragmatic (Creswell & Poth, 2018), both of which are also goals of critical fat scholarship (Brown, 2016) and phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “The critical theory is, therefore, a social thought and an organic part of the social development process that it reflects” (Zvi, 1999, p. 38).

Fat studies is a field of research that is related to the critical paradigm (Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2010; Russell, 2020). Fat studies and critical inquiry both focus on “the plight of disadvantaged peoples and the effects of structural inequalities on them” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). Moreover, interpretive phenomenological inquiry relies on theories like critical theory to provide an appropriate lens to analyze the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Critical theory, fat studies, and phenomenology form the conceptual framework of this study.

**Fat Studies**

This section focuses on introducing key research that has developed fat studies and exploring how this is relevant to this study. Fat studies falls within the critical realm of research
Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2010; Russell, 2020). Fat studies scholars believe that weight-based oppression is a critical issue and that further research and activism are needed to end the stigma and discrimination related to body size (Russell & Cameron, 2016). “Fat studies enables the reframing of the problem of obesity, where it is not the fat body that is at issue, but the cultural production of fatphobia” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020). Cooper (2010) describes the young field of research in more detail:

Fat studies is complex, features multiple actors and perspectives, has potential for exciting theoretical and empirical research, combines popular and high academic discourse with social justice concerns and is beginning to articulate an area of human life where there is a hunger, pun intended, for clarity and understanding. (p. 1020)

This study fits well within the mission of critical fat scholarship as it explores the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses.

Fat studies is not only a field of research, but it is also a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze and interpret data. Fat studies is guided by four core tenets, including (a) fat activism, (b) language and representation, (c) over-medicalization, and (d) individual stories (Brown, 2016). Fat activism, the first tenet, looks at the relationship among scholarship, fat acceptance, discrimination, and advocacy. Language and representation, the second tenet, explores language as a tool to empower those in dominant identities (e.g. thin, White, able-bodied, cisgender men). Over-medicalization, the third tenet, analyzes the problematic medical rhetoric that further marginalizes fat individuals. Individual stories, the fourth tenet, amplifies people’s experiences of stigma and discrimination (Brown, 2016). Each of the four tenets is described in more detail below.

**Tenet 1: Fat Activism**

“Fat activism has sought to end weight-based oppression and promote size acceptance, laying an important foundation for the development of fat studies and, more recently, fat
pedagogy” (Russell, 2020, p. 1516). Some scholars consider the field of fat studies to be a radical exploration of theory and that critical research like this is inherently a form of activism (Russell & Cameron, 2016). Other researchers add that teaching fat pedagogy on college campuses and even attending fat studies conferences can be seen as forms of activism and social justice (Burford et al., 2018).

Fostering accessible environments and supportive cultures is one example of activism that involves physical space. For example, Pickett and Cunningham (2017) outline a plan for physical activity centers, such as those available on college campuses, to become more inclusive of body-size diversity. Currently, many physical activity centers are places where fat individuals have learned to expect fat-shaming and hyperawareness of weight stigma. More specifically, the overabundance of mirrors, weight-restricted equipment, large windows, and weight-loss marketing within these centers deter fat individuals from participating (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). The authors propose a “physical activity at every size” (PAES) model that includes a cultural commitment, leadership commitment, inclusive physical spaces, body-size inclusive language, a sense of community among larger individuals within the pace, and participant autonomy (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). Physical activity centers on college campuses are often open to use by anyone affiliated with the university, and this fresh perspective could benefit fat faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, PAES can be generalized more broadly as student affairs professionals describe the physical environments surrounding them in their daily lives on college campuses. Physical space will be an important topic during participant interviews and is reflected in the first research question, which asks about limitations and challenges associated with student affairs professionals’ working environments.
Tenet 2: Language and Representation

Within the field of fat studies, the word “fat” is often used in place of words like “obese” or “overweight” (Brown, 2016; Cooper, 2010; Russell, 2020). “Obese” is often used as a clinical term to describe weight in comparison to height. “Overweight” is a descriptor that implies a “normal” weight that someone has exceeded. Fat studies scholars find that both terms have negative connotations and work to stigmatize large-bodied individuals further. Instead, the word “fat” has been reclaimed by many scholars and self-identified fat activists as a general descriptor of a body characteristic similar to words like “tall” or “blonde” (Brown, 2016).

Scholars identify inclusive language as one of the core tenets of fat studies because of the power that language has to stigmatize individuals (Brown, 2016). Some scholars look beyond language and incorporate representation more broadly, such as depictions within news media and obesity awareness campaigns. McClure et al. (2011) studied the effects of using images of fat individuals in news stories about obesity. The study was designed to mimic an online news story about “obesity” that was neutral, meaning that it did not discuss or imply responsibility for weight; it merely reported current weight statistics. Then, following the news article, participants were shown photographs of fat individuals. Depending on which group the participant was in, they might have seen a photo of a fat person wearing formal attire, leisure clothes, or eating food. The participants were then asked to complete a brief survey about “obesity.” The study found that the photos depicting fat individuals in a positive light (formal wear) had fewer negative results on their survey, whereas the negative representations of fat individuals resulted in a more negative perception of the person shown (McClure et al., 2011). Overall, media coverage of “obesity” leads to further stigmatization of fat individuals and increased weight-bias in the public sphere (Heuer et al., 2011; McClure et al., 2011).
Similar studies were conducted on the representation of fat individuals in general healthcare campaigns and obesity awareness campaigns. Researchers found that in general, the representation of fat individuals and the usage of “obesity” health campaigns (a) led to increased rates of weight-bias, (b) increased feelings of stigmatization, and (c) decreased trust of healthcare providers (Puhl et al., 2013a; Simpson et al., 2019; Walls et al., 2011). Fat studies refers to this as “obesity discourse” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 1). Obesity discourse often “dominates and serves to reproduce a framework of thinking, talking, and action in which thinness is privileged and in which a ‘size matters’ message fuels narratives about fat people’s irresponsibility and lack of willpower” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 1). Research conducted within the field of fat studies works to dismantle this form of discourse by using appropriate terminology and eliminating the negative representation of fat bodies.

Participants in this dissertation study were asked about language, including how they refer to themselves, as well as what language is used by their peers and colleagues. Data collected on the language used within the workplace helped inform the second research question of this study related to perceptions of fatness on college campuses. In other words, a portion of this study explored fat student affairs professionals’ observations of obesity discourse on college campuses.

Tenet 3: Over-Medicalization

One major misconception about fat studies is that it is focused on discrimination despite scientific evidence that being fat is unhealthy. However, through the growing field of Health at Every Size (HAES) research, more medical professionals, nutritionists, and food scientists are investigating the ways that weight prejudice, discrimination, and stigma have effectively biased the scientific studies that claim “overweight” means “unhealthy” (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011;
Brown, 2016; Hunger et al., 2020). This field of research focuses on ending scientifically motivated weight prejudice, increasing the understanding that wellness does not always mean losing weight, and promoting holistic health, which includes mental wellbeing (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020).

This dissertation explores the HAES model and its implications for higher education institutions. For example, participants were asked how their bodies are perceived by colleagues, faculty, students, and administrators, as well as the campus resources that are available to them related to their weight. Comparing participants’ experiences with HAES tenets helped provide new or revised policy and practice recommendations for higher education institutions looking to better support weight diversity.

**Tenet 4: Individual Stories**

Telling individual stories is a critical component of conducting fat studies research (Brown, 2016). Russell (2020) noted in their fat studies literature review, “[w]hat is evident from reviewing this work is that fat learners’ and educators’ perspectives are far from uniform, which makes the importance of listening to a wide variety of fat voices all the more important” (p. 1522). The purpose of this qualitative study, exploring the lived experiences of fat student affairs professionals, fits well within the fourth tenet of fat studies. Although this may be a small population, especially if one looks at the scope of fat studies globally, it is a critical population. “Academics make up a tiny fraction of one percent of the entire country; however, our impact on that larger population can be enormous” due to the considerable number of students, alumni, and other stakeholders that are impacted by this work (Lockard, 2015, p. 177).

Using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals helps build a personal narrative that may reveal issues that would not be discovered
quantitatively. Lockard (2015) noted in her introduction that being fat can add financial hardship to one’s life as an academic. For example, working in higher education often requires a lot of travel. Fat individuals are often asked to purchase two seats on planes, even though one seat is already expensive enough to break a budget (Lockard, 2015). Another example is professional attire. Big clothes come with big prices and are often only available at smaller stores that specialize in big and tall or plus-size options; regardless, professional attire is often a requirement of higher education professionals (Lockard, 2015).

Outside of financial challenges, fat scholars also describe experiences in which there their body size was evaluated against their research to determine worth. For example, as a doctoral candidate, Lockard (2015) recalled being told not to incorporate fatness into her research because she would never get hired after completing her dissertation. In other words, it would be perceived that she was too emotionally invested in her research and other scholars would not be impressed.

Fisanick (2006) takes a critical look at fat bodies in the tenure and promotion trends within American higher education. She states that “the normal body,” or the body that is White, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied, “is the body with power” (Fisanick, 2006, p. 326). “There are almost no fat people at the top of the academic profession” (Fisanick, 2006, p. 331). The author could also not recall a time when a keynote speaker at a conference was a fat person (Fisanick, 2006). “Professors not occupying the ‘normal professor body’ are at risk for not achieving institutional milestones…it is clear that a body bias exists in the academy” (Fisanick, 2006, p. 336).

Stories like these are a major component of fat studies. Lockard (2015) notes that a lot of fat studies scholars use personal narratives to discuss their experiences, for example, “teaching
while fat” (p. 182). “It has become customary for authors writing fat scholarship to discuss their own size…many seminal books include a first-person narrative about the author’s own body” (Lockard, 2015, p. 180). However, one component that was consistently missing in these narratives were personal accounts of student affairs professionals.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a crucial part of the conceptual framework of this research because it ties together the qualitative elements of both critical theory and fat studies. Critical theory addresses social inequalities through an analysis of power and privilege (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fat studies, often through a critical lens, looks at power and privilege in the context of body size (Russell & Cameron, 2016). Moreover, the fourth tenet of fat studies calls for the telling of personal stories as a primary method in which to conduct this analysis (Brown, 2016). Phenomenology, therefore, provides the means in which to collect the participants’ stories (fat studies) and, in turn, analyze those stories for themes of power and privilege (critical theory).

Phenomenology was designed to explore the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). In other words, phenomenological inquiry provides a process through which a researcher can understand the essence of a given human experience by investigating “what” was experienced and “how” it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, Ogden et al. (2014) used a phenomenological design to better understand the experiences of weight-loss surgery patients who did not lose weight following the surgery. “[This] approach places more emphasis on the individual’s personal perception of an event rather than an objecting statement of the event, or the event itself” (Ogden et al., 2014, p. 952).
More specifically, this study utilizes an interpretive phenomenological approach, sometimes referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology. Interpretive phenomenology, unlike transcendental phenomenology, invites researchers to incorporate their understandings of the data, as well as other theoretical lenses into the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Alsawy and Mansell (2013) conducted an interpretive phenomenological study that explored the phenomenon achieving and maintaining a comfortable body weight. The researchers noted that the interpretive approach was appropriate for a number of reasons. First, the approach explored how the participant made sense of their own experiences as opposed to a second-hand account of an event. Second, the approach is exploratory, and therefore did not seek to test a hypothesis. And finally, it allowed for the researcher to infer certain pre-understandings which in their case, was the process of psychological change (Alsawy & Mansell, 2013, p. 3).

Interpretive phenomenology provided an appropriate method of inquiry for this study given (a) the interest in the participants’ own understandings of how their weight is perceived on college campuses, (b) it is not testing a theory, and (c) it uses both critical theory and fat studies as theoretical lenses through which the data was analyzed.

**Stereotypes and Stigmas**

There are several stereotypes that have developed around fatness. Laziness, lack of motivation, stupidity, lack of will-power, gluttony, and unattractive are just a few that have been cited in research (Fisanick, 2007; Russell, 2020). This section details the research that explored negative health consequences experienced by fat individuals as a result of stereotyping and weight stigma.

Stereotypes about body weight dictate how people treat one another. For instance, if someone is perceived to be fat voluntarily, meaning they do not have any apparent disabilities or
medical conditions that contribute to weight gain, society views that person as lazy and lacking in self-discipline (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). According to a study with Australian university students, initial perceptions of fat individuals without medical causes were perceived negatively; on the other hand, if the person had a medical reason, they were perceived slightly more positively (Allison & Lee, 2015). The authors used an attribution theory lens, which pointed to the idea that the study participants felt biased against fat individuals based on the assumption that they have complete control of their weight yet lacked the self-determination to become thinner (Allison & Lee, 2015). This attribution of weight-bias is passed from generation to generation as parents socialize their children to hold “anti-fat attitudes” (Robinson et al., 1993, p. 467).

Stereotypes like these have led to a stigmatization of fat bodies that equates being overweight with unhealthy and unsuccessful. Robinson et al. (1993) discuss a culture of fatphobia, “a pathological fear of fatness” (p. 467), that led medical health professionals to irrationally target weight as a culprit for many diseases and mental health problems. Thus, health became synonymous with thin. Unwarranted medical blame coupled with the stereotypes of the complacency of fat individuals led to the “war on obesity” that utilizes guilt and shame to pressure “overweight” individuals to become thinner (Cameron, 2015).

Negative attitudes surrounding fat individuals have made it difficult for them to effectively earn and maintain employment in many career fields (Robinson et al. 1993). For instance, employers translate the stereotype that fat people are lazy and unmotivated to mean that they are undisciplined and have a poor work ethic. If these are the stereotypes that fat people are prescribed, then they will inadvertently be treated differently by the world around them. For faculty and staff within higher education, these stereotypes and stigmas forced many into a habit of taking on more responsibilities than their thinner peers, thereby overburdening themselves to
prove their worth and utility to themselves and those around them (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). Furthermore, internalized shame surrounding weight illicit “adverse physiological responses, consistent with stress-based models of disease,” as well as “depression, body image dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem” (Lindly et al., 2014, p. 180). The consequences of prejudice against fat people do not stop with internalized oppression. Stigmatization also invites mistreatment from society and peers.

A recent qualitative study explored fat women’s experiences navigating stigma within healthcare settings (Williams, 2018). The author found that while “stigma was a familiar part of the experience of being large-bodied,” they became hyperaware of their stigmatization when visiting healthcare professionals (Williams, 2018, p. 66). “Participants rarely identified their doctors as people whom they felt they could rely on to support them in achieving healthy outcomes, either physical or emotional” (Williams, 2018, p. 67). In this case, stigma became so painful that it created distrust between patients and general practitioners. Although this dissertation is not focused on healthcare providers, the findings in Williams (2018) may be applicable to interactions between fat individuals and persons of authority more generally.

To better understand methods of destigmatization or attempts at removing negative internalized weight bias, research has been conducted on coping mechanisms. For example, the narrative of “coming out as fat” plays off of the notion that members of the LGBTQ+ community often “come out” by revealing a hidden identity (Saguy & Ward, 2011). On the other hand, body size is considered a visible identity, and therefore the idea of revealing it is humorous. However, this narrative comes from the queer theorists’ understanding that the rebellious action of “coming out” openly with an identity that is marginalized within society is, in turn, a rejection of its associated stigma (Saguy & Ward, 2011). For example, Fisanick (2007) recounted the story of a
professor who gained a significant amount of weight. He felt that he was going to be perceived differently but was not sure to what extent. The professor questioned several potential courses of action. For example, would it disarm negative commentary if he openly acknowledged his weight in front of the class? Would it be better to ignore it altogether? Would students take him less seriously now that he might be characterized by the stereotypes associated with fatness? Fisanick (2007) noted that this professor’s story is not unique and that many faculty members who are fat or gain weight throughout their careers struggle with these questions.

Because body size is a visible identity, inferences are likely made about large-bodied individuals based solely on appearance. An older study attempted to answer how fat faculty are perceived by measuring students’ perceptions of body-size diversity in images. Chia et al. (1998) tested this assumption by selecting a random sample of undergraduate students and showing them pictures of adults (presumed to be professors) of a variety of body sizes. The students were asked to rate the intelligence of the pictured individuals. Not surprisingly, the study found a negative correlation between body size and presumed intelligence (Chia et al., 1998). In other words, the larger the professor, the less intelligent they were perceived to be by students.

Dickins et al. (2011) conducted a study on fat adults’ responses to weight stigma. “Participants internalized the weight-related stigma they received from others and believed that they deserved the fat hatred directed at them from friends, family members, and the broader community” (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1683). Fat individuals have also reported that weight stigma has a larger effect on their avoidance of some places where weight stigma is more common (e.g., gyms, pools, etc.) and a lesser effect on intentional weight loss (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). Little to no research has been conducted to explore the internalized weight stigma of fat student affairs professionals and their experiences on college campuses. This study explores the
experiences that fat student affairs professionals have had with weight stigma, and how supervisors and colleagues perceive their work.

**Prejudice and Discrimination**

Largely considered “to be one of the last acceptable forms of discrimination” (Fisanick, 2007, p. 237), prejudice against fat individuals permeates the social world. One study found that weight discrimination “is the fourth most frequently reported form of discrimination after race, gender, and age” (Allison & Lee, 2015, p. 189). Furthermore, Maranto and Stenoien (2000) claim that being “overweight” may be among the most stigmatized of the social identities (including race, sexual orientation, and religion) because society views obesity as an “abomination” and fat individuals are “often blamed for their condition…unlike individuals with other physical disabilities who often elicit sympathy” (p. 14). One study even found explicit weight bias within the judicial system noting that men on the jury were significantly more likely to perceive a woman defendant as guilty if she was overweight (Schvey et al., 2013). The findings of the study made it clear that society perceives large-bodied people as immoral.

The views that society has of fat individuals manifest in many ways. First, fat individuals are often victims of discrimination within the healthcare industry (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009); in other words, body size has been shown to alter how medical and mental health professionals diagnose and treat illnesses. Second, wage discrimination has been an issue for many fat employees. For example, women who are perceived as slightly “overweight” are highly likely to see wage penalties. In contrast, with men, wage penalties are only apparent after they are perceived as “very obese” (Maranto & Stenoien, 2000). And finally, for adults with a body mass index (BMI) of 35 and
above, 40 percent are likely to report discrimination within the workplace with women at much
greater risk of mistreatment (Puhl et al., 2008).

Within higher education, fat faculty and staff are more likely than their thinner peers to experience prejudicial remarks that insult their credibility or shame them for their appearance (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). In a qualitative study about fat employee experiences, one participant recalled being told by an interview committee that they were concerned about her stamina and ability to keep pace with students’ needs. Unsurprisingly, fat women and sexual minorities are less likely to be chosen for promotions or seen within management positions. Other participants within the study recalled crude comments that intersected multiple identities, including race, ethnicity, and religion (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018).

An article by Flint et al. (2016) investigated hiring policies and found that fat applicants were perceived by hiring managers as less capable of holding leadership positions. The study found that (a) fat individuals were less likely to be seen as “suitable” for the position, (b) fat individuals were often judged based on their perceived stamina, and (c) fat women were more likely to be discriminated against than fat men (Flint, 2016, p. 1). Many scholars agree that this discrimination takes place in higher education as well. Academia is thought of as a refuge for diverse thought, a place where scholarship is valued, and appearance does not matter. “In reality, bodies do matter in academic culture, and fat academics remain susceptible to the fat-hating rhetoric that permeates American culture in general” (Fisanick, 2007, p. 237). Unless protections are put into place, and new policies are enacted, this practice will continue.

It is important to consider the experiences of fat students because they consist of future faculty and staff members within higher education. For students, discrimination and oppression in the classroom distracts them from learning and can impact their mental health. Brown (2018)
argues that higher education institutions have an obligation to help all students succeed, and that includes eliminating barriers that cause mental and physical pain to students. One of the most notable physical barriers is the fixed-top desks that are made to accommodate small to medium-sized students. In Brown’s (2018) qualitative study, students reported the fixed-top desks as a common source of mental and physical anguish. One student reported, “I can sit in them, but it’s not exactly comfortable. There’s always stomach on the table and then I gotta write!” (Brown, 2018, p. 14). Not only are these desks uncomfortable, but students reported feeling like the center of attention in the room, leading to embarrassment and a hyper-awareness of their bodies. Furthermore, the heightened self-consciousness made students feel more harshly judged than their thinner peers expressing that if they were to give a wrong answer in class, they would be perceived as unattractive and unintelligent (Brown, 2018). While students are distracted by their discomfort and mental anguish, they are unintentionally forgoing the education that is happening around them. This can cause students to earn poor grades and potentially withdraw, both of which may hinder students from pursuing faculty and staff careers within higher education.

There have also been overt forms of discrimination and fat-shaming aimed at fat graduate students. In the article “Heavy Thinkers Need Not Apply,” Parr (2013) followed nearly 1,000 graduate school admission applications and paid close attention to students with higher body mass index (BMI) scores. Parr (2013) found that in cases where graduate school applicants had in-person admissions interviews, there was a significant difference in the percentage of thinner candidates being accepted than heavier candidates. This difference was not found when candidates held phone interviews with admissions officers (Parr, 2013).

In 2013 a professor tweeted a fat-shaming remark causing national outrage and bringing light to potential discriminatory practices. Associate professor Geoffrey Miller tweeted, “Dear
obese PhD [sic] applicants: if you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation” (as quoted in Ingeno, 2013, para. 2). The tweet was quickly removed, and several apologies were made both from the professor and the institution. However, a few inquiries were made to the university about discriminatory application processes for graduate students, causing a review of discriminatory policies and social media guidelines for faculty and staff (Ingeno, 2013). Graduate degrees are often a requirement of higher education faculty and staff positions, and these discriminatory practices and prejudices disproportionately limit the number of fat individuals who complete graduate programs.

Fat individuals are facing barriers at every stage of the education process. The literature confirms that not only are fat students less likely to earn good grades and graduate from undergraduate institutions, but they may also face discriminatory practices that hinder their acceptance into graduate school. Even if a student does obtain an undergraduate and graduate degree, they are still unlikely to get selected for a job within higher education due to stereotypes and stigmas that label fat people as lazy, unmotivated, and lacking self-control.

**Summary of Literature Review**

In conclusion, fat studies brings a much-needed critical lens to the world, and more specifically, to higher education. Understanding the perspective of fat student affairs professionals helps institutions tear down antiquated systems of oppression and discriminatory practices that disadvantage them. Weight discrimination has been widely documented across social institutions, and new research is needed to fill in the gap of missing literature on these experiences of higher education professionals. Cameron and Russell (2016) further discuss the need for additional research:

Feminist and critical scholars working in education have advocated emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies, demonstrating that classrooms and other learning contexts are not
separate from but instead extensions of society fraught by hierarchies and structures of dominance…We assert that all educators need to pay attention to how classrooms and other learning contexts can turn bodies into political sites of privilege and oppression as well as the ways in which dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression, often expressed as fatphobia, fat hatred, and fat bullying, are being addressed within spaces and places of teaching and learning. (p. 2)

Not only are institutions of higher learning affected by the same social stigmas and systems of oppression as the larger society, but the individual experiences of student affairs professionals have been ignored. In short, new research is required to (a) better understand the experiences of fat individuals and (b) add to the literature (Cooper, 2010; Russell, 2020; Russell & Cameron, 2016).

This dissertation is focused on the experiences of fat higher education professionals through the theoretical frameworks outlined in this literature review. Critical theory, fat studies, and interpretive phenomenology provide appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches to exploring lived experiences. Moreover, emergent themes from the literature such as limitations within physical environments, shame, stereotypes, stigmas, and discrimination are all explored. Results from this research add to the literature within critical fat scholarship and provide policy and practice implications for college campuses that want to better support weight diversity.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Weight-based stigma and discrimination have been widely considered the last acceptable forms of prejudice (Bowden, 2012; see also Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013). The medical industry created the “war on obesity,” which led to the stigmatization of body size (Cameron, 2015); fat-shaming and weight-based oppression have led to increased rates of depression and anxiety (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017); and weight-based discrimination has been identified and studied throughout social institutions (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; Puhl et al. 2008). However, institutions of higher education remain under-researched. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses and offer policy and practice implications to help make college campuses better for future higher education professionals.

Qualitative inquiry provides the best method for addressing the central phenomenon of this study. Critical theory, fat studies, and interpretive phenomenology helped fill in the existing literature gap that ignored body-size diversity among student affairs professionals. Four overarching research questions were identified and focus on the following topics: the limitations of physical space on college campuses, perceptions of available resources, stereotypes of fat individuals, and discrimination against fat employees.

Research Design

Qualitative inquiry provided the best method for addressing the central phenomenon of this study. Critical theory and fat studies are both qualitative frameworks through which social justice research is commonly conducted (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fat studies uses a variety of research methodologies; however, given this study’s focus on the lived
experiences of the participants, qualitative methods provided the best results. Critical theory is often used within qualitative research to provide a critique of social phenomena and to address systems of oppression and power inequalities (Charmaz, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of critical theory is appropriate for this study because it addresses real-world problems and has implications for addressing policy and practice, a shared characteristic among fat studies scholarship (Brown, 2016) and phenomenology (Cameron & Russell, 2016).

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative inquiry that seeks to understand commonalities among similar lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It provides a process through which a researcher can understand the essence of human experience by investigating “what” was experienced and “how” it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, this study utilized an interpretive, or hermeneutic, phenomenological approach. Interpretive phenomenology, unlike transcendental phenomenology, invites a certain degree of “pre-understanding,” or information already understood by the researcher, as well as other theoretical lenses into the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the interpretive approach affords participants the opportunity to make sense of their own experiences through their own words as opposed to researchers hearing about lived experiences second-hand (Alsawy & Mansell, 2013). Interpretive phenomenology provided an appropriate method of inquiry for this study given that study (a) focused on the participants’ own understandings of how their weight was perceived on college campuses, (b) did not test a theory, and (c) used both critical theory and fat studies as theoretical lenses to analyze the data.

Interpretive phenomenological methods are designed for exploring lived experiences and have been used within the critical weight studies field in previous research (Alsawy & Mansell, 2013; Glenn, 2012; Ogden et al., 2011). Interpretive phenomenology starts with the familiar
qualitative processes of utilizing semi-structured interview protocols based on the themes emerging from the literature review. Then, codes and themes are analyzed, new data is collected, and follow-up interviews are conducted if needed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Participants**

This study utilized purposeful selection and snowball sampling. Systematically selecting participants with a working knowledge of the student affairs profession and the shared lived experiences of living as a fat person was critical for this research. Participants were recruited using a social media call-out within the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group (see Appendix C). Additionally, phenomenological inquiry provides an in-depth analysis of one central phenomenon shared by all participants within a given study. For that reason, it was essential to (a) set research parameters based on the research questions of the study and (b) recruit participants who met those parameters (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Three parameters for participant recruitment and selection were created. First, participants must have reported either currently working or having recently (within the last year) worked in an institution of higher education within the United States. This criterion was based on the central phenomenon of the study, student affairs professionals, as well as previous studies such as Hunt and Rhodes (2018), which also explored experiences of higher education employees more generally. Second, participants were selected based on their self-reported clothing size, with all participants requiring at least plus-size or big and tall clothing. Clothing size parameters, such as those outlined in Williams (2018), have been used by some fat studies scholars in place of BMI and other medical measurements because it (a) is less likely to further stigmatize participants and (b) ensures that participants have shared lived experiences as a person of size. The third and final parameter for participant recruitment and selection is that the

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participant had worked primarily in student affairs roles physically located on college or university campuses. In other words, individuals working in fully virtual student affairs positions were not eligible to participate. While this parameter has not been used in previous research, it is a crucial component of the research questions that focus primarily on the experiences of navigating campus facilities, policies, and practices as a fat student affairs professional.

Fifteen participants were selected for this study. The number of participants falls in line with phenomenological and other qualitative methods, stipulating that the number of participants for a given study is based on the researcher reaching saturation within the data, with most studies falling between 10-15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation is defined as the point at which no new data is being introduced to the study through data collection processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, looking at previous research outlined in the literature review, the number of participants in those studies ranged from 6 to 44 with a mean of 15 (Alsawy & Mansell, 2013; Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2016; Dickens et al., 2011; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Lewis et al., 2011; Ogden et al., 2011; Williams, 2018). Out of all the qualitative studies mentioned, Hunt and Rhodes’ (2018) methods are the most similar to this study, with a participant total of 13. In short, having 15 participants is on par with previous research, and saturation was reached.

**Data Collection**

Participant recruitment began during the fall semester of 2020 via the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group. Forty individuals applied to participate in the study through the participant recruitment survey (see Appendix D). The survey collected information such as frequency of challenges/limitations experienced within the workplace, titles, types of institutions, and demographics. All the data was reviewed holistically, and finalists were purposefully
selected and narrowed down to a diverse group of 15 participants that represented a range of genders, races and ethnicities, and institution types.

Once participants were selected, they reviewed and completed the informed consent (see Appendix E). In accordance with institutional review board (IRB) approval (see Appendix F), participants were assured confidentially, noting that all identifiable information would be kept separate from transcriptions. Additionally, participant information, transcriptions, and recordings will be kept on a password protected electronic device. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could remove themselves from the study at any time. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom video conferencing and lasted between 40-75 minutes. It is important to note that a web-based virtual interview procedure would have been used regardless of the COVID-19 social-distancing protocols due to the widely dispersed participant locations at higher education institutions across the United States. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and typed notes were taken to capture details that added to the “thick description” of each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 94).

During the interviews, participants responded to a semi-structured interview protocol that explored the four major topics outlined in the literature review (see Table 1): discrimination, stereotypes, physical space/environment, and resources. Each topic had two to four questions that prompted the participants to discuss their experiences with marginalization and discrimination on college campuses in their roles as student affairs professionals. The ordering of the topics and questions were intentional, starting broad and graduating becoming more specific. As typically done with semi-structured interviews, participants were often asked to further explain experiences that added context or clarity to their answers.
Table 1. Interview Protocol

Q1: How would you describe yourself? What words do you use to refer to your body/weight?

**Topic 1: Discrimination**
Q1: Tell me about a time on campus, if you have an example, when you felt discriminated against because of your weight.
Q2: In your opinion, how should weight discrimination be handled on college campuses?
Q3: How would you feel about weight being listed in your campus’ non-discrimination policy?
Q4: How would you describe the difference, if there is a difference, in how your body/weight is perceived while at work as opposed to outside of work?

**Topic 2: Stereotypes**
Q1: What stereotypes, if you know of any, exist for fat people on college campuses?
Q2: If you are aware of such stereotypes, how do they make you feel?
Q3a: Describe your experiences with other student affairs professionals as it relates to your weight.
Q3b: How do these experiences compare to experiences with administrators, students, and faculty?
Q4: Describe your experiences and interactions with other fat student affairs professionals.

**Topic 3: Physical Space/Environment**
Q1: What challenges, if any, have you noticed with physical space on campus?
Q2: What thoughts go through your mind if or when you feel limited by physical space?
Q3: Describe your experiences, if you have any, with “obesity discourse,” or in other words, casual conversations about fatness, within the workplace.
Q4: How does your job as a student affairs professional affect your health, if at all?

**Topic 4: Resources**
Q1: What resources are available to you, if there are any, as a larger-bodied person on campus?
Q2: If you could add any resources to your campus, what would they be and why?

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed common qualitative methods, including reviewing data for codes and themes by identifying significant statements that provide a deeper understanding of the
social phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first-round of open coding conducted on all 15 transcripts resulted in 118 distinct codes. Each transcript went through a total of five reviews, each time resulting in better-defined codes until the final codebook was created (see Appendix G). The final codebook contains 21 codes and their corresponding definitions. Codes were then used in a five-step thematic analysis process that included matching codes to research questions, reviewing emerging ideas, and finally, identifying salient themes. Additionally, following interpretive phenomenological methodology, the data was analyzed through the lenses of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study uses both a critical theory and a fat studies lens, meaning that the data was analyzed as it pertains to power and privilege. The results of which can be seen in the salient themes and sub-themes identified in chapter four.

Interpretive phenomenology also invites interpretations of the data from the researcher who may have pre-understandings that relate to the social phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, to mitigate these pre-understandings, phenomenology often uses a technique called bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing is seen as both a method for keeping the researcher “in check” and as a method for the research to take a deeper, more reflective dive into the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). “Given the sometimes close relationship between the researcher and the research topic … bracketing is a method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). Bracketed thoughts were pulled out of the data during analysis but remained particularly useful while discussing the implications of the study.

**Positionality Statement**

Taking a moment to discuss the researcher’s connections to the study is critical to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Even though most qualitative work does not carry
the same value-free expectations as quantitative inquiry, understanding the researcher’s position, experiences, and values, as it relates to the study, is important. Moreover, interpretive phenomenology calls on the researcher’s pre-understanding of the subject as part of the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Part of this process, through bracketing, requires the researcher to openly identify any privileges or positions of power that may impact the data, as well as any experiences with marginalization or discrimination that may emotionally tether the researcher to the participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

So, in the spirit of self-disclosure, I want to start by addressing the several ways in which I hold privilege, including being White, cisgender, male, and able-bodied. There are also areas of my life in which my identities, such as being queer, first-generation, and fat have introduced barriers to success. Regarding this study specifically, issues of weight-bias and discrimination have, indeed, personally affected me. I have been fat my entire life, and I have dealt with many of the issues that were addressed in this study. I started my first diet when I was eleven years old. I remember having to take special lunches to school and I was hyperaware of who was sitting near me during lunch. I also vividly recall an experience where I was openly fat-shamed in front of the entire fourth-grade class by the teacher who remarked, “it looks like you haven’t missed many lunches in your life” when one of my parents arrived at the classroom door with my lunch money in hand.

I have numerous experiences of being in classrooms that did not have desks large enough for me to attend class comfortably. On some occasions, I would sit in the chairs despite not being able to fit, trying not to think about the pain of my skin being pinched between the rails and the tabletop. In some classes, I have had to turn the fix-top desks backward and sit with the instructor’s chair facing the front of the room to attend class. While this solution does allow me
to sit more comfortably, it still generates a degree of self-imposed shame as I wonder what my peers think and if they too feel that I should “have worked out more” or “ate less.”

I have had jokes made at my expense in my personal and professional life. I have also experienced employment discrimination due to my weight when my “stamina” was called into question while addressing whether I was “fit” for specific student affairs positions. These experiences have led me to believe that sizeism is a form of prejudice, much like racism, sexism, and homophobia. In my professional role, I work with students daily to end forms of oppression on college campuses, and I include weight-based oppression in my work. I believe that destigmatizing weight is an integral part of developing healthy intersectional identities. My experiences, both personal and professional, are important to this research. I value self-worth, justice, equity, and inclusion. All my experiences, beliefs, and values impact my relationship with this study and the field of critical fat scholarship.

**Trustworthiness**

There are several standards of validation that build trustworthiness within qualitative research. The process of building and maintaining measures of validity starts with the researcher’s positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although interpretive phenomenology does not promote value-free data analysis, it is still customary practice for the researcher to bracket their thoughts in the early phases of data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Additionally, this study utilized three strategies for validity. First, referential adequacy checks (Creswell & Poth, 2018) were conducted by continually referencing transcripts of participants’ interviews during all stages of coding and thematic analysis. Second, member checks were completed, where participants were invited to review their transcripts and add context to their interviews, whether it was a new thought or a clarification of a previous thought (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally,
two external auditors were used to review and confirm the codes, subcodes, and definitions within the codebook (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Measures of dependability also add to the overall trustworthiness of qualitative research. First, “thick and rich descriptions” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 94) is a principal component of most qualitative work, including phenomenology. In other words, chapter four explores participants’ experiences and their interpretations of those experiences to help the reader better understand how the related codes and themes emerged. And finally, a customary practice within qualitative methods is to provide a codebook of defined codes and to continually cross-check the definitions with the themes and categories outlined in the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To meet this measure of dependability, external auditors reviewed the codebook.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses and offer policy and practice implications to help make college campuses better for future higher education professionals. Utilizing fat studies scholarship and the tenets of critical theory, I created four overarching research questions that helped guide this study. The four research questions focused on the following topics: college environments, resources, stereotypes, and discrimination. Rooted in the phenomenological approach, the research questions emphasized the participants’ interpretations of lived social experiences:

1. How have fat student affairs professionals been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the university environment?
2. What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat student affairs professionals?
3. How have stereotypes of fat student affairs professionals, if reported, been perpetuated on college campuses?
4. How have weight-based discriminatory practices and policies, if they exist, been used against fat student affairs professionals?

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in the fall of 2020 to answer these four research questions. Participants were purposefully selected from a pool of 40 eligible candidates who signed-up to participate in this study through a recruitment post in the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group. Participants were required to have worked within a student affairs position within the last year, be over the age of 18, and require big and tall or plus-size clothing. A week after posting the recruitment information to the Facebook group, 40
individuals signed up to participate in the study using the participant recruitment survey. Fifteen participants were selected based on (a) the self-reported frequency of experiencing challenges in the workplace related to weight (e.g., weekly, monthly, or two to three times per semester), and (b) attaining a diverse participant pool including demographics such as race, gender, job title, and institution type. Possible participants were first narrowed down by maximizing racial and gender diversity within the participant pool. Then participants were selected based on institution type and frequency of reported incidents. Two participants (both with underrepresented racial identities) that were originally selected for the participant pool did not respond to three outreach attempts. Two more participants were then selected for a total of fifteen participants.

Participant Profiles

Participants in this study represent a wide range of institution types and titles. All the participants have worked in student affairs at the coordinator level, which is often seen as an entry-level title within the field. Eleven of the 15 participants reported having advanced from coordinator positions to program manager, assistant director, or director-level positions within student affairs. Directorships were the highest-ranking titles represented in the study; there were no titles higher than director (e.g., vice president) within the 40-person participant application pool either. The 15 selected participants represented a range of institutions that included large “very high research” universities, regional research universities, public and private institutions, and community colleges. All participants had completed master’s degrees, and two participants were currently working on doctoral degrees.

Participants selected pseudonyms during their individual interviews and are included in Table 2 along with their disclosed gender identity, race, and job title. Participant profiles were created to add further context to the experiences of each participant. Each profile includes the
language that each participant used to describe their body and/or weight, as well as any additional details they wanted to share. All profiles were written using the singular gender-neutral pronoun “they.” With the seventh edition of its writing guide, “APA advocates for the singular ‘they’ because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender” (Lee, 2019, para 7). All participants were given the opportunity to select the pronoun of their choice or use the default gender neutral pronoun “they,” and everyone indicated that they were comfortable with using the default.

Table 2. Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Racial and/or Ethnic Identities</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Current/Most Recent Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brady</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Assistant/Associate Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Native American, White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darby</td>
<td>Prefer Not to Answer</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Hispanic, Latinx</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelynne</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa</td>
<td>Hispanic, Latinx</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Hall Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jude</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krystal</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luna</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Black, White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Assistant/Associate Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Trans, Non-Binary</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Assistant/Associate Director</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brady

Brady is an assistant/associate director at a large research university and reported that they experience challenges related to sizeism on a weekly basis. Brady uses the term “fat” as a self-descriptor most often and is also comfortable with the word “chub,” a common identifier within the LGBTQ+/bear community. Brady was one of the more active and informed participants when it comes to the fat acceptance movement, and they attribute this to having strong mentors who taught them how to self-advocate for their needs early on in their career.

Brooklyn

Brooklyn is a program manager at a private, professional university and reported experiencing challenges with sizeism two to three times per semester. Brooklyn was comfortable using the word “fat” as a self-descriptor but will also refer to themselves as “bigger-boded” when talking to friends. Throughout the interview, Brooklyn advocated for the creation of networks of fat student affairs professionals and often expressed that the best advocacy comes from the community.

Darby

Darby is a senior academic advisor at a private institution. They have over 15 years of higher education experience at a range of institutions, including three (two public and one private) “very high research” activity institutions. Darby reported having worked as an academic advisor, a program coordinator, and as a director of an academic area. They reported weekly challenges with sizeism within their current role. Darby stated that their body fits into the “superfat category” and has no problem using the word “fat” as a descriptor. They also use terms like “phat” and “curvy.” Darby mentioned that words like “overweight” and “obese” are seldomly used.
David

David is a program manager at a large, private research institution and experiences issues related to sizeism monthly. David prefers to use the phrases “heavy-set” or “person of size” to describe their body. David recognizes that the descriptor “fat” is being reclaimed within the fat acceptance movement and is growing more comfortable with using it. However, while growing up, “fat” had negative connotations, and many of the people around David, especially in their professional life, still consider fatness a negative attribute.

Evelynne

Evelynne is a director at a small, public institution and has served as a student affairs professional at several other institutions, including community colleges. Evelynne is one of two participants working toward a doctorate. They reported issues related to sizeism on a weekly basis. Evelynne says the word they use the most to describe their body is “curvy.” “To the doctors, [I’m] obese, but I would say [I’m] on the heavier side.” Evelynne is comfortable with the word “fat” when it is used positively, but not when there is a negative or derogatory connotation accompanying it.

Isa

Isa is a coordinator at a large research institution. Isa is working toward a Ph.D. in education and reports challenges related to sizeism two to three times per semester. Isa uses phrases like “big girl” and “voluptuous woman” to refer to their body; “I actually don’t use the word fat enough, to be honest.” Isa recalls that while growing up, “fat” was consistently used as a derogatory term, but as they grew up, they stopped caring about the negative connotations associated with it. Isa discussed their experiences as both a student affairs professional, as well as a doctoral student who takes classes on campus.
Jeffrey

Jeffrey is a hall director at a small, four-year public institution and reports issues related to sizeism happening two to three times per semester. Jeffrey uses the word “fat” as a self-descriptor. In fact, Jeffrey was the only participant that talked about their experiences as both a skinny and fat person, “I’ve been skinny before, and I hated the way I looked. I’m comfortable with my size. I like being a big person; to me, being a big person equates to being powerful.” Additionally, Jeffrey was the only participant who did not mention having self-deprecating thoughts about their size and/or self-worth.

Joe

Joe is a program manager at a large research institution. Joe reported that there are issues related to sizeism occurring on a weekly basis. As a descriptor, Joe is most comfortable with the term “big” and is not very comfortable with the term “fat.” They stated, “[fat] just hasn’t necessarily felt right because it comes with a lot of connotations behind it.” Joe was one of the few participants who openly discussed looking for a way out of the student affairs field, complaining that there is just too little support for fat people in higher education.

Jude

Jude is a coordinator at a large research institution and reported challenges related to sizeism on a weekly basis. Jude is most comfortable with the phrases “fat person” or “person of size” when referring to their body. They stated, “I am more open to sharing the fact that I’m fat, and that’s a big part of my identity.” Jude noted that their comfort with the word “fat” has changed over the last few years; they previously used words like “heavy,” “overweight,” or “chubby,” but after getting connected to other fat student affairs professionals, their comfort with the language shifted.
Krystal

Krystal is a director at a regional, public research institution. Krystal has served as a student affairs professional for nine years and has worked previously at the coordinator and the assistant/associate director levels. Krystal is one of two participants who have had experience working at a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI). Krystal reported experiencing issues related to sizeism occurring on a weekly basis. When asked what descriptors they felt most comfortable with, Krystal said “fat” or “plus-size,” but when I inquired further, they mentioned that they were less comfortable with “fat,” and may opt for words like “thick” or “heavy” instead.

Luna

Luna is a coordinator who reported experiencing issues with sizeism on a weekly basis. Luna is one of two participants with experience working at a religiously affiliated university. Luna prefers the term “overweight” to “obese” but will also often use the term “fat.” Luna stated, “everyone around me hates it, but I call myself fat a lot. They’re like ‘oh, don’t do that,’ and I’m like ‘I didn’t say I’m not pretty, I said I’m fat.’ Those are two different things!” Luna was one of only a few participants that discussed the intersections of their weight and physical disabilities, adding that their disability positively correlates to weight gain.

Nicole

Nicole serves as an assistant/associate director at a small, private, four-year institution and reported challenges related to sizeism occurring on a weekly basis. Nicole may be the participant with the most academic understanding of fatness and sizeism; they mentioned first exploring notions of fatphobia and weight-based systems of oppression in their early undergraduate years. Nicole openly identifies with the word “fat,” but will also use the phrase “lasagna noodle,” stating, “I call my body a lasagna noodle because a lot of people have apple-
shaped bodies, or pear-shaped, or hour-glass, and I definitely don’t.” Nicole added, “it’s very flat and wide and has a lot of rolls, so it just seemed like a lasagna noodle to me, and I love lasagna, so it is fitting.”

**Patricia**

Patricia is a program manager at a small, private, religiously affiliated professional university and reported having experienced issues related to sizeism on a weekly basis. “Fat” is the only term that Patricia uses to describe their body. Patricia is the only participant in this study to have worked on creating affinity groups for fat student affairs professionals on their campus and has experience creating online support networks for fat people.

**Rose**

Rose is a coordinator who has had a good amount of experience at both small and large institutions, as well as both public and private institutions. Rose is the second participant to have experience at an HSI, and reported issues related to sizeism occurring weekly. Rose is likely the youngest participant in this study and has only been a student affairs professional since March 2020 (when the COVID-19 pandemic struck many higher education institutions in the United States). Rose uses words like “fat” and “overweight” to describe themselves.

**Stephanie**

Stephanie is an assistant/associate director at a large research university and reported issues related to sizeism occurring on a weekly basis. When asked what terms they prefer when referring to their body and/or weight, Stephanie said, “I try to avoid referring to my body and weight. It feels kind of awkward for me, and I think I’m still accepting myself in a way even though I’ve been larger for most of my life.” Stephanie is more comfortable with the phrase
“plus-size,” but also recognizes that a lot of people are comfortable with the term “fat,” even if they are not comfortable with it for themselves.

**Findings**

Each participant in this study completed a semi-structured interview. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 75 minutes with an approximate average of 60 minutes. I transcripted and coded each interview. Codes were systematically sorted and merged, and the final codebook with definitions was created. Codes were then sorted into emerging ideas using an interpretive phenomenological approach, which allowed for the ability to analyze the data through the conceptual lens of the study which is comprised of critical theory and fat studies scholarship. Emerging ideas were then grouped based on the research questions they answered. These groupings were then analyzed and converted into themes and systematically narrowed down until the following six themes were identified:

1. Fat student affairs professionals face health consequences.
2. Fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their current positions.
3. Fat student affairs professionals encounter prejudice in the workplace on a regular basis.
4. Fat student affairs professionals perceive a lack of viable career options in higher education.
5. Fat student affairs professionals are required to practice self-advocacy.
6. Fat student affairs professionals can be recruited and retained by adding campus resources.

**Theme 1: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Face Health Consequences**

The first theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals face health consequences. In other words, participants perceived student affairs work to be
mentally and physically taxing in ways that uniquely impact fat student affairs professionals. This theme explores the following subthemes: (a) stress in the workplace, (b) low self-confidence, (c) self-deprecating thoughts, and (d) weight versus health.

**Stress in the Workplace**

When asked how working in student affairs affected their health, Darby stated, “student affairs is highly stressful. I think regardless of what kind of help you have … I don’t think people understand how stressful it can be, and how emotionally taxing some of it can be.” Luna, a residential life staff member, added, “The only part of my health it affects is my stress levels. It’s a really stressful job. I work on-call and I deal with students of concern, and so, I think that part is super stressful.” Some participants noted that the strain is both mental and physical. For example, Joe stated, “It’s super harmful to my mental health, and that’s a whole three-hour dialogue right there. But it’s been not a healthy environment, both physically and mentally.” And Patricia gave a similar response, “It’s often a strain on my mental health, [and] it isn’t great for my physical health.” Nicole went into more detail on the connections between mental and physical health consequences of student affairs work:

The amount of stress, and the overworking expectation in student affairs is not great. It definitely affects my mental health, and that impacts my physical health because then I have a lot of anxiety and I can’t sleep and then, like, I’m not sleeping, I’m not doing things, and then if I’m overworking, then I’m not eating like I should be.

Evelynne’s thoughts on health consequences and student affairs added a weight component:

Ah, I think it’s had an enormous impact on my health, and not in a positive way. I don’t just mean … sizeism, but I think mental health as well. And I think it kind of all loops together. And that’s why I’m getting at a mental plateau of “I don’t want to do anything else about this.” My job is to help the students, and so you’re on 24/7, and you can feel bad for thinking about yourself sometimes. Complicate these time issues with our lower-paid jobs. Think about what food is accessible in a time-crunch and with less money. True, if I made more, I probably would be eating more strawberries [rather] than the bags of chips I bought from the vending machine. … Yeah, every aspect of my life, I think, is affected by this job.
Evelynne is certainly not alone. Jude, also a residential life student affairs professional, felt that the long hours and high-stress environment created “habits” that “bring out the worst in us because we’re rationalizing our choices, whether that’s not exercising or whether that’s eating more.” Jude continues:

You’re living day by day and then before you know it, you’re like, “okay, well I gained a half a pound a week,” and five years later, here I am. How did I get here? I think a lot of that is attributed just to the stress … people have put on them, or put on themselves, especially in their entry level student affairs positions.

**Low Self-Confidence**

Connected to the overall health theme was the subtheme of low self-confidence, a feeling that most of the participants mentioned struggling with. Nicole described the everyday thought processes that they go through when entering the workplace and engaging with colleagues, “I think it’s just this worry and this fear that I’m not showing up in the way that people are expecting, but also, like, trying to convince myself that I don’t care.”

Nicole added:

I feel like there’s like a hyper vigilance, kind of like a panic, of how am I showing up. Just constant worry, and in a way, like, is my body okay? Am I good enough to be here? Am I a good influence on students here?

Many of the participants discussed similar thoughts related to their bodies in student affairs settings. One participant, Evelynne, described undergoing surgery that resulted in needing a wheelchair and a cast for an extended amount of time. While the surgery was not related to weight, Evelynne felt that the wheelchair and cast were being perceived negatively by others and attributed to their plus-size body. For example, “You already are feeling larger amongst your colleagues, and then you add this cast, which makes you even bigger. I just wanted to hide in a shell. I didn’t want anybody to look at me.” Evelynne’s experience exacerbated their low self-confidence by placing a spotlight on their appearance. Evelynne stated, “My clothes weren’t
fitting [over my cast], so [I was] always in … frumpier clothes and trying to hide [it]. That was probably one of the worst years of my life.”

Participants mentioned feeling hyperaware of their bodies in any given situation. Krystal stated, “I think my weight and the space that I take up is always kind of at the forefront of my mind, and it doesn’t really matter who I’m engaging with on campus.” Participants discussed the anxiety and stress they felt as they navigated the work environment trying to perceive how their bodies are being perceived by others. For example, when asked about self-confidence, Rose mentioned often feeling “unworthy,” “unprepared,” and “guilty.” Rose stated, “I feel like student affairs professionals have to have a certain level of nurturing qualities to them … I feel like being a fat person, I can’t express those qualities the same way as thin people can.” These comments by Nicole, Evelynne, Krystal, and Rose convey a shared internal dialogue that they are not good enough.

Furthermore, this internal dialogue kept some participants from wanting to seek out new leadership opportunities. For example, when asked about leadership roles within the workplace, Stephanie stated:

That goes back to self-confidence, and why do I have such a lack of self-confidence? A lot of it is tied to my weight and stuff like that. … I wonder if I were smaller, would I feel more comfortable asserting myself and taking on leadership roles? … I’m always told “You do a great job, you go above and beyond for your students, but you need to assume more leadership roles in office.” And I’m like, “well, [I] don’t really know how to do that.” And I think a lot of those are kind of just given to the people that are assertive, and I’m not assertive.

In other words, Stephanie’s low self-confidence made them feel less qualified to take on leadership opportunities within the office despite being told they do exceptional work.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that plagued higher education starting in March 2020, an unexpected subtheme related to low self-confidence emerged in the data. Participants reported an
increase in the usage of web-conferencing software (most notably “Zoom”) to conduct regular meetings. This software allows you to video chat with students, faculty, and staff while also showing a small video “preview” of what you look like to the other attendees. Participants reported struggling with self-confidence while using Zoom. For example, Rose stated that they are “behind a screen all day long” and rarely sees “anyone in real life.” Rose continued, “My self-confidence has actually gone down because of all the Zoom calling, because in real life, you don’t have to look at yourself as you’re speaking to someone, but via Zoom you do.” Rose added, “I’ve talked to my therapist about this … I’ve been struggling with that a lot.” Krystal noted that the video of themselves could not only hurt their self-confidence, but it can be distracting during important meetings:

So sometimes I’m in these big Zoom meetings, and we’re covering important information, but I’m just looking at my rectangle, the whole time … to make sure my hair is okay instead of paying attention to what I’m supposed to, and I don’t know if other people, I mean I’m sure a lot of people struggle with, you know, like how they look and things like that, but I just, I feel so much more pressure with the video than I ever did with in-person meetings. I just feel weird.

Stephanie added that the Zoom feed makes them constantly second-guess their appearance, “Do I look acceptable? Do I look disgusting to someone? Am I okay to them?”

**Self-Deprecating Thoughts**

Within the mental and physical health theme, another salient subtheme emerged: self-deprecating thoughts. Self-deprecating thoughts are, in many ways, related to low self-confidence; however, there is an important distinction. Low self-confidence, and the internal dialogue experienced from the lack of confidence, was described by participants as a constant nagging feeling that originated from within the participant in everyday life. Conversely, self-deprecating thoughts occurred after a negative experience, such as rude comments, jokes, or
slurs. For example, Joe described their thought process immediately following a negative interaction with someone:

I get more into my head, it’s like, “oh, so they said that. What did I do that made them think that?” And it’s like, “so, it’s my fault now.” Not the fact that they said it, but it’s more like ”so, I did something that put them in that situation.” Like a, “oh, well, now I feel like shit because, you know, I’m here. This is how I am … I made this sad situation.” A very, very kind of messed up mentality. But it’s definitely there for sure. Very self-defeatist. Angry.

Evelynne described the feeling as an “internal beating down of yourself of ‘How can I let it get this way?’ I can’t even function in society.” Darby added that fat people berate themselves with questions, “if it gets bad enough, I start the terrible internal dialogue of ‘Why are you like this? Why can’t you fix it?’ … the things that we’ve been taught to think about as fat people.”

David noted that negative comments or jokes create feelings of shame and guilt that force fat people to think, “I should have exercised more. I should have done different things. I’m trying to take up the least amount of space as possible.” Rose echoed these thoughts saying that they often ask themselves, “Why are you like this? This is your fault that you let yourself get like this.” However, despite participants knowing that their size is often not a choice, these negative thoughts were still present. For example, Krystal explained that self-deprecating thoughts occur even when there is a logical explanation for one’s size, “It makes me feel sad. I’m angry with myself. ‘Why can’t I just get it together and get this weight off?’ Even knowing that I have health issues that make it really hard for me to lose weight.” And, despite the health conditions that impede weight loss, Krystal will ask themselves, “Why are you so fat? Why, why, why can’t you be smaller?”

Joe mentioned that these self-deprecating thoughts can last days following a negative event, and they outlined their typical thought process:
So, following my timeline of the entire thing, a situation happens and addressing the situation in the moment. And probably about five minutes after the situation is wrapped up, I start to have that guilt [and] that mentality of negativity. And then, I would say a couple days honestly, [and] I would be wrapped up in that mentality of negativity for a significant amount of time. Because it’s not a short-term conversation for me. It’s definitely a long-term situation, where it takes me to unpack a lot of that.

Stephanie described self-deprecation as “a constant battle in your head … you never know when something’s going to hit you.” Additionally, some participants described self-deprecation as being caused by limited physical space, such as not fitting in their office chair or a chair on campus breaking underneath them. Stephanie added,

I wish I didn’t have to have those thoughts, because I could be using my energy for something a lot more productive or connecting with someone. But instead, I’m obsessing over how I look to other people right now? So, I think there’s embarrassment and then like, “what are they thinking of me?” If they are noticing [me], are they judging me? Are they laughing at me in their head? What are they thinking about when they’re seeing me not fit into a space or struggling to be comfortable in a space? And then [angry] with myself, because again, it goes back to what I’ve been told since I was 11, “oh, if you just lost weight, you wouldn’t have these issues. You would fit no problem. It’s your fault for not fitting.”

On the surface, this section has little to no direct connection to student affairs; however, connections to low self-confidence and self-deprecating thoughts are weaved throughout the findings of this study and will be frequently referenced. For example, as participants recalled negative interactions with colleagues or instances of being limited by their physical space, low self-confidence, and self-deprecating thoughts were noted as common reactions.

**Weight Versus Health**

Throughout the interviews, participants made a lot of comments related to perceptions of weight and health, more specifically, the idea that weight equates to health. For example, Jude stated, “I know in general, I’m a healthy person, and health is not equal to being a skinny person or being a fat person.” Participants noted that there is a perception within campus health centers that health is tied to weight and that weight is entirely controllable. Krystal added, “I think when
people see someone who is plus-sized, whether they’re ‘healthy’ or not, you know, they
associate that with being lazy.” Overwhelmingly, participants wanted health centers to focus on
holistic wellness such as nutrition and exercise that can benefit everyone without pushing for
weight loss.

Additionally, participants found it frustrating that college health centers often combined
weight, health, nutrition, and eating disorders into one resource section. For example, Brady
suggested reconfiguring resources, “having resources on the website that are separate from
eating disorders, that are separate from the sort of the health thing,” to demonstrate a better
command of weight and health as separate topics. Brady also suggested adding content related to
body confidence with a greater consideration of mental health resources for fat faculty, staff, and
students:

I think that currently, what universities need to be doing is having larger conversations
about fat bodies and fat discrimination … I think it just needs to be recognized … [and]
there needs to be a lot of training and understanding what that means. There’s a lot of
intersection in terms of fat bodies with abilities, and that’s not just physical, but also
mental, emotional, dieting, [and] things like that.

And finally, many of the participants called for more inclusive language around fatness, weight,
and health. For example, participants called for the word “obesity” to be removed from health
resources, as well as from our vocabulary in general. Nicole stated:

When people talk about obesity on campus, it really, really frustrates me, because first,
the amount of people that are technically classified as “obese,” based on the very
inaccurate BMI, includes so many thin people, and I don’t know why we have to do that.
And correlating weight with health? Because when you talk about obesity, there’s never a
thought about how an obese person is healthy. Health is also subjective, and it’s also just
a biomedical classification [of] someone’s worth. But yeah, when people throw around
“obesity”—that word is something that I will not let continue in a conversation. I always
say you’re wrong if you’re [using] that word because it’s not a good word. It’s awful and
hurtful, and there’s no basis of actual science behind it. So, I need them to just stop.
Correctly distinguishing between weight and health, as well as inclusive language in general, is a theme that repeatedly appears throughout chapter four, specifically as it related to negative experiences with colleagues and the conversations that take place in work environments.

In summary, participants felt that fat student affairs professionals face mental and physical health consequences while working in higher education. They discussed increased stress within the work environment, calling the work “taxing” and labor-intensive with long hours, irregular shifts, and limited time and money for self-care. Participants also discussed having low self-confidence as a result of feeling hyperaware of their body size, often because of limited furniture and negative interactions with peers, while in the workplace. These negative interactions often resulted in self-deprecating thoughts, or in other words, a negative internal dialogue where participants reported that they shame themselves for their size, appearance, and behavior. And finally, participants noted that office conversations often equate weight and health, using the terms interchangeably, which increases stress, lowers self-esteem, and encourages self-deprecation.

**Theme 2: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Feel Unsupported in Their Current Positions**

The second theme that emerged was that fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their current positions. This theme explores the following subthemes: (a) fatness being overlooked and ignored, (b) feeling limited by professional attire, (c) negative experiences with supervisors, (d) weight and intersectionality, (e) weight as a disability, and (f) feeling limited by physical space.

**Fatness Being Overlooked and Ignored**

Fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in the workplace, and a major contributor to that feeling is that fatness is overlooked and ignored. Isa stated, “I want folks to
realize that yes, we are big people, we are fat people.” Participants argued that fatness was a part of their identity and should be something separate. Joe added,

Weight, in general, isn’t part of our umbrella of identities that we recognize, and therefore we can just ignore it. Or we can just kind of pretend that we don’t have to be aware or cognizant of it. And I think … that’s exactly what I’ve experienced all over the place.

When asked about experiences with universities taking on issues related to sizeism, Isa noted, “They don’t care. I don’t know if it’s denial, or they’re just so uncomfortable with broaching the topic that they prefer not to say anything. So, it’s almost worse because it’s being ignored.” Patricia compared the ignorance surrounding sizeism to that of “color-blindness” that has plagued systems of oppression against Persons of Color (POC): “It’s largely ignored in the same way that people, White people, prefer to say that they’re color blind.” Brady added:

I think the same thing goes with race, you know, a lot of people, they don’t want to talk about race because you’re not supposed to talk about race. I think that the narrative around fat bodies is starting to come around as our society and culture is now really focused on talking about race and normalizing those conversations. I think that those of us who care about the fat resistance, you know, we’re trying to put that into the mainstream conversation as well.

When people refuse to talk about weight, it becomes dehumanized; it is discussed as if it is not an identity but an affliction or an illness that someone must overcome. Brady explained their experiences with conversations revolving around weight:

We talk about obesity, about being overweight, about being fat as all these negative things correlated with certain health things, and in bad decision making. And when it comes to us as individuals, you know, we were raised to not talk about this. You’re raised not to call someone fat, you know, people who are not fat don’t like to even use the term fat, and so when a fat-bodied person is like, “I’m fat,” it makes you uncomfortable.

Fatness has become “such a taboo thing that we don’t talk about it. We don’t point it out; we’ve … made it invisible,” Brady emphasized. They continued by sharing a story about when they visited a gay bar and stood at the counter until everyone else around them had been served.
Finally, the bartender approached Brady and apologized for not seeing him standing there. Brady retorted, “What do you mean? I’m literally taking up two fucking people’s spaces, so you obviously fucking see me!” The bartender clearly saw Brady, but instead of apologizing for the delay, it was suggested that they were not seen. Brady added, “It sort of works the same way in higher ed. We don’t ‘see’ fat bodies because we don’t want to acknowledge that we’re being oppressive to them.”

Jeffrey added that on the rare occasion that fatness is discussed in the workplace; “It’s only something that’s talked about when it becomes a negative factor.” In other words, “if it gets in the way of something.” Examples of this might include fatness impeding someone’s ability to perform their job responsibilities, or extended leave due to health concerns. Moreover, “if it is talked about, it’s … behind closed doors,” Jeffrey added, building on the notion that fatness is taboo and should not be addressed.

Every participant agreed that treating fatness as a taboo topic was a detriment to their experiences in higher education. Fatness is treated as invisible as a way to erase the guilt and shame of ignoring the negative experiences of fat student affairs professionals who “just feel forgotten about,” Jeffrey noted. When we refuse to look at fatness as an identity, we make the mistake of thinking of it “as an individual thing that people can fix, and that it’s [only] a health issue.” By doing this, we ignore “that there [are] systems at play that are marginalizing fat bodies,” Brady explained.

Moreover, when we ignore fat bodies, it creates “an expectation that you’re supposed to be a certain size because [otherwise] they don’t plan for you,” Jeffrey stated. When the campus is not built in a way that accommodates fat employees, it shows that those identities were not
considered. Patricia added, “people just don’t really necessarily think about the implications of what they’re doing,” and this becomes very apparent throughout the remainder of this theme. 

**Feeling Limited by Professional Attire**

Participants felt that not only are there higher professional attire standards for fat student affairs employees, but also that access to those professional clothes are limited by availability and cost. Ten out of the 15 participants mentioned that they had experienced unfair treatment related to professional attire. “I feel like I have to go an extra mile to look presentable at work. For example, where most of my thin colleagues can wear leggings and a tunic to the office—that would be seen as unprofessional [on] me,” Evelynne reported. Likewise, Luna explained that thin colleagues “get away with a little bit more. So, I have a colleague that wears joggers as professional wear sometimes, and if I tried to wear joggers as professional wear, I’d get my butt sent home.” Nicole added the different expectations cross-gender and racial lines as well: “I feel like there’s just an additional level of professionalism needed for fat people, especially for fat women, and I’m also Black, so for fat, Black women there’s a different expectation of dress than for other people on campus.” Even for campus cultures that have a relaxed dress code, different expectations can exist, Nicole explained:

> There’s this level of business casual here, but I still feel like if I wore clothes that I felt 100% comfortable in, it would be perceived poorly. Even if I wear dresses that are considered fine for thin people, my body shows more, I guess, and it might not be perceived as respectable, in a way.

Men also noted the different expectations between thin and fat dress codes. David recalled being confronted at least three times about being at work with his dress-shirt untucked. People told him, “just so you know, you should tuck in your shirt more. It looks more professional.” Tucking their shirt in was not always an option, David said. “It was just uncomfortable.” As a member of the residential life staff, Joe explained that khakis, polos, and
comfortable shoes are widely accepted outfits within the housing department. However, that did not stop a parent from filing a complaint with the department. Despite everyone wearing variations of the same outfit, the department lead called Joe aside, explained the complaint, and set a higher standard for Joe than for the thinner colleagues: “I am not allowed to be in the same spaces in the same outfits as everybody else because of my size, because of my physical appearance.”

It is also important to note that professional attire does not fit everyone the same. Suits, pants, shirts, ties, skirts, and jackets are designed with a particular body in mind. Traditional clothing companies take their designs and simply enlarge them to provide big and tall and plus-size options. Unfortunately, bodies do not store fat in all the same places and in all the same proportions. This makes it challenging for fat student affairs professionals to find appropriate clothing that meets traditional business attire standards—a sentiment reflected in Brady’s interview: “I think one of the bigger areas where I struggle most with my size, in terms of my job, in terms of higher education, is professional clothing.” Brady continues, “my size makes it harder to find clothing. Also, I don’t feel as comfortable in it, and in some ways, I feel self-conscious.” Brady described some of the details that go into their search for professional wear:

Buying suits and having shirts that can tuck-in. I have a really long torso, so having a big stomach and having a long torso, it makes it really hard to find shirts. And I’m one of the people who wears their pants under the belly, not over. And so, it’s really hard to find shirts that will stay tucked-in. So, you know, finding accommodations for that … I got those one things that are basically upside-down girdles: you put them on your legs and then they hold your shirt tucked-in. But then, at the end of the day, I have giant bruises around my legs because those things were held so tight around my thighs.

After describing that detailed process for selecting and wearing one outfit, Brady asked, “do I even look that professional in those clothes?” Brady was not the only participant to raise this question; many interviewees felt that they work too hard to fit into clothing standards, painfully
at times, only to feel that the professional clothing is not designed to look *professional* on fat bodies.

The focus on professional attire adds to the second theme of feeling unsupported in student affairs because clothing standards often make fat professionals feel isolated and inadequate. Patricia stated, “Because of my size, I don’t have access to the same attire that I think a lot of upper-level administrators would expect from their leadership … I just physically can’t get the clothing that would speak mid-level, upper-level administrator.” David adds, “These people in the director-level roles and even some of our assistant director-level roles, they are constantly wearing those suits and … they [are] going to speak down [to me] if I don’t do that type of thing.” Participants mentioned that their inability to meet professional attire standards impedes their ability to see themselves moving up into higher positions with student affairs. David added:

> You always hear that … you should always dress for the role that you want and not the role that you have. That’s always like, “Oh, you should be in a suit, a shirt, and tie. Wear this, do that.” And it’s just like, “do you see how expensive this is for me?” I can’t just go to some, you know … two for $69 sale at Men’s Warehouse type of thing, you know?

Participants perceived higher standards of professional attire from supervisors while also feeling that those professional standards do not account for both the poor fit and limited availability of big and tall and plus-size clothing. Furthermore, David alluded to another vital component: cost.

Participants reported that the cost of big and tall and plus-size professional attire as a barrier. “I’m 300 pounds; it is so hard to find good, affordable, professional clothing,” Krystal said. Darby added, “I understand that there’s more fabric, but why does it cost you know, $20 more, or whatever? When it’s literally an extra four inches of fabric. It doesn’t need to be like that.” Isa and Luna both noted that their thinner colleagues can go to discount stores, clearance racks, and even second-hand retailers and find decent, lightly worn professional wear. However,
these options are rarely, if ever, available for big and tall and plus-size clothing. As a result, participants reported having to shop at expensive designer stores that create clothing options specifically for fat individuals. Isa stated:

It’s hard to find professional wear. I think right now I’m a Lane Bryant queen, but it’s very expensive. I have certain outfits that I wear, and I know I recycle a lot because it’s just a lot more expensive to purchase the same outfit for me than it is for someone that’s a size 10. I can’t go to Ross and get a steal of a deal on pants or [a] skirt, because it’s not going to be the same price. It’s always going to be higher.

Luna shared a story about their struggle with professional clothing while on the job market for a student affairs position. Coming from a low-income background mixed with the limited availability of suitable clothing, they relied heavily on the small selection of items from Goodwill, an apparel thrift shop. When it became apparent that clothing was important for the job interview, Luna decided to take out a loan in order to pay for the needed clothing. Luna recounted some of the thoughts they had while struggling with their business attire:

I remember feeling less prepared. I remember feeling not good enough and not being able to stand up to what they were wearing. I remember one day I was in a dress. It was a blue dress and a white blazer that I’d actually gotten gifted to me, but my shoes were really old, and they weren’t close-toed. The dress was probably a little too short, [but] it was what I had. I saw other people in two-piece suits and these super interesting and awesome dress suits for women. And I was like, ‘I don’t have the money for that.’ It made me feel inadequate.

In short, participants perceived that the standards for professional attire were set higher for fat student affairs professionals as compared to thinner colleagues. Participants also felt that they would need to take their wardrobe more seriously if they were going to be considered for higher-level positions. Despite this awareness, access to big and tall and plus-size professional attire is limited in both availability and cost.

Matching Staff Apparel. Limitations and challenges related to matching staff apparel emerged as an important subtheme in the data. All 15 participants mentioned their offices’
inability to find them adequate matching apparel as among the most marginalizing experiences they have faced. Matching staff apparel refers to the polos, oxford shirts, jackets, and other garments that institutions and departments purchase for their employees. Matching apparel usually all come in the same color and have the office’s logo embroidered or screen-printed onto the lapel. Participants reported that they feel mistreated when apparel is ordered without regard to the employees’ needs, resulting in shirts or jackets that cannot be worn. “Every single shirt I’ve gotten that supposedly was my size, they’re just sitting there … They’re always too small, or they’re not long enough, or they’re tighter on the arm,” Isa explained. Krystal added, “I have a whole drawer full of shirts that are too small, because they don’t order big enough sizes.”

When matching apparel orders are placed without checking with employees and their self-reported sizing needs, department heads end up marginalizing and isolating their employees. For example, Jeffrey stated, “Don’t be ordering something that you know is not going to go up to a certain size where I will be left out. I’m having to be that one person that says ‘oh, well, they don’t have this in my size.’” Patricia recalled an experience where her department was ordering matching shirts for an upcoming conference. The company that the department selected to make the shirts did not include larger sizes. When Patricia approached their supervisor about the issue, the supervisor decided to order Patricia’s shirt from a different vendor and in a different color from the rest of the staff; “Sure, why don’t we let the other 20 people in our department all match and I’ll just be the odd person out; that’s fine.” Behind the sarcasm, Patricia stated, “I am so tired, first of all, of having to be an afterthought.” Several other participants, including Joe and Rose, had identical stories. When Joe approached their supervisor about a comparable situation, Joe was told, “oh, well, then I guess you’re just not going to look like the rest of us.” Issues like
this isolate and marginalize employees; or, as Rose stated, “it doesn’t make [them] feel like [they are] part of the team.”

**Negative Experiences with Supervisors**

Nearly all the participants referenced negative experiences with supervisors related to their body size. Participants mentioned that supervisors would often overlook instances of sizeism, ignore the needs of fat employees (such as chairs with higher weight capacities), and some of them have created and maintained a work environment that shames fatness, whether intentional or unintentional. For example, Evelynne discussed that their supervisor often likes to take them on walking meetings (a concept discussed earlier in chapter four): “My supervisor tries to make our one-on-ones into walking meetings. Nope, I don’t want to be out of breath talking to you … it almost feels like a power move so that they can do more of the talking.”

Participants also mentioned that sometimes supervisors wanted to feel supportive and helpful but that their actions were harmful. For example, Luna mentioned going on a walk around campus with her very thin, athletic supervisor. Toward the end of the walk, they took a turn and stopped at the university’s recreation center. Gym memberships at this particular university are not free for faculty and staff, so employees must go in, sign up, and pay. Luna was guided up to the front desk and asked to sign up for a membership in front of their supervisor:

They walked me to our recreation center, and they’re like, “We’re signing you up for a gym membership.” And I said, “Um what?” And she was like, “Yeah, we’re going to sign you up and you’re going to come with me.” And I was like, “Okay, I want to spend more quality time with you, so yes, but also you don’t spring this on somebody. No.” And so I wound up signing up for it because I did want to spend more quality time with her. And I did use it a couple of times, where I was like, “Why did I sign up for this?” And then I’m like, “I didn’t. She did.”

Luna felt that their supervisor did this because they cared for them: “I just felt like she wanted me to lose weight … because she thought it would make me healthier.” However, the
supervisor’s actions had adverse effects on Luna, who felt like there was a spotlight on them in front of everyone at the gym: “my weight, my health; pretty much everything about me” was on display. “I felt, like you know, when you wake up from dream, and you feel like you’re naked in front [of] class. It felt like that—but at the gym.”

Darby had a similar experience; their supervisor praised the efforts of one of their employees who was replacing lunch breaks with gym visits, and the supervisor openly encouraged others to do the same. Krystal’s supervisor had recently lost weight on a new diet and consistently talked about how “fat and disgusting she was” before the weight loss. Krystal, looking through their supervisor’s Facebook photos, saw that they were a size 12 prior to the diet. Krystal explained their reaction:

What are you talking about? It kind of makes me question: “You’re saying that about yourself [at a size 12], and I’m a 20, 22 on a good day … how do you feel about me? Does that impact how you feel about me?” So, conversations about fatness and dieting in the workplace, yeah, they happen.

Experiences like Krystal’s, Darby’s, and Luna’s highlight some of the negative interactions that employees can have with supervisors. These interactions make fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their positions.

**Weight and Intersectionality**

Participants discussed the intersections of their fatness with other identities that they hold. Participants noted that it is challenging to distinguish between the mistreatment, marginalization, and discrimination they face due to fatphobia as opposed to sexism, homophobia, racism, and other underrepresented identities. For example, Brady stated:

I hope you’ll note this in your study, I think it’s super important to think about the intersectional identities of people who are fat because I think that our intersections really do make a difference. And I think as a cis-passing White guy, I think that’s really helped me; I think that I am seen as someone who’s competent.
As a cisgender White man, Brady feels that fatphobia has impacted them differently than others because their race and gender identity may be more salient identities than their size. “It’s hard to know people’s attitudes towards me; is it because of my size? Or is it because I have these other privileged identities that dominate and that make maybe [my] fatness invisible to people?”

Brady added that competency and fatness might appear on a continuum with other identities. For example, if a survey was conducted asking people to rank order perceived competence of pictured individuals, the athletic White man would be seen most competent, followed by the fat White man. On the other end of the continuum, we would see the fat persons of color. This idea was also apparent in the interviews with Stephanie and Nicole. Stephanie noted:

There’re so many factors that play into it. So maybe a White woman that’s fat is acceptable, but a Black or an Asian woman that is not acceptable; or fat men are acceptable, but fat women aren’t. Or non-binary fat people aren’t acceptable. I think there [are] so many nuanced things to it that I wouldn’t even know where to start, honestly.

Stephanie added that while their campus has improved in many ways in its treatment of Black students, faculty, and staff, no changes have been made to make campus more inclusive of fat individuals:

I’ve seen growth in race relations on campus, and it’s not where it needs to be by any means; I don’t want to say that it is. And I don’t want to compare my struggles to racism because I’m still so much more privileged where I am, but I haven’t seen any improvement.

Nicole echoed Stephanie’s point and added that sizeism is perpetuated by people refusing to see it as a problem:

I experienced this on other levels, as well as like, being in a very predominantly White area like as a Black person, but it’s like, at least people are aware that racism is real. Most people believe that anyway; most intelligent-ish people recognize that racism is a thing. Whereas I don’t think people realize that sizeism is an actual thing, or that fatphobia exists, or that people can be hurt by these things.
Participants noted that just because it is challenging to separate fatphobia from other forms of marginalization, it does not negate that fat people are treated poorly. Nicole noted that their intelligence is often called into question, and it’s likely because they are fat, Black, and a woman:

I’m not sure if people don’t think I’m intelligent because I’m fat or because I’m Black, or it’s probably both, so it’s hard to parse out, just like the fatphobia. … There’s a lot of sexism that goes into that. A lot of sizeism that goes into that. And I feel like that is something that really affects me.

It is important to highlight intersectionality within the findings because some participants felt that they could not distinguish the marginalization they felt as solely fatphobia, homophobia, sexism, or racism. However, all 15 participants within the study, regardless of their other identities, described similar experiences related to sizeism in the workplace and reported that they felt unsupported in their student affairs positions.

**Weight as a Disability**

Participants often discussed weight by comparing it to disability. Fatness was described as being similar to disability in that it sometimes impedes ability and elicits harmful stereotypes. For example, Jeffrey noted, “People make assumptions about what you’re able to do and what you’re not able to do based on what my body looks like.” However, participants also noted that disability and fatness are perceived very differently. In other words, weight is seen as a self-imposed disability, a choice, and therefore elicits less sympathy and compassion from others. “Being fat isn’t seen by society as a [true] disability; it’s seen as a choice. That’s what the problem is,” Jeffrey stated. Luna added, “a lot of people don’t ask or care to ask what’s going on. There are many reasons people are overweight. And so, I think a lot of people don’t care that there are reasons behind it.”
A few of the participants noted that they have disabilities that positively correlate with increased body size. For example, Luna explained some of their issues with weight loss: “I have polycystic ovarian syndrome, which makes me insulin resistant, and it’s really hard for me to lose weight. And so, I’ve been trying for a pretty long time to lose weight. And it’s still not happening.” Similarly, Nicole also suffers from a disability that corresponds to weight gain:

I think it correlates really closely with my physical disability; I have chronic pain. So, that is an interesting intersection because people assume, like really always assume, that fat people are lazy anyway, but then having a disability on top of it really impacts that because, like I physically cannot do these things, not because I’m fat, but because my body is unable to do so, which occurred prior to me being fat.

Nicole continued, “So my fatness and my chronic pain have a lot of synergy … because it’s an invisible disability; people don’t know about it, so then they judge me based on my weight.”

On many college campuses, weight is categorized under disability because the accommodations often look similar. For example, Brooklyn explained:

A lot of times, I think people would try to lump weight in with disability status, and that could be for some people, but for a lot of people, it’s not. And then I think that that also can really minimalize the experience for two very different groups of people who could be experiencing similar or very different things.

Brooklyn also suggested that by classifying weight as a disability, the experiences of both fat people and people with disabilities are being diminished. Many of the accommodations may look similar; however, the rationale and assumptions behind the accommodations are distinctly different. In other words, to assume that a fat person knows what it is like to experience a disability and vice versa is short-sighted. Additionally, several participants noted that they were hesitant to approach disability services departments because they felt that they would be taking services away from people who truly needed them.

For example, Stephanie discussed what it would be like if they had to request accommodation on their campus:
I think you have to file with the Accessibility Services Office, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that. I would be like, “Oh, well, I’m taking that from a student who broke their leg or something,” and I feel guilty for doing that. I shouldn’t feel guilty, but I would feel guilty.

Jeffrey added:

We don’t want to be a burden, you know, because it’s one thing to have a disability, having a disability is no one’s fault, but people will be quick to say … that being fat is your fault, even though, for most people it is not. … Wanting an accommodation for that is like saying that you want accommodation for something that’s not accepted, and some people will look at it as if you’re asking for something you don’t deserve. I feel like if I asked for an accommodation to have more time or something because I’m a larger person, it would, in my mind, be retaliated with, “Well, why are you in this job then? Because it’s required that you do this, and we’re not going to make that accommodation for you because it’s not something that’s written that says we have to make an accommodation for you.”

Instead of requesting accommodations, Jeffrey stated that they would rather hide the issue and move forward: “I’d rather just take that personal sacrifice and not have to explain myself rather than be compared to someone [with a disability] and be told to just deal with it.”

Several participants described the resources provided by campus disability services departments as rigidly zero-sum; that somehow their request for accommodations would take away resources from people with disabilities:

I don’t think it’s intentional, but I believe that is the idea that is put out there. That if someone who is paralyzed or has no legs would need this, what is it that you have that’s equal to that? And, if you don’t have something equal to that, why do we need to offer that accommodation to you? I think it’s one of those unintentional things that gets communicated. They don’t mean to do it, but their actions kind of show that.

To combat this idea, participants regularly mentioned campus-wide universal designs for increased accessibility. If something is universally designed, it refers to the idea that everyone should be able to access it regardless of ability. “I am a huge proponent for universal design,” Evelynne noted. They continued:

[It’s] the idea that people should not have to ask for accommodations, because in the end, universal design is made for all people. It really is ‘one-size-fits-all.’ So, in a perfect
world, tear it all down and start over. In a realistic world, I think just being more intentional.

**Feeling Limited by Physical Space**

Participants noted that they felt unsupported, and in many ways, marginalized, by the physical work environment. “The designers of physical space typically don’t design with a lens for fat people,” Darby noted. For example, Joe mentioned that in their state, windows are considered an emergency exit for residence halls. However, last year, the windows in their residence halls were replaced with smaller counterparts, and Joe has a real concern that any larger people in the building who may need to escape in an emergency would not have the option to leave. Fat residents were not considered. Another example comes from Brooklyn, who shared that the parking lot in front of their building was reconfigured, and the lines were repainted. To increase the volume of the lot, new spaces were added, and old spaces shrunk. This poses a real concern for larger drivers who are challenged to get out of their cars once parked in the small spaces. “So that is something that no one would ever think about if they don’t have that experience, it seems so obscure,” Brooklyn stated.

Challenges and impediments to mobility within the work environment were common throughout the interviews. This subtheme covers relevant topics discussed by participants, including elevators, walking on campus, bathroom stalls, campus furniture, office chairs, conferences, flying, and even challenges specific to those working in residential life.

**Elevators.** Participants discussed the critical role of elevators, not only as a necessity for those with physical disabilities but for anyone with mobility issues. Fat people can, in some cases, experience issues with mobility that hinder their ability to take the stairs. Participants were quick to note that not all fat people *want or need* to take the elevator, but some do. Regardless, they felt that elevators should be a provided accommodation for everyone. Darby stated, “It’s not
just about being fat. It’s about any kind of accessibility to elevators. I feel like buildings always hide them in the back, way in the back, they’re hard to get to.” Nicole added, “So there are elevators, but not many elevators, and sometimes those elevators are not working, which is a problem, not for only fat people, but for people who cannot go up the stairs.” They continue, “And a lot of the times, the [ADA] accessible doors to the elevators are not in the front of the building, so it’s extra work to actually find the elevators.”

Increasing the accessibility to elevators across campus was an important topic for participants, but they also felt the need to go a step further: the culture surrounding elevator use also needs to change. Several participants noted how they have felt or experienced shame for elevator usage on their campuses. Nicole shared a story about their experience:

I think that, there’s always moments where like I want to use the elevators because walking upstairs is painful for me. People here always assume that walking up the stairs is the only answer, and so when I say "no, I’m going up the elevator," there’s a lot of judgment. And, when I’m on the elevators, by people that I don’t know, [there is] that cursory look of like “why are you here?” Even though they are also on the elevator.

Other participants mentioned signage hanging up on their campus near elevators that encouraged students, faculty, and staff to skip the elevators and take the stairs as a healthy alternative. Participants felt that these signs were distasteful and inadvertently shamed someone for their limited mobility or physical disability.

**Walking on Campus.** Walking on campus was another topic that participants frequently mentioned. For example, the idea of a “walking meeting” was frequently discussed. A walking meeting might be used to replace a more traditional meeting; instead of sitting in someone’s office, the meeting would occur while walking across campus (often to another meeting). While a walking meeting may increase time efficiency, participants discussed the stress, anxiety, and exhaustion that these meetings can inflict on fat professionals. For example, Stephanie noted the
quick pace of these meetings and the expectation to not only keep-up with colleagues but to also contribute to the conversation: “I keep up with my coworkers, and I have to regulate my breathing to not let on that I can’t breathe right now … I might pass out, but I feel embarrassed saying that.” Stephanie recalled an experience when they felt embarrassed to take a moment to catch their breath:

I need time to breathe and not just immediately walk in the building, walk up three flights of stairs, and jump right into the meeting. Y’all need to give me time to breathe. Let me go to the bathroom and catch my breath. Because I feel embarrassed to be like, “Hey, I need to catch my breath.” I don’t want to say that. Because again, this goes back to the stereotype of “oh, you’re lazy.”

Participants also noted that they often feel pressured to walk in groups to campus functions. Brady described that they would have to regularly remind colleagues that there is a 1,000-foot elevation difference between the edges of their campus and that they’ll simply need to meet there versus walking together. Brady explained that they utilize the free bus pass that faculty and staff receive in order to move around campus: “walking up the hill for me was just not an option.” Brady described another situation where they were teaching a course on campus, and they had two sessions back-to-back across campus with only 12 minutes between the end of the first session and the beginning of the second. The campus, as Brady explained it, was built into the side of the mountain, and the second session of the course was at the top. “I was showing up to my second class that I was teaching soaked in sweat, out of breath, looking so unprofessional.” Brady wants campuses to take these situations more seriously and posed the following questions:

How far are classes from each other? How far are meetings from each other? What sort of terrain does someone have to navigate to get from one place to another? If someone needs assistance with mobility, what accommodations are available to them?
Additionally, like the discussion earlier with elevators, the campus culture surrounding walking also needs to shift. Participants noted that they often experience shame for deciding to drive or shuttle instead of walking. For example, Nicole mentioned that they lived near campus but chooses to drive because it is still a significant distance. Nicole’s colleagues felt differently: “There’s like this judgment, and I think it’s a layered judgment, ‘Of course you drive, you’re fat.’” Participants noted, similar to Brady’s story, that they often drive or shuttle around campus to maintain their professional appearance. Walking across campus can cause shortness of breath and sweating that can both impact their professional appearance in their next meeting or delay the start of the meeting altogether. Pressuring or shaming fat professionals to walk to meetings may hinder their ability to perform well, participants reported.

**Bathroom Stalls.** Another limitation to the campus work environment is the bathroom stalls. Darby, Krystal, Rose, Brooklyn, and Joe all noted that small bathroom stalls were not only an issue for fat individuals, but also for people with disabilities or other mobility challenges: “[it’s] not just a fat accessibility issue, this is an accessibility issue,” Darby said. For that reason, a lot of bathrooms offer ADA-accessible stalls large enough for wheelchairs. Participants noted that they too often gravitate to the ADA stall. Brooklyn added, “there are times where I need to use a handicap stall. This is the stall that I fit in, but then I feel very bad. I shouldn’t need to use a handicap stall or an accessible stall.” Brooklyn noted that when they use the ADA stall, they feel like they are taking that stall away from someone who may have mobility issues. However, small bathroom stalls pose mobility challenges to fat individuals who barely have enough room to get into the stall, turn-around, and straddle the toilet to shut the door, then wedge oneself onto the seat between the stall walls and the toilet paper dispenser. “Bathrooms can sometimes be a challenge; tight spaces on older campuses, I’ve noticed in particular. I won’t get into the
mechanics, but the narrow stalls can make certain things difficult,” said Rose. Joe added that small bathrooms tend to complicate visits to the restroom during the normal workday:

We have bathroom doors that aren’t wide enough, even for an average-sized person most of the time, for people to get through. We have bathroom stalls [that] are smaller, and they’re not necessarily expanding the spaces to be, one more accessible for people with disabilities, but also more accessible for people who are large. So, I’ve definitely gone into buildings where I can’t use any bathrooms in here. I have to go to a different building just because the stalls are small.

**Campus Furniture.** Campus furniture was the most frequently mentioned physical space limitation of college campuses. Or, as Jude put it, “the biggest challenge I would say is just furniture. That is number one. Absolutely.” Campus furniture refers to desks, communal area seating, stadium seating, classroom seating, and other campus amenities. Joe added,

I feel like the most that I’m discriminated against … when it comes to furniture, and I say that because the institutions tend to buy, in my perspective, what is most available or ready, and not necessarily what’s most accommodating to everybody. So, they like to buy furniture with armrests, and with very specific width sizes … they’re not very accessible for people with different ability levels.

Desks were a big topic for the participants, whether they were professional desks in office spaces or student desks in classrooms. Either way, participants felt that desks were purchased by universities with the idea that they are one-size-fits-all, but in reality, they are often too small and painful. Darby mentions that desks can also be too low, causing pain on the upper portion of one’s thigh, or they can be too narrow, causing pain along the sides of one’s legs. Desks can also be too tall, Evelynne noted, while sharing a story about returning to work after knee surgery. They had worked with disability services to get a standing desk installed in their office to stand and stretch as needed. Unfortunately, campus facilities purchased a desk that was too long for Evelynne’s office and only fit in the standing position, which forced Evelynne to stand the entire time they are at work. “[It] is very uncomfortable and really sucks when I’m on
that campus … So, I tried to avoid going to that campus as much as possible. You deal with what they give you, I guess.”

On the other hand, the number of complaints about students’ desks in classrooms far outnumbered the complaints about office desks. On most campuses, there are two distinctive styles of student desks that participants felt should be discarded. First is the auditorium-style seating with the hide-away desktop that flips and folds to a resting position under the armrest. To fit the folding desktop feature and still have maximum capacity in the classroom, the chairs are often made smaller making it challenging for persons of size to sit comfortably. Rose stated:

My body doesn’t fit in that, and sometimes those are where we do student trainings and we meet with students in those rooms or even, I took classes in those rooms, and it’s not accessible to my body. It’s a struggle every time. That’s what I mean when I have to prepare. Sometimes I have to go into a classroom and pull in a desk and a chair from another classroom to make it work for me.

The second style of classroom desk mentioned by participants is the fixed-top metal-frame desks with the baskets under the seat. These are found in more traditional classrooms and are typically arranged into rows facing the front of the room. Isa mentioned using the desks both in a professional capacity when working with students and also as a part-time graduate student taking classes on campus. “I would have my laptop in this really small space. So, I’m worrying about balancing the laptop and the notebook, and kind of focusing on class.” Eventually, Isa found a new way to sit comfortably in class utilizing the instructor’s chair from the front of the room:

There was a single wooden chair that I would just get from the front of the room. I would put that where the [desk] chair would be, and I would literally flip my desk around, so then the writing surface would be in front of me. So then I would have enough room to write, and that was good.
Isa went on to mention that even though their body was more comfortable with rearranged furniture, they felt mentally and emotionally uncomfortable having to be the only person in the room with the self-imposed accommodation that accentuated their body size.

Other forms of campus seating mentioned by participants included theater seating with the flip-up cushion, white plastic outdoor venue seating, conference seating (with the chairs that hook together into rows), stadium chairs and bleachers, and dining hall chairs with thin wireframes. Participants argued that these chairs were too flimsy, too small, or both. Brooklyn put it simply: “chairs, seating, I hate it.” Brady recalled multiple negative experiences with the temporary outdoor seating found on most campuses: “the dreaded white plastic chair … worst chairs in the whole world. It took two chairs breaking on me to realize those chairs are not for me.” Darby mentioned that campus seating is an essential consideration for student affairs staff because they often work with students, hold meetings, and host events in spaces all around campus. Some participants mentioned actively avoiding parts of campus that do not offer good seating options. For example, Krystal stated, “there are some places on campus I just don’t go because there’s no good seating or the seating is unstable.” Krystal continues: “Like, in the dining hall, I was worried that one of the chairs might collapse; I don’t want to be the [person] who just broke a chair in the middle of the dining hall.”

Not only does inadequate campus furniture cause discomfort, but it also causes anxiety and stress. Jude discussed walking into a crowded room: “For example, when you walked into the room and everyone else was sitting down, and you’re like, ‘Oh, I’m not gonna sit down because I can’t fit in those chairs.’” At that moment, Jude typically decides to stand at the back of the room instead of forcing their way into an uncomfortable seat. However, the anxiety of that decision begins to build: “Are they going to look at me differently because everyone else sitting
and I’m standing? And they’re going to say, ‘Oh no, please sit.’’’’ Brooklyn added some context to how they feel when campus furniture excludes them:

Like, am I doing something wrong because I don’t fit into things? … I get angry about it because if you look into a universal design, for instance, the whole point of this is that you are catering to everyone, and that’s what we should be doing. It’s 2020. Why are we still buying the chairs with the desks on them?

Participants note that the anxiety in those moments stems from the realization that the furniture was built in a way that excludes fat people, and now fat people are forced to adapt or leave. For this reason, campus furniture is one way in which fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their roles.

Office Chairs. Office chairs, while closely related to the previous campus furniture topic, deserves its own focus for two reasons. First, participants noted that unlike other pieces of campus furniture, personal office chairs cannot be avoided. Second, not only can they not be avoided, but also, they are utilized every day, and replacing them can be expensive. All 15 participants had at least one grievance with their office chair, and throughout the interviews, office chairs were mentioned over 100 times. “Office chairs are probably the biggest [pain] I endure. Not having adequate support for my body, [from something] that I use every single day, eight hours a day,” Rose mentioned.

Participants noted that not all office chairs are bad, but there are certain design elements that make some worse than others. Brady explained, “I think the biggest bane of fat people’s existence are chairs with arms … and chairs that are not wide enough. Chairs that actually cause physical pain when you have to sit.” Patricia mentioned having an office chair that broke under her while at work, and other participants mentioned that when their office chairs became too broken down to function, their only option for a replacement was to order the same chair.

Additionally, there were two other concerns that participants shared. First, most campuses have a
small selection of pre-approved office chairs that employees must select from; this pre-approved list does not typically include options with higher weight capacities. Second, most campuses have a spending limit per chair set by their procurement office; these spending limits do not account for the costly feature of increased weight capacities. For example, Darby was told that they should purchase a replacement chair for under $125; chairs with higher weight capacities often run $300 or more.

Only one participant mentioned a positive experience with office chairs. It was related to an inclusive campus policy that allowed for the purchasing and swapping of office furniture. David’s campus created this process to help support fat employees who needed chairs that offered more overall support:

They have a cycle of chairs; you know … every so often they buy new furniture, they get rid of old furniture type of thing. And so, our interior designer personally purchased all of it. She was willing to buy these bigger chairs for those of us who requested [them], and they would use our current chair to cycle out other people’s chairs. So, someone who needed a regular chair that wasn’t wider, it would cycle out those chairs and give them our chairs and buy us the bigger, wider chairs.

David argued that procedures like this should be more widely adopted across higher education as a resource for fat employees who feel limited by the furniture they use every day.

**Professional Conferences.** Participants discussed professional conferences as extensions of their professional roles. However, conferences often take place away from their own campuses, requiring travel, and often place people into new surroundings. Participants noted several concerns they had with conferences starting with location: “It’s a big deal. I don’t go to bigger conferences if they’re not close.” Traveling to close-by conferences has given Patricia the option of using their personal vehicle (an adequately sized and comfortable car for them to be in). Patricia also mentioned having used a train to travel to a conference a few years ago, but trains often require frequent stops and extend the travel time for passengers, which can be
uncomfortable. When asked about flying to conferences, Patricia stated: “I consider not going, first of all. That’s always number one. And if I do go, then there’s the frustration of knowing that I’m going to be uncomfortable.”

Once participants get to conferences, they noted two things that make them challenging to navigate. First, conferences, especially larger student affairs conferences, are spread out and require a lot of walking. Darby specifically mentioned that conference sessions should be closer together to limit the amount of walking attendees have to do. Second, venues tend to maximize occupancy by putting in rows of linked, semi-stationary chairs; this creates many issues for fat student affairs professionals who cannot fit down the aisles to find available seats, as well as those who need some additional seating space. Krystal added, “[There are] certain spaces where I just kind of stand toward the back of the room the whole time, because I don’t even want to try to fit … I get really nervous about things like that.” Rose also mentioned room configuration and the comfortability of conference attendees:

I’ve been in conferences where the room is not packed, and so I can take up two seats, and I kind of spread myself out by putting a bag on the seat next to me, and it kind of hides the fact that I’m taking up two seats, or at least going into the second seat. But in conference rooms where [there are] no open seats, and if I have to cram in, yeah I feel uncomfortable, and I feel that level of guilt of taking up space. And then people in the seats directly next to me being uncomfortable because I’m their space.

Rose continued by addressing the stereotypes some people have about fat individuals: poor hygiene, smelly, sweaty. Rose feels hyperaware of those stereotypes while in confined spaces: “I think about hygiene and how knowing that I’m going to have to sometimes sit in a cramped room full of people.” Rose will ask themselves, “Well do you smell okay? Have you been sweating? Are you good? Do you have to go freshen up before you go to this meeting? Are you going to be late?”
On the other hand, two participants mentioned having positive experiences at conferences. Luna mentioned one of their experiences: “I’ve only ever been to ACPA, and … it’s a pretty fat-friendly conference. I really enjoyed it. There were a lot of people there that I can identify with; I think I’ve just gotten really lucky with my conference experiences.” Darby added that sometimes professional conferences been welcoming and inclusive:

I think the people that go to those are far more accepting of me as a professional than at my own campuses. And I don’t know if that’s weight-based or not, but I have had the opportunity through various positions, of leadership positions, in the organization and my writing and presentations, to show what I can do and what I can bring to the table.

While conferences will continue to be an important part of student affairs work, participants shared that policies and practices regarding conference travel, as well as conference planning, should be more weight-inclusive.

**Flying.** Work travel was another popular topic during the interviews, most notably of which was flying. Participants noted that they travel for work for a variety of reasons, including conferences, recruitment, and meetings. None of the 15 participants liked flying, and several participants said they actively avoid anything that might require them to fly. “I don’t fly. And I know that that’s often the most economical option. I just don’t do it, because I haven’t flown since I was significantly smaller than I am now, and even then, it was uncomfortable,” Patricia mentioned. Nicole added, “as always, plane rides are awful. I think they’re the bane of fat people’s existence.”

Participants were quick to note that flying is uncomfortable for two reasons. First, the seats are too small. “The seats are very, very small,” said Stephanie. Nicole added, “I’m wider than six inches, so it’s hard to be comfortable.” Nicole went on to say that being confined to the small airline seat makes them hyperaware of their size and the space that they are taking up.
“Traveling is already not a comfortable thing for anyone, but it’s like extra uncomfortable for fat people.” Nicole continued:

I just feel like I need to shrink myself as much as possible so I can give the person next to me as much space as possible. I feel like I’m invading their space, although I physically can’t help that my body is fat. So, sometimes it does feel like I’m a burden to the world.

Nicole was not alone in that sentiment; other participants, including David, mentioned the idea of “shrinking” oneself to accommodate others: “I always think more about the person next to me. I know I’m uncomfortable, but I’m trying to make the person next to me the least uncomfortable.”

The second reason that flying is uncomfortable for fat people is because of the negative interactions with other passengers. Patricia mentioned that “there’s the anxiety about what other people are going to think.” They have even been afraid of being kicked off the flight for being too large for the seat. Stephanie has flown a lot in their role as a recruiter and mentioned that other passengers can be confrontational. “I’ve had experiences where people elbowed me. I had someone call me a whale one time on a plane.” Stephanie also explained that other passengers openly complained to the flight attendant about Stephanie’s size and not wanting to sit in the neighboring seat. David had a comparable situation:

I remember one time in particular. I was flying—traveling—and I remember this person next to me literally went to the flight attendant and started crying because they didn’t want to sit next to me because I was taking up too much space. I was just like, “this is very awkward because I can see what you’re doing.” And it was just a very awkward moment.

Over half of the participants have had negative experiences with other passengers, and a few participants mentioned a more covert, passive-aggressive behavior. For example, Darby mentioned that whenever they board a flight, they walk down the aisle of the plane and notice all the scowls and side glances from passengers hoping that Darby does not stop at their row to have a seat.
To cope with the negative experiences with flying, participants mentioned a few tactics. First, several of them mentioned flying exclusively with Southwest Airlines, which offers a “person of size” policy that includes a free second seat for fat passengers. However, participants noted that this policy often requires you to purchase the second seat upfront, then get refunded following the flight. Campus policies regarding travel may not allow for employees to take advantage of this option. Second, participants mentioned either purchasing a second seat or upgrading to first-class out of pocket. For example, Stephanie mentioned paying up to $200 out of her salary to upgrade to first class during recruitment flights to avoid negative interactions with passengers. Three participants mentioned feeling compelled to pay out of pocket for flights to feel more comfortable during work travel.

Participants felt that campus policies and practices involving travel unintentionally limit fat student affairs professionals from finding comfortable modes of transportation. In short, campus offices that approve travel often expect employees to go with the cheapest option available. Unfortunately, not everyone can fit in the cheapest economy seats, and therefore leave fat student affairs professionals feeling unsupported.

**Challenges Specific to Residential Life.** Five of the participants discussed experiences related to working in residential life. Working in residential life is different from traditional student affairs work. It often requires working on-call for emergencies and living on campus in university-provided housing. Non-residential life participants discussed creating positive support structures outside of work that helped them cope with difficulties experienced within the workplace. However, live-in staff find it more challenging to separate themselves, whether it’s from student issues, fatphobic colleagues, or inadequate campus furniture. For example, Joe discussed the struggle with finding a place to practice some physical wellness:
Being residence life and acknowledging the fact that I don’t want to be around students constantly if I want to go do things physically, I would have to be around students. I would have to either be around students or drive 30, 40 miles away. And so physically, I can’t go into any of the gyms within town; I can’t go to the pool without essentially being surrounded by students.

Other participants discussed the challenges of having furnished apartments that do not meet their needs. For example, Brooklyn explained that they have several friends in residential life whose beds and couches do not support their weight. Patricia mentioned that their bed broke under them one night, and when they approached their supervisor about a replacement, their supervisor wanted to replace it with the exact same bed. Rose, a non-residential life staff member, was asked about student affairs positions that they would avoid applying to, and Rose responded:

I mean housing for sure; I would definitely never do that. I mean, [I’ve] seen the Facebook posts on the Fat Student Affairs Professionals page about people complaining and not being able to find proper furniture for their weight and their size. And so, I just would never put myself in that position.

Other issues specific to residential life include being on-call and going on building rounds. Jeffrey discussed having to cover rounds in a building without an elevator:

I worked in a couple of different buildings that don’t have any kind of elevator at all. So, I worked in one building that was a split-level building. And so, one side of the building was seven floors that didn’t have an elevator, but the other side had four flights of stairs, and I’m expected to do rounds every day of this building.

Jeffrey added that this is not simply a body size issue but a mobility issue. Patricia echoed Jeffrey’s sentiments:

Being a res life professional, I am an area director, and having to go on calls and having to, first of all, park in staff parking, which is not always near the residence halls, and then having to hop up a building to the top floor without an elevator. That’s not always fun when you’re walking up to a crisis situation.
Residential life staff makes up a sizable percentage of student affairs professionals, and participants argued that more needs to be done to make it supportive of staff members of all body sizes.

**Theme 3: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Encounter Prejudice in the Workplace on a Regular Basis**

The third salient theme is that fat student affairs professionals encounter prejudice in the workplace on a regular basis. This theme explores the following subthemes: (a) fatness as negative, (b) stereotypes, (c) feeling marginalized by office discourse, (d) negative experiences with faculty, and (e) overcompensating.

**Fatness as Negative**

When asked how they felt their bodies were being perceived at work, participants explained that fatness is consistently seen as a negative trait. For example, Stephanie stated, “I think that if people accept fatness, then they’re like, ‘does that mean that I’m going to be fat?’ Because for some people, that’s the worst thing that can possibly happen to them. They’d rather die than be fat.” Stephanie noted that they are confused about where this idea comes from; “It’s really not that bad [being fat]; it’s fine. I’m living my life, but they don’t know it that way.”

The negative connotations with fatness also affect the way fat student affairs professionals are perceived and treated. Jeffrey stated:

> Sometimes it feels like I am being judged professionally because I can’t physically meet the same standards that everybody else is meeting. They say that we’re supposed to be a team of us to work together, but it’s almost like I’m judged for not wanting to participate if I can’t physically be at the same level as everyone else.

Some participants noted the negative connotations perpetuated by the socio-political climate. Socially, people dislike the idea of being fat, and politically, fatness has very few workplace
discrimination protections; combined, participants noted, means fat employees experience workplace discrimination with very few, if any, protections. Patricia added:

It’s wrapped in social and political context, and I think it’s super important that we acknowledge that. And I think that needs to start with acknowledging that fatness is not a choice, and that even if it was a choice, it’s not something that should limit our human dignity.

Jeffrey continued with the idea of human dignity:

Fat people are people too; some people don’t choose to be fat, and some people choose to be fat. And so, I don’t think that my size should be something that is, you know, discriminated against. And, [whomever] I’m working for—no matter what level they are at—needs to understand that. They need to understand that I shouldn’t be discriminated against for this.

Participants noted that failing to see fat people as human beings mean that they are reduced to stereotypes; or, in other words, oversimplified and often negative connotations about fatness.

**Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are a key component of prejudice. Within fat studies and critical theory, stereotypes, stigmas, and prejudices are studied as perpetuators of discrimination and systems of oppression against fat individuals. Participants identified the following stereotypes in their interviews: friendly, funny, and emotional; lacking intelligence; lazy and lacking self-control; unattractive and unhygienic; and unhealthy.

**Friendly, Funny, and Emotional.** Several participants noted that stereotypes related to the personalities and overall demeanor of fat people. For example, Brooklyn explained, “There is this really palatable idea of a chubby, happy, friendly White woman that people have. I am very White, and I am a woman, and chubby and fat, and I am very nice, so people can really address me.” Many people may not see this as a negative; however, Brooklyn noted that it becomes a negative when it distracts from a person’s intelligence and work ethic:
I also want people to know I’m good at what I do. I’m not just here because, “oh, she’s so friendly.” It’s weird how you internalize all this stuff because I always am like, “yeah, it’s the chubby White girl aesthetic,” and I kind of joke about it.

“People-person” is another way that this idea is portrayed. In other words, fat bodies have become a beacon that signifies you are lovable, chatty, and friendly. Nicole noted, “Maybe because there’s this expectation that fat people are jovial and rosy-cheeked, and happy all the time, which is not true. So maybe there’s this weird kind of stereotype about fat people that makes them feel that I’m approachable.” Again, these sound like good qualities of a person, but they are negatives because they are stereotypes; they are assumed traits of all fat people based on the few. Evelynne explained their thoughts on the topic:

[People assume] you’re a people-person, which is really funny because I am not. I am the exact opposite. I love people, but you could be over there, and I’ll be here, and it’s fine. I’m not as touchy-feely as people assume that I am because I am on the larger side. And so, I think that plays a huge role in perceptions. … When I first started, assuming that [you’re] a lovable person if you’re larger, they wanted to give me lots of hugs. I’m like, “nope, I can love you from over there.”

The negative side of always being seen as the friendly, neighborly, lovable person is that you may not be taken seriously in the workplace. Participants observed that supervisors may be less apt to give a fat person more responsibility because fat people fit well into the lovable, friendly-faced, administrative positions instead of the program lead, managerial-type positions.

The second part of this stereotype is that fat people are funny. Brooklyn described this as the “chubby, fat, whatever…happy-go-lucky, jokes.” Fat people’s bodies are often utilized as jokes. For example, several participants discussed having to refuse repeated invitations to the gym, and in the process of turning them down, they would phrase their disinterest as a joke about their appearance: “Do I look like someone who would enjoy that?” Brooklyn further explained the idea:
I’m sure that this probably has come up at some point: feeling the need to be funny as a fat person. I don’t know where that came from. I mean, I guess it’s probably because that’s what we’re looked at in general, like the funny person in media and stuff.

Again, while being funny in general is not a negative trait, it becomes negative when fat bodies are themselves becoming the joke, and fat individuals are not taken seriously in their professional roles.

The final piece to this stereotype is the emotional component. Fat people are stereotyped as overly emotional, sensitive individuals. Isa noted, “we’re compassionate, and that we’re go-to people.” However, the negative side to this stereotype is that fat people are viewed this way because people perceive them as having gone through their own trauma. In other words, the traumatic “fat life” becomes a motivational story. Fat people are seen this way, according to Isa, “because we should feel bad. You know what I mean? Because we should be able to understand what someone else is going through. Because we’re going through something.”

These stereotypes have impacted the participants because they do not speak to the ideals of a professional. Supervisors, bosses, and managers are not typically described in terms of friendly, funny, and overly emotional; they are described as sensible, level-headed, and decisive. Holding these stereotypes about fat people can limit their growth in the workplace by being overlooked for increased responsibility, promotions, or even being hired in the first place.

**Lacking Intelligence.** The second stereotype mentioned by participants was the idea that fat people lack intelligence. When people see that you are a fat person, they see that “you’re less organized; that you’re less competent; … that you’re not as smart or intelligent,” Darby mentioned. Nicole added, “Fat people are stupid, which I don’t like using that language because it’s super ablest, but I’m saying it because that’s what people say for the stereotype.” Darby
explained that fat people are perceived as lacking intelligence because if they were intelligent, they would be better able to manage their body size:

The stigma around being fat, I think, leads people to believe you are less intelligent … I guess people assume that I don’t understand nutrition or understand how to do things that work, or how to do certain things, because of my weight, because of what they see versus what I might actually know.

Krystal noted that to combat the stereotype, they have to work diligently to prove themselves: “sometimes I feel like people view me as somebody who’s maybe not as smart or won’t fit in as well, and I feel like I kind of have to show people that I’m smart or that I fit in.”

**Lazy and Lacking Self-Control.** The third stereotype mentioned by participants is the idea that fat people are lazy and lack self-control. All 15 participants mentioned laziness as a perpetuated stereotype that directly impacts how they are perceived at work. “Yeah, so I think for me the lazy one is a big one. I think that’s one that a lot of people sort of relate to,” David said. Nicole echoed those words: “fat people are lazy … fat people don’t try and don’t put any effort into things.” Stephanie mentioned that fat people are seen as “greedy” and “unmotivated.” Patricia added that thinner colleagues think that “we don’t respect ourselves.” Participants also argued that thinner colleagues feel that fat people are fat simply because they lack the motivation to “fix” the problem. Darby stated, “To me, this is the last acceptable discrimination almost, you know, because people automatically assume being fat is a control thing. And they don’t understand the underlying things that can make it happen, or the genetics or whatever.” Brooklyn added, “the hardest thing about being a fat person, to me, I think, is that people don’t care because it’s like you did this to yourself.”

This stereotype has negative consequences at work. Participants felt that if their colleagues see fatness as a failure or as poor work ethic, then why would fat people be trusted with additional responsibilities? For example, Evelynne stated, “some of my thinner colleagues
are like ‘Oh, you’re larger, so you don’t really care. … Obviously, you don’t care enough about your position.’” Krystal added that colleagues think fat people may be less deserving of additional responsibilities than others: “they don’t eat well or take care of themselves, why do they want this extra task at work? … Why would they want to be on this extra committee?”

David noted that their supervisors may question their ability to finish tasks: “[if] you don’t have the determination, or you don’t have the willpower to do something, I guess, or if there is a task or something like that, are you going to be able to complete it?”

In stark contradiction to the stereotype, some participants felt that they thrive at work; it is an area of their life where they have more control, where they can prove themselves.

I actually had somebody say this directly to my face that they think that people who are overweight don’t have good work ethic. Somebody said to me, “I’m surprised you have the good work ethic you do because you’re overweight.” And I’m like, “what?” I think that ties back to people thinking we’re lazy. And I also think, like … they think that I don’t like being at work; that we’d rather be at home laying down or not doing work. And for me, I love being at work. I thrive in my work environment.

Luna added that this stereotype is frustrating because they are not a lazy person; in fact, they like being busy, and they enjoy going to work: “I’ve done nothing to show you that I’m lazy.”

It is also important to note that some participants prefer their fat bodies. Stephanie added, “I feel like that’s another stereotype, too is that people are always trying to lose weight, and they’re unhappy with how they look.” Jeffrey, for example, mentioned that they have been thinner before, and they were less happy with the way their body felt:

I like being a big person. To me, being a big person equates to being powerful. But people make this assumption that you being a big person is because you accidentally got fat, and that you want to be skinny, but you just haven’t been able to do it. They all make this perception because that’s what society wants people to see about fat people, but that’s not true.

**Unattractive and Unhygienic.** The fourth stereotype is that fat people are unattractive and unhygienic. Nicole noted that “there’s a general disdain for fat people … specifically with
the populations that I work for, … queer and trans students, there’s this idea of like, ‘no fats,’ in
dating profiles, and this inherent disgust and unattractiveness towards fat bodies.” In other
words, Nicole felt that people see fat people as “ugly and not worthy of love, and not worthy of
affection.” Similarly, some participants heard that fat people are stereotyped as unclean, dirty,
and smelly. Joe stated, “the stereotype that I’ve definitely heard, it’s really strange to me, is that
we smell.” Joe continued by sharing a story about an interaction they had with colleagues just
prior to the interview: “The other week, people were discussing body wash, and it just came up
in conversation, but they avoided talking about it with me, which is very strange. I have my
favorite body wash; I have my opinions, too. It’s very much like, ‘you avoid hygiene.’”

Clothing came up in the conversation as well. Participants felt that the lack of appropriate
clothing options added to the stereotype of fat people being unattractive and unclean. Jeffrey
noted:

People think that because we are fat people and we have a hard time finding clothes, that
we don’t care about our appearance, or that we don’t find ourselves attractive. Just
because society paints that picture of “fat not being attractive” doesn’t mean that I don’t
think I’m not attractive.

Brooklyn works to combat this stereotype by thinking carefully about their outfits:

I always dress nice and have nice clothes, and clothes that that I feel fit my body right, so
that’s one thing that I have always thought about a lot … not wanting to fit the stereotype
of being a fat person who can’t find clothes that fit them. But I’m hearing my privilege
right now, that I have been able to do that. … I have been able to afford and find clothes
that fit me. It’s not always been easy, but I have been able to do that. That also kind of
cuts down on how I feel I’m being perceived because I am purposefully putting the image
that I want out there. If that makes sense.

Unhealthy. The fifth and final stereotype is that fat people are inherently unhealthy, once
again equating weight with health. Luna mentioned that there is this idea that “we eat a lot, and
that meals need to be bigger for us, or we need double meals, or that we don’t eat salad.” In the
workplace, this stereotype comes up most often while participants were eating with thinner
colleagues. Krystal stated, “I feel like people seem surprised if they see me eating a salad, like ‘oh girl, you’re eating healthy!’” Stephanie mentioned that they have started to avoid eating in front of colleagues:

I don’t want to eat in front of people a lot of times until I know that they’re not going to judge me. Because, again, going back to the stereotype, like, “Oh, she’s eating so much.” And I’m not eating as much as everyone else, and even if I was, that’s none of your business, and you don’t need to judge me because I’m excited over a nugget tray. … So that’s something that’s always running through my mind.

David noted that the availability of food is something unique to working in student affairs, “we’re always trying to get rid of food!” But, as a fat student affairs professional, David feels targeted with the conversations surrounding the leftovers and pressuring the nearest fat person to eat it: “Oh, you know you want it, you can eat it! Come on, you can take that last piece!” David explained further, “So, [it’s] the idea that just because food is there that we’re gonna be willing to eat whatever’s placed in front of us.” Joe noted a similar scenario during an admissions event when visitors would “walk around the room and come find the fattest person… and ask him ‘what’s a good place to eat,’ and I’m like, that’s so strange.”

Aside from the idea that fat people eat too much, participants felt that the unhealthy stereotype also applied to general bodily health. Brady mentioned, “I think to people in general, and specifically, in higher education, fat people are seen as people who don’t care about their health. They don’t care about physical fitness.” Evelynne shot down this notion:

Not taking care of your body or not being healthy is another perception. When again, that’s not true. I take high-intensity dance classes three or four times a week. I just happen to not lose weight as fast as other people, I guess. So, I feel relatively healthy. All my blood work comes back from the doctor, and all my numbers are in the perfect or low zone even.

Despite the ongoing healthy reports, Evelynne says this stereotype still impacts the way they are treated at the doctor’s office:
I get the same kind of treatment from my doctors when the first thing they always say is that I need to lose weight. The first thing they always do is get me checked for diabetes, even though every time the test comes back, it doesn’t even read pre-diabetic. It’s annoying when you’re just trying to live life and all anyone else is worried about is your bodily figure.

**Feeling Marginalized by Office Discourse**

Stereotypes and prejudice go together. Stereotypes are pieces of information that have been generalized to hold meaning for an entire group of people. Prejudice takes place when stereotypical ideas are turned into action, such as microaggressions. Office discourse, or in other words, casual conversations taking place in an office setting, is one of the ways that participants have felt marginalized, especially when the conversations include microaggressions about health, body size, and stereotypes about fat identities. Rose described their experiences with microaggressions in office discourse:

[It’s] just little things that come up during the day. So, the way that people talk to me sometimes, I can kind of tell, living in this body my whole life, you kind of see patterns. … I’ve noticed it can be a little bit disrespectful, or just a little bit degrading … I would say just kind of little things that you just pick up on as someone of size.

Overall, most participants felt that office discourse around fatness, while harmful, is generally passive. For example, Brady mentioned, “a lot of the marginalization comes in passive and not very overt forms.” Patricia added:

It’s all really passive, and I think, largely unconscious, right? I don’t think people are saying those things because they want to subtly shame me. I think they’re doing it because of their own beliefs about their body and their worth. But that translates—in my experience—to both conscious and unconscious opinions about fatness in general, which includes my fatness, and so it’s hard not to take those things personally.

Jude spoke about student affairs more specifically and added that it isn’t necessarily always about the words that are used, but instead, the impact of the statement as a whole:

I think, especially in student affairs, I think people often are trained or have been conditioned to be PC [politically correct] in certain aspects, so they’re not necessarily going to be as blatant about fat discrimination. And I think that that’s what makes it hard
because sometimes you can’t just pinpoint the exact singular thing they said, but it’s just how they made you feel.

In this section, participants discussed the various kinds of office discourse that further marginalize fat student affairs professionals. This often occurs when colleagues offer hurtful commentary or unsolicited advice about nutrition or exercise. For example, Evelynne summarized a few of their experiences: “I have a lot of colleagues, again, who are on the thinner side who feel like it’s necessary to give me healthy recipes and find me other places to go work on my fitness level. And, just continually pushing.” These types of discourse include diet discourse, exercise discourse, body size discourse, and office weight loss challenges.

**Diet Discourse.** Diet discourse refers to casual conversations around dieting within the workplace. This can sometimes include comments about what others are eating, as well as unsolicited dieting advice, both of which participants have experienced. For example, Brooklyn mentioned eating lunch with a colleague who continuously commented on their own food intake:

> They’ll be like, “I really shouldn’t eat this,” or “I’m trying to lose weight; why am I eating this donut?” I mean, I’m clearly much larger than you. What is your thought? And I know that those are internal for each person. But that kind of stuff … people don’t think about how it affects other people.

Stephanie commented that “it was really hurtful coming from coworkers, hearing them have diet talk nonstop at lunch. Because I care about those people, and I value their opinions.” Nicole added a few other examples: “I think just small remarks like that. Like, ‘oh, you’re getting more [emphasis added] food’ or ‘you’re going to get dessert [emphasis added]?’” Nicole continued:

> I feel self-conscious a lot of times when I eat in front of people. Even though people may be eating the same thing I’m eating, it’s just that overt awareness of what I’m consuming and putting into my own body that feels like there’s an inherent judgment. And, sometimes people are like, “oh, you’re getting another serving?” “Yes, I am. Thank you.” … I feel like it may not be so overt and be negative words or anything, but it’s definitely those microaggressions that you just experienced, and you know that they’re hurtful without needing to have that overt derogatory name called or anything.
Participants noted that thinner colleagues might feel like they are coming from a good place when they offer advice or dieting tips. However, participants felt that, when unsolicited, these comments can make them feel uncomfortable and targeted. Krystal mentioned that they already have negative thoughts about their own diet and health, and when someone approaches them with advice, it only confirms what they were already thinking:

Like they’re confirming my internal dialogue about myself. Sometimes it’s like, “oh, thanks for smoothie recipes. That’s awesome.” I was thinking about a former student who, she would just stand in my office for an hour talking about all this stuff that I can do to be healthier. She was an Exercise Science major and a great RA, so it was okay in that moment, but then there might be another day where it’s like, “stop fat-shaming me. Go away!” is what I’m thinking on the inside.

A few participants mentioned that they work with dietitians and are on diets, but they still have a difficult time having conversations with co-workers about dieting because of the assumption that diets are meant to help someone lose weight. For example, Brady explained:

Even though I’m fat, I live a keto diet, and my keto diet isn’t for weight loss. I think a lot of people hear [the word] “diet” and they think “weight loss,” and I’m like, “I’m not really trying to lose weight, who cares; I’m just trying to be healthy, and my life is the healthiest when I’m on keto.” If they’re asking me about food or something and my dietary restrictions, you know, I make sure I go through that in detail.

**Exercise Discourse.** Exercise discourse refers to casual conversations around exercise in the workplace. Rose mentioned having colleagues who would change clothes and go to the gym every day at lunch. Despite regularly invitations to join them, Rose continually refused and even noticed that their relationships were distancing a little:

I [was] kind of feeling put off by their level of enthusiasm to do whatever they’re doing, but I’m not interested in, and it’s [obvious] that they’re attempting to lose weight, and I’m just like, I’m not there yet, or won’t ever be. I think it makes me uncomfortable to … build those relationships if I know that they’re just going to continue to berate me with invitations [to] exercise.

Rose had another experience with a supervisor who spent the entire summer on a new exercise regimen that resulted in some weight loss. Once the supervisor returned to the office, their
colleagues became very enthusiastic about their weight loss journey: “and so she would talk about it nonstop, and there are many times I would have to leave the room because I just felt uncomfortable … I didn’t feel like I could stop it, so I’d just leave.”

Patricia has had similar experiences and told a story about their colleagues who run marathons regularly:

Everybody’s comparing stories about the marathons that they ran over the last week, which is fine, and it’s cool when that’s the people who run marathons and are together and wanting to talk about that, but I clearly don’t run marathons. That’s not my thing, and it just feels really isolating.

Participants in the study did not feel that these conversations should be banned or removed from the workplace, but they did argue that there is a time and place for the conversations to occur and that everyone should be more cognizant of who is present and whom that conversation may affect. Otherwise, fat colleagues must find a way to remove themselves from the conversation. For example, Nicole explained their strategy for exiting an exercise conversation:

I always joke around about my aversion to fitness because I feel like that is the only way that people find it acceptable for me to not want to exercise. Besides the fact that I physically cannot … Normally, when I talk about exercise, it’s really like, “ew, who would want to do that?” There’s some truth to that but, … I definitely use humor to kind of distance myself from the … fear of them judging me for not wanting to do it. So, if I make it that I’m just ‘grossed out’ by the thought of exercise rather than being like, “my body is unable to do those things,” … it allows me to distance myself from the bad feelings.

Size Discourse. Size discourse refers to casual conversations around body size in the workplace. Several of the participants agreed that size discourse was among the most harmful of all the types of discourse. In many ways, it felt more targeted and blatant than the other forms. For fat student affairs professionals, size discourse in the workplace adds to the hyperawareness
of the space that their bodies are taking up. It is a reminder that “there are people that just can’t see past the body that you’re in,” Darby stated.

Among the various forms of size discourse is the notion that someone can “feel fat.” This often comes up in conversations around appearance where someone remarks that they either ‘look’ or ‘feel’ fat when what they really mean is that they are not confident in their appearance or outfit that day. Stephanie explained why comments about “feeling fat” can be hurtful:

It’s so ingrained in every interaction I have that I think I stopped thinking about it because it’s everywhere with friends, and just people casually saying, “oh, I feel fat today,” or like, “that makes me feel fat.” No, it doesn’t. You are just having a bad day. … You don’t look fat because you’re a size 2. You do not look fat! I know it’s most likely not directed at me; I’m trying to remind myself [of] that … but it still is hurtful when that’s being used as an insult. And you most likely mean, “you look ugly today,” and then fat is indicative of ugly and that’s hurtful. So, I think that’s probably the most pervasive thing I see.

Nicole added their thoughts as well:

When people say, “I’m feeling fat today,” … how much that hurts me, because fat is not a feeling, and also to hear you say that the worst thing that you could be, and feel, and experience is ‘fat’ is not great. Because I’m living here as a fat person, and it’s hurtful that you think about my existence is the worst thing that could ever happen in this world.

Other conversations related to size discourse come in the form of retaliations to fat people who accept their fat bodies. For example, Nicole, who openly advocates self-acceptance, will claim the fat identity in front of others: “I say like, ‘oh my gosh, I’m fat!’ Like, I exclaim that sometimes because I like it, and … people are like ‘no, no, no, no, you’re beautiful!’ Like, did I say that I was not?” Because thinner colleagues have negative connotations with the word ‘fat,’ hearing someone claim the term openly is interpreted as self-degradation. However, some fat people love and accept their fat bodies and use the phrase as a descriptor similarly to how someone might identify their race, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality.
Nicole mentioned a separate occasion where the person they were talking to claimed they did not see Nicole as a fat person because to see someone as fat would be an insult:

I just actually spoke with someone recently, and we were talking about this topic … and I was self-declaring as fat, and they were like, “well, I don’t really see you as fat.” I’m like, “You need to stop right there because that is such an insult. What you’re really saying is that you don’t want to be associated with a fat person, and you want to be as distant from a fat person as you can be, so you’re gonna call me full-figured.” I’m not full-figured … full-figured is for curvy people; I’m not curvy. … Understand that I am fat, and your aversion to that word is just you being fatphobic. And that hurts me.

Jeffrey has had similar conversations with colleagues in the past: “I will say it’s a little irritating, because for some people, I have to always explain … that I’m happy with the size that I am. Why do I always have to explain myself?”

Some participants have experienced size discourse in the form of derogatory remarks about other fat people. For example, David recounted a story where they were talking with a good friend and colleague who made an inappropriate comment:

I remember this one specific conversation we had. They were talking about someone else. And they were like, “they have their shirt tucked in; they look like a muffin because their fat rolls are hanging out.” I was just like, “why would you say that in front of me like … that’s just like, … no!” This is a good friend of mine; is that what they think of me whenever I dress a certain way? Whenever I wear certain clothing types? … It’s really hard in the moment to have those conversations. When you’re so triggered by something, it’s like, how am I expected to have that conversation with them?

Evelynne was also put into a compromising situation where her colleague was openly degrading another fat person in front of the entire staff:

One of my colleagues was recently divorced, and she is a size 5/6. She would bring the clothes of [the person] her husband cheated on her with and make comments about how … her husband cheated on her with “a fat lard.” The clothes she would bring in were merely a size 10/12. Knowing that I am way outside of that, I quickly excused myself from these conversations. It was especially hard because I was actually pretty close with this person. I know she was upset, but I can’t help but to wonder if she feels that way about me too.
Participants also discussed experiences with size discourse that took place outside of their departments. Isa spoke about an incident that occurred while leading a campus town hall to discuss campus policy changes. Isa and their boss, both fat women, were in front of the room leading the discussion. At one point, students took out their phones and began streaming the event live and openly mocking the size of their bodies. The clip was saved as a recording and published anonymously online for people to comment and share: “everything they said about me and [my boss] was so hurtful.”

Isa had another experience on campus while they were five months pregnant. A colleague from a different department commented, “oh, I can tell that you’re pregnant now!” In shock, Isa could not recall their response to the remark. Similarly, Brady discussed being on campus with people driving by in cars “people shouting out the window ‘Lose weight!’ or ‘Fatty!’”

**Weight Loss Challenges.** Many participants felt that diet, exercise, and body discourse were all at their peak during annual campus-wide weight loss challenges. Krystal explained the challenge: “one thing that always comes up every year, there’s some sort of contest to lose weight or some type of wellness program, where the aim is to lose weight or work out a bunch of times.” Many participants found his type of challenge to be very isolating. On the one hand, fat student affairs professionals felt left out of the competition out of fear that they would not be able to put in the work (emphasizing the idea that fat people are inherently lazy or unmotivated):

They just started [a challenge] here, and one of the guys on our team is young, energetic, and awesome. I love him, and he was going around, like, “oh, do you want to be on our team?” And I’ve heard him talk about it. Nobody asked me about it.

On the other hand, some fat student affairs professionals felt that the nature of the competition is not inclusive of body diversity, Evelynne noted:

The office-wide weight-loss competitions and stuff like that, we just need to be more aware of what’s going on and … how [it] affects other people. Not just aware, but take
actionable steps to not enforce them, even implicitly, in the office. Even if it’s not a written requirement in the office to participate, if everyone else is doing it, you kind of feel pressured to do so as well. Folks make comments about how, as the largest person, it will be easier for you to win when that’s not the truth at all. I really don’t think those challenges should be part of the office culture.

Jeffrey noted that the weight loss challenges are misguided because not everyone wants or needs to lose weight: “I find that someone is always trying to encourage me to do [it] … you’re implying that I need to work out, and [that] goes back to me having to explain and I’m comfortable with my size.” Luna added that they are healthy, and implying that someone needs to lose weight to become healthier is problematic: “it seems like they’re not supporting everybody the way they should be.”

Weight loss challenges bring out the worst in campus culture, according to participants. Unsolicited diet and exercise advice become the norm, and fat people are either targeted for having more to lose or are avoided because they are lazy or unmotivated. Either way, participants feel that these challenges create and encourage fatphobia on college campuses.

**Negative Experiences with Faculty**

Five participants noted that working with faculty can be challenging at times. Evelynne felt that faculty do not fully understand everything that student affairs staff are tasked with doing. On top of that, Evelynne felt as though faculty look at their weight and immediately assume that they are lazy:

Well, we all know there’s a divide between faculty and staff, and it’s not intentional. I think it just happens. I really think it just comes down to an assumption on laziness. “Why can’t you handle your own health? Why can’t you handle losing weight on top of doing what you do? You just do activities?” And it’s like, “Well, no, I do quite a bit more. I don’t just paint my toenails all day.”

Darby, Joe, and Nicole all mentioned that faculty have been condescending toward them. Some participants are unsure whether the mistreatment was sizeism-related. For example, Darby
explained, “in general, staff are treated like they’re not as intelligent as faculty. So, I can’t say if that’s a weight issue or not.” Nicole had similar thoughts:

Faculty are difficult. Faculty are super condescending, and again I’m not sure if people don’t think I’m intelligent because I’m fat or because I’m Black, it’s probably both; so, it’s hard to parse out just the fatphobia in a lot of cases, because I have a lot of different intersecting identities. So, faculty are just super condescending and don’t think that I’m actually as intelligent as I am, or as qualified to work or anything, as I am.

However, Joe discussed an experience they had with faculty was clearly weight-related:

I feel like my first experience even thinking about weight in student affairs came up in grad school, where the faculty decided there needed to be a conversation about “You’re fat, you need to wear clothes certain ways so that you can be perceived as a professional.” And it was definitely one of those conversations, that is like … this is absolutely wild.

Two participants mentioned working on healthcare campuses and discussed some of the interactions they have had with faculty. For example, Patricia mentioned that “there are healthcare instructors on campus, who are openly fatphobic, and who will, you know, teach their classes as such and have been called out by fat students and have not taken that criticism well.”

Brooklyn, another healthcare campus staff member, mentioned that they had worked closely with faculty to do ‘obesity’ research; “I do feel weirder about interacting with them … I don’t think I’ve felt that it has affected my day-to-day interactions with people, but internally I know these things.”

**Overcompensating**

Participants mentioned that to combat the stereotypes and prejudices they face, fat student affairs professionals will overcompensate in their daily work. Stephanie said, “I think some of it is overcompensating because I want to prove that I’m not lazy. I am a hard worker. I just think there’s so much more that… I feel like I have to prove.” Stephanie added, “would I be having to do this if those stereotypes didn’t exist? I don’t think so. I don’t think I would.” Jeffrey
added that being fat in the fast-paced student affairs world makes them second-guess how their work is perceived:

It makes you wonder, “Am I good enough? Is my size going to be a factor in whether I’m able to do my job correctly?” I do have to be able to do rounds, and what will my supervisor think if I take longer to do the rounds than my colleagues? Will they think that I’m being lazy? … Are they going to think that I’m not doing my work or think I’m slacking? … That’s the biggest fear for me is that I’m not pulling my weight or not doing my fair share, because it takes me longer to do something that my colleagues will be able to do in a shorter time.

Jeffrey added, “I know I have to start a bit earlier and put in a little bit of extra work.”

Some participants spoke about their ability to do their work as representatives of all fat people; they felt they had to succeed so that fat people, in general, would not be seen as lazy.

Nicole stated:

I think I push myself more than I should … I need to show them that fat people can do this. I need to go out and just do it, and be in pain, and suck it in, and just not complain about it.

Jude had a similar outlook:

As long as you’re meeting your goals and you’re doing good work, it’s okay that you’re fat. And I feel like, not just that it’s okay, but that it feels like we have to do more, and we can’t have as many mistakes.

Participants also mentioned that working hard and “looking professional” often meant presenting oneself in a way that hides their weight. For example, Evelynne stated, “I feel like there’s just so much extra pressure to be always put together. Make sure that you’re hiding your weight, make sure that you look like this pristine businesswoman.” Darby added:

I think, you know, at work, I feel like I have to work harder, and I have to be better, and I have to dress a certain way and talk a certain way. And be kind, in a way, so that people start to not notice the weight.

Krystal discussed their feelings about being on the leadership team of their department:

I’m one of the senior leaders in our student affairs division of housing, when I’m at a table with colleagues I’m the youngest person in the room. I’m also the heaviest. And I
feel, I always feel weird about it. I’m always trying to hold myself a certain way or dress a certain way. It’s like I have this fear that I’m not going to be taken seriously because I’m plus-size.

A few participants discussed specific experiences related to overcompensating in their work. For example, Isa discussed their experience taking a phone call right after giving birth:

Not even 24 hours after I gave birth, I was taking a work call because I was concerned for what was going to be said about me, or my job, or my ability, because I didn’t have any trust, right? So, there’s no trust where I’m at. At least I don’t have any trust towards where I work, and I think that is both painful and honest.

Luna discussed taking on additional volunteer tasks and even staying late to finish work items: “I will stay late sometimes just to get work done so it doesn’t seem like I’m not finishing something because I’m lazy, even though it could wait till the next day.” Luna also mentioned that in three years of overcompensating, they have only received recognition for doing excellent work one time: “my boss, for the first time, said that I was doing a good job, and it made me cry because I don’t get recognition that often. So, it is something that people would just expect of me.” Luna explained that this was not the case with their thinner colleagues, who were often given additional time off for doing less overtime. In short, student affairs professionals feel like they have to prove themselves, both in their appearance and productivity, to overcompensate for the stereotypes that fat individuals are lazy, lacking drive and work ethic.

**Theme 4: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Perceive a Lack of Viable Career Options in Higher Education**

The fourth salient theme in the findings is that fat student affairs professionals perceive a lack of viable career options within higher education. This theme explores two subthemes: (a) career advancement and (b) representation.
Career Advancement

Participants reported a wide range of answers when asked about their futures in higher education. A couple participants felt that their weight had little to no impact on their careers. Some felt that their weight kept them from applying for specific positions or departments; others felt that their weight has caused them to consider leaving higher education altogether.

Participants who felt that their weight had little to no bearing on their student affairs careers portrayed higher levels of confidence in their answers. For example, Brady’s confidence was related to their body image:

I found my confidence very early on, and I know that it took a lot of pain and isolation to get to the point where I am today. I never have ever actually thought about how my weight might impact whether I can get a job, whether there are opportunities, whether I’m being denied opportunities.

Krystal’s confidence related more to their work ethic and abilities:

In the position I’m in, I’m in the rooms that I’m in, the committees I’m on, [there are] leadership opportunities I’m a part of because I’m a good professional, and I deserve to be there. I try to repeat that to myself. I’ve worked really hard, and that work isn’t negated by my size, or the clothes I can get, or how much hustling walking to a meeting, you know.

When asked about whether they would stay away from specific areas of higher education, Krystal stated:

So as far as affecting where I’m going to go, I’m not going to go be director of a health center because that’s not my interest. But, I don’t know that I would let my weight stop me from pursuing my dreams because it hasn’t. It just gives me a lot of anxiety along the way.

Some participants noted that they would stay away from specific positions within higher education. These decisions were not based on confidence but perceived limitations. For example, Darby mentioned purposefully avoiding positions within campus ministry, student engagement, residential life, and career services:
I haven’t applied for those because I assume that I would never get hired because of the way I look, and so I think that’s my own limitations. I don’t know that it’s limitations at the university, but it’s what I see, you know, in certain offices. I’m looking at certain places, “okay, this is the kind of person that they hire.”

Rose mentioned staying away from residential life due to perceived limitations with supporting staff of size:

I mean, housing for sure would definitely never do that. I mean, you’ve seen the Facebook folks on the Fat Student Affairs Professionals page about people complaining, not being able to find proper furniture for their weight and their size. And so, I just probably would never put myself in that position.

Rose added that they would also avoid positions in event coordinating and orientation: “I really loved orientation, but the 14–15-hour days of being on your feet, five days at a time. [I] would not put myself through that.” Darby’s concern with certain higher education positions related to being actively engaged with students for long hours:

I also have thought about trying to be [the] dean of students. That was a path that I thought that I really wanted earlier in my career, but that probably was derailed more by weight and hours. Because I know it’s highly involved—at least the positions I’ve seen—have been highly involved with students, and in a way that’s more active than I’m able to be or like to be. So, I probably kind of avoided thinking about those positions.

Other participants have contemplated leaving higher education altogether. These participants feel pessimistic about student affairs because of how their weight has been perceived and how colleagues and supervisors have treated them. When asked about how weight might affect their future in higher education, Stephanie replied, “I think it will affect my career, and so I guess I’d like to stay in student affairs, but also I don’t know if that’s gonna be realistic for me.” Stephanie continued:

I think it will affect my career path, because I don’t have the qualities that they’re awarding with promotions. I don’t always see promotions going to people that do the best work. I see it as people that have figured out how to play the game in some way, shape, or form. And thinking of the appearances of those people, I mean, I work with a bunch of thin people, but it goes for White people too.
Patricia and Joe both had similar responses and felt that higher education focuses too little on the experiences of individuals and too much on business. For example, Patricia stated that being fat in student affairs is a “detriment.” Patricia adds:

I think that we’re very focused on image. … I’m just coming to terms with the fact that higher education, in general, is a means of socialization and that we’re socializing people into an abusive capitalist context that I don’t agree with. And that, in a lot of ways, this context is not meant for me to be successful or even to exist. … It’s just—it’s getting to the point where even with good coworkers in a good position on a relatively good campus environment, it’s just not worth giving my soul to [some place where] ultimately I could die today [and] they’d start the student services screening on Monday.

Joe added that they are interested in giving higher education another chance, but they might be looking for their way out. “I don’t see myself going upwards, or staying in student affairs long term, honestly. Just because student affairs isn’t welcoming to anybody who isn’t an average-sized White male …” Joe continued:

I am looking at lateral moves then, and I’ll see if I want to stay in student affairs after that. So, I feel as though my weight, in some ways, has played a part in that, and I say that because I feel like weight and a lot of identities play a larger role in student affairs politics. And the politics is exactly why I’m trying to get out. I hate how much student affairs tokenizes people, and I really hate how much student affairs tries to invalidate people’s experiences by trying to shove people into boxes, and I’m not just speaking about my weight in this conversation, but in general, but I have experienced that in weight as well. And so that … is exactly why I’m trying to look outwards and trying to leave student affairs.

Participants noted that leaving student affairs may be the result of something other than personal choice. Two salient ideas emerged from this subtheme: (a) public-facing positions are image-based and not offered to fat employees, and (b) the job interview process systematically limits the success of fat applicants.

**Public-Facing Positions.** Regardless of participants’ interest in staying in the student affairs field, each of them designated a specific type of position that they would steer clear of: public-facing positions. Participants defined public-facing positions by the titles, such as
deanships and vice-presidents, as well as anything dealing with stakeholders or public affairs.

When asked about how their weight might be perceived in public-facing positions, participants indicated that they would not be offered the position even if they received an interview.

Referring to the staff pictures and profiles that are often featured on campus websites for various public-facing positions, Isa added, “you know what? Sometimes, … a lot of times, I think it’s [more about] ‘what can we put up on the website?’”

Most participants stated that they would not apply for a public-facing position even if they were qualified. For example, Darby stated:

[I don’t apply] to higher-level positions that are front-facing … so like VP, dean positions, I generally don’t apply when I know I am qualified. I have had interviews for a few higher-level positions, and as soon as I walk in the door, I read the room and almost instantly know if I will be really considered. The last position I interviewed for that was higher level, the students and staff thought I was great, but the faculty and supervisor did not.

Evelynne mentioned similar sentiments:

[Weight] does play a big role in choosing what roles I want to go into. I have a lot of fraternity and sorority life experience, and [I am] very intentional when I [apply] to those [positions]. And a lot of those times knowing, “okay, they are not even going to look at look at me if I apply because I don’t fit into their standards of what they’re looking for,” knowing that some functional areas of our field can be much more image-based than others.

Krystal pointed out that image can play a significant role for non-career opportunities within student affair, such as staff senate or similar leadership committees: “there’s just not that representation there, and so, I don’t know … maybe people are nervous to go for things like that because they feel a barrier.”

**Job Interviews.** Job interviews are an important part of any hiring process. However, higher education is notorious for extensive interview processes, often involving one or two phone interviews and a day-long campus visit filled with in-person interviews, breakfast, lunch,
and often a presentation. Participants discussed being nervous about how their bodies might be perceived during the interview process. For example, Rose explained:

I’ve read the studies that say that weight is correlated to how well you do in interviews. And so, I would say most definitely. I can see myself not getting certain positions because of it. Because of the perception that you’re not able to keep up or you’re not willing to put in the extra work to do something about your body, so you’re obviously not willing to put in extra work to do something about our office.

Patricia added, “I think I would get to the interview stage because I know I’m a good professional, but I don’t think I’d get past the interview on the majority of campuses.” Isa recalled a time when a colleague told them, “you know, people will hire you more for bigger positions if you lose weight. And I was like ‘holy shit,’ she actually said this out loud!”

Additionally, most of the participants mentioned at least one negative experience with a job interview involving their weight, specifically related to in-person visits, professional wear, walking tours, interviewing over meals, and finally, traveling to the interview.

Several participants mentioned negative experiences with in-person campus visits. For example, Evelynne stated, “The more non-video things that we can do, I think, has been in my favor, which is super sad.” Evelynne was speaking from recent experience; they had recently participated in a series of phone interviews leading up to a video interview. Until that moment, Evelynne had been considered a top candidate, but immediately following the video interview, they were informed that they were no longer a candidate: “I’m thinking, so the first time you see me, ‘oh sorry, you’re done.’” Stephanie mentioned a few thoughts that go through their mind when preparing for or reflecting on an in-person interview:

Would I have gotten that job if I was thinner? Or, are they perceiving me to be lazy even though I’m not? I know I’m not lazy. I know I work hard. I know I do good work. But what is their initial perception of me? Are they automatically making that judgment when they see me? Cause I know [when I’m] interviewing for jobs at a grad school, I get every single phone interview, but then, after the on-campus, I never got anything. And I’m like, “They can’t tell my weight on the phone,” so they liked me on the phone, but then they
see me in-person, and they’re probably like, “too lazy.” I don’t know. That’s the thing … I don’t know, I can’t tell that. But I have to think it has to happen because of how fatphobic everything is. You have to actively work to not be fatphobic. So, I can’t act like those attitudes aren’t there.

Jude mentioned that prior to their current job, they had been to six on-campus interviews and never received an offer. Then, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, campuses were no longer having candidates visit in-person. The very next job that Jude interviewed for, they received an offer:

[For] this one, I didn’t physically go on-site, and part of me does, in the back of my mind, think, is it because they’ve only seen my face? Is it because I didn’t have to go walk around that campus, and I didn’t have to be with them? … I was relieved that we didn’t have to do an on-campus physically on-site, so that makes me wonder, did I not get some of those jobs because of how I was perceived?

Similarly, some participants felt that professional attire adds some complications to the job interview process. Limitations of professional attire were discussed earlier in chapter four, but a few participants brought up the subject specific to the job search process. For example,

David mentioned that finding business attire for interviews is always a major concern:

I think the biggest thing that always worries me, and I think I’m very self-conscious of it anytime I’ve had an interview, is the professional dress standards that people have. Because one, I can’t go to just a Men’s Warehouse and find clothes. I have to go to a different store because Men’s Warehouse never has my size. And [two], even though I’ve gone through the weight loss process and lost a lot of the weight, they still don’t have my size, and so I think that’s always the biggest thing.

Evelynne also discussed professional attire and the challenges they have finding the appropriate fit and style for their body:

When we do the on-campuses and such, I am very intentional about the clothes that I choose to make sure that they’re tight, but not too tight. That way, it shows off my figure, but not my curves. And just find a way to kind of hide my body in a way that doesn’t attract the thought, “oh, you’re larger.”

Walking tours of the campus are another common part of in-person interviews in student affairs. However, as discussed earlier in chapter four, participants addressed the challenges and
limitations of walking around campus. Yet, during the interview process, participants noted the added complication that they are less likely to advocate for themselves out of fear of losing the position. Isa noted that institutions that make walking tours a part of the interview process should ask candidates if they are comfortable walking; if not, campus departments should make other accommodations. Not making it optional or offering accommodations can impact the interview.

For example, Brooklyn mentioned not feeling comfortable accepting a job offer because of their interaction with those leading the tour: “I [have] really judged [places I’ve] interviewed for this. Everyone was like, ‘we’ll just take the stairs.’ I just asked you to take the elevator. Don’t tell me we’ll take the stairs.” In Brooklyn’s case, the walking tour let them know that the campus may not be a good fit. For Darby, on the other hand, they felt like they were removed as a candidate because of the walking tour:

I interviewed for a position once where the supervisor of the position wanted to do a walking interview. No thought was given to if I could walk up and down steps, or hills, or for how long. I knew right away I wasn’t getting that position. I was able to do the walk, but it was a subtle form of discrimination.

In addition to walking tours, most student affairs interviews also include at least one meal interview where the candidate is taken to a local restaurant. Participants have already mentioned how uncomfortable it can be eating in front of overs; however, Brady adds that when taking candidates out to eat, be sure to find a place with inclusive seating:

If someone suggested a restaurant with patio seating, I’d say absolutely not. It’s sort of the whole booth or table? Table, right? In the past I used to let other people decide, people who are clueless, right? And so, if they picked booth, I would just squeeze myself into it, be super uncomfortable, not be able to breathe. I just used to grin and bear it. And now, my internal dialogue, I don’t let [them]. … I’m not going to be uncomfortable in any way or humiliated in any way.

The final suggestion offered by participants related to job interviews is to offer inclusive forms of travel for getting to the in-person interview. David, who was fresh out of graduate
school and in desperate need of a job, turned down a job interview because they would only fly them out to the campus using a regional commuter plane that David knew would not fit them: “I was very nervous. I talked myself out [of it] because I was like, just because of where they’re located, and having to fly there was really anxiety-driven for me because I knew I wasn’t gonna fit in the airplane seat.” David ended up turning down the interview without telling the hiring manager about their concerns with flying.

Having worked in student affairs for a few years now, David was eager to share some advice on how this issue could be resolved moving forward. First, David recommends that campuses know the person-of-size policies of the airlines located at their nearest airport. For example, David recommended that campuses use Southwest Airlines because hiring managers can purchase fat candidates two seats and then receive a refund on the second seat after the flight. Second, David suggested campuses give candidates the option to fly into a larger airport in the area, even if it is farther away. Larger airports often have larger planes that are more accommodating of persons of size. Third, David recommends that campuses provide town cars or taxis for picking-up candidates who chose to fly into the airports a little farther away. David insisted that making “sure that we’re providing [these accommodations] upfront to the candidate” is the best way to be inclusive of prospective employees.

**Representation**

Participants discussed the importance of the representation of fat student affairs professionals within higher education. Many participants noted that there is a lack of representation overall, but especially within higher-level positions. Evelynne stated:

I think you see this a lot in upper-level administration. You see who is represented at the upper-levels compared to the lower-levels. Most of our entry-level folks, at least that I see across our campuses, most are on the larger side. And as you go up the chain, people seem to get thinner and very quickly.
Stephanie argued that a lack of representation is coupled with a lack of thoughtfulness, and inevitably, people’s needs fall through the cracks:

> It was the most difficult when I was working in admissions because that was a traveling role, and there just were a lot of things that weren’t thought about in that role (for plus-sized people, people of size, fat people working in that role). And I was the only person of size in my office. Everyone else was very thin, very fit. And just—I don’t think they understood my experience.

Darby mentioned that their dreams changed, in part, due to a lack of representation:

> At one point, I had hoped to (and there are lots of reasons why I haven’t done this), I had hoped to pursue a Ph.D. and become an academic. And there are several reasons why I’ve changed that path. Some of it is weight because I see the people that are put into those positions, and I’ve never seen a [fat] person in any school I’ve worked in as an academic.

Jude noted that having diverse body sizes on campus is not only good for representation, but also for innovation: “There needs to be more face-time or table-time for those who are fat, I would say, so that we can better build these spaces.” In other words, fat people need to be involved with planning and organizing spaces so that all body types find campus as an accessible space.

> Representation also matters in terms of creating a community of fat individuals on campus that support one another. David explained, “I think that representation does matter, and I feel like it’s nice to see that there are other people who look like me in the office that I can connect with on a different level.” Brooklyn added that when other fat people are connected to the office, it creates a sense of comfort: “I haven’t felt any different, or less-than, or unaccepted … and I think part of that is because of that there are [other] fat people.” Jude mentioned that this sense of comfort also translates to the interview setting:

> I feel like when I’m on an interview on campus, and the person who’s my host is also … a person of size, or even just slightly fat, I’m like, “okay, they could be considered plus-size, I feel like I’m going to connect with them more. I feel like they’re going to understand me more. That they’re going to give me more grace, more leniency.” [If they’re] not fat or plus-sized at all, I feel like, “okay I need to sit up straight, I need to
make sure I’m doing all this stuff.” I feel like I don’t need to be ‘on’ so much when I’m with other fat student affairs professionals.

Participants noted that having fat supervisors also makes a difference. For example, Stephanie noted that in their previous positions, they felt lonely:

Everyone’s been very thin at all my previous jobs, and I don’t know why that’s happened that way. But it’s very rare to see people my size, at least at the institutions that I’ve been at. So that’s kind of isolating. I wish that wasn’t the case.

However, Stephanie’s current supervisor is a person of size, and they do not feel embarrassed advocating for themselves: “my supervisor now is a plus-size woman as well. So, I feel much more comfortable going up to her. And that, honestly, has been really life-changing. I don’t feel as embarrassed to say things to her now.”

Several participants felt that representation of fat student affairs professionals also mattered in terms of supporting fat students. For example, Krystal explained how uncomfortable they are being in spaces that are not accessible or accommodating to different body sizes: “I don’t want any of our students to be feeling like I’m feeling right now.” So, they leverage their position in planning meetings to advocate for better, more accommodating facilities for students: “even though it makes me feel really, really uncomfortable, I always make it a point to talk about space and how things are going to be laid out through the lens of how a larger person moves about.”

Nicole also mentioned representation and its impact on students in terms of self-esteem and body-positivity:

I also feel like being fat on campus has brought some sort of (not enough, but some) representation for students who are fat to see that you can be successful—whatever you want to define success as. You can get a job, and you can work, and smile, and be happy with your body, too. And I try really hard to really show my pride in my body.
Theme 5: Fat Student Affairs Professionals are Required to Practice Self-Advocacy

The fifth salient theme to emerge from the data is that fat student affairs professionals are required to practice self-advocacy. This theme explores the following subthemes: (a) learning and practicing self-advocacy, (b) planning ahead, (c) spending personal money, and (d) creating support networks.

Learning and Practicing Self-Advocacy

Participants noted that campus protections and diversity efforts seldom protect against acts of sizeism or fatphobia, which creates the need to advocate for oneself. Jeffrey stated:

I think [to] some people when it comes to talking about inclusiveness, fat people are not on the list. I feel like when we’re thinking about inclusiveness, we’re thinking about people who are disabled. We’re thinking about race. We’re thinking about socioeconomic status. But no one ever talks about [body size].

Brady added that mistreatment and discrimination surrounding fatness are inevitable, and “when you have to experience it over and over, and if you’re somebody who can’t advocate for yourself, then you’re just going to let it happen. It’s going to cut deep.”

Several participants discussed having to learn self-advocacy, often taking years to build up the confidence to stand up for oneself or, in some cases, learning from a mentor. Isa explained that the simple phrase, “I’m not comfortable,” took years to articulate in the professional setting: “I’m 35, and if I am going through that, I can only imagine our students…18, 19, 20, 21 years old … Who’s actually going to be willing to speak up for themselves in a classroom of 30 [other students]?” Isa went on to discuss their initial reaction to standing up for themselves to make their space more comfortable for their body: “For the longest time [I thought] it was embarrassing. Now I’m like, ‘oh, it makes you uncomfortable that I’m [getting] comfortable? Tough shit.’”
Some participants mentioned learning about self-advocacy from other fat student affairs professionals. Evelynne stated, “I have a mentor who…[is] a super amazing, amazing guy who has taught me how to advocate for myself.” Brady had similar mentorship: “There were other fat folks who were super empowering, who had already thought about these things before I had, and really empowered me to start thinking about more deeply.” Brady continued to discuss that they now feel the need to mentor others and to support students along the way:

So ever since I’ve been a professional, I have never stepped down because I realized as a professional, if I don’t speak up, a student who is still in their developmental stages may have to experience this. That’s a big role shift for me.

Despite the commonality that participants had in needing to advocate for themselves, it was interesting that their advocacy methods varied. Some participants, Evelynne, for example, pointed out that their form of self-advocacy is strategic in that they work closely with students to make a change on campus:

I can strategically turn the script, I guess, to my students who are also needing to advocate for themselves. So, I’m helping to train them: “How can you go about this? Who do you need to go see? What’s the language that you can use to be the most successful?” Which in the end still benefits me, but then I know I’m making a bigger difference. Bigger ripples, I guess, in the world.

Nicole has practiced self-advocacy by claiming “weight neutral zones” and “fat acceptance zones” and posting educational signs around the office, informing students and guests about the signs of sizeism and how to be inclusive of all bodies. Additionally, when Nicole introduces themselves, they openly identify as fat:

I always have some sort of positionality statement of like who I am and my identities, and fatness is always on there. And I always say, “I am fat, and you can call me fat because that is not a bad word,” and I do a little bit of an educational thing in that moment.

Brady offers a more up-front, vocal form of self-advocacy: “I have never stepped down from calling things out.” They recalled the first-time meeting for a one-on-one in their boss’
office: “I sat down in the chair and I said, ‘This chair is not going to work for me. If we’re gonna have one-on-ones here, we’re gonna have to get something else. And for now, we’re going to go somewhere else.’” Brady took the time to explain to their boss the challenges of fitting into the chair and how it would break if they had to continue trying to fit. Brady was excited to share that their boss ordered new chairs soon after that initial meeting.

Although participants were quick to advocate for themselves, they also noted that they should not have to. For example, Luna stated:

A lot of times I’m thinking, “how can I make this better using what I have?” And then other times I’m like, “why do I need to make this better using what I have? It should be better for me. I’m working for the university, and I’m helping them.”

Evelynne added: “I don’t believe it’s my responsibility to go advocate [for] all the other faculty and staff members. That should be the university’s job.”

Planning Ahead

All 15 participants mentioned practicing self-advocacy by planning ahead. When asked about how weight impacts their daily life, Krystal explained, “It influences everything in my life … and I think it’s something that will always be intertwined with my decisions.” Participants reported that they are forced to make their own accommodations because they are fat in a world that does not accommodate size. Brady explained the thought process behind this concept:

I used to be one of those people who would go and shove myself into a theater seat and just deal with it and suffer the whole time and be super uncomfortable. Or [on] a plane, to get into a plane seat, I’d just be uncomfortable for six hours squeezing myself against the window as tight as possible, so I didn’t have to touch the person next to me so they couldn’t complain about my fatness. Now, I’m just proactive. Now, I realized that we live in a society that is not making any accommodations for me, who isn’t even thinking about me and my fat body, nothing about anybody’s fat body. So, I need to create my own accommodations, so I need to accommodate myself, and that is planning ahead. That is getting more information about things.
Some participants disclosed that planning ahead means getting to your event, meeting, reception, or other activities early and investigating the space. For example, Isa discussed being the first person in a conference room to find one of the few chairs that might not have armrests. Rose mentioned planning ahead for walking to a meeting across campus: “I’ll leave 20 minutes early, knowing that it’ll take me 10 minutes to walk, and then 10 minutes to catch my breath before the meeting starts.” Krystal noted a comparable situation with their regular meetings with their boss, whose office is across campus. Krystal works in a state known for its hot temperatures, so on meeting days, they are particular about their type of clothing, make-up, and shoes. They will leave their office early to spend time in the bathroom touching up their appearance before the meeting.

Several participants explained that they analyze their day so regularly that it is simply part of the everyday routine. David noted:

I think it’s sort of become that second nature [to me]. If it’s something new, I’m gonna research it [to] see what pictures are there. Is there something on a forum? I know I’ve even gone so far as to go to their [websites] to see how big are the seats, so I can measure it and see what it looks like type of thing. I think that’s something I know I’m constantly thinking about.

Jude also mentioned researching businesses and restaurants online to see if there were any reviews from fat patrons and to look for images of the seating options. Rose added, “It’s just something I’ve always done, and so, I don’t know how not to do it.” When asked about how much time is consumed by planning ahead, Rose explained:

At least 60 to 70% of my day, absolutely. Thinking about what my next meeting is, whom I’m going to be seeing, where I have to be, how I’m going to get there, what I need to do before I get there, what do I need to do when I get there. Yeah, there’s a lot of thought that goes into it. And it’s kind of always in the back of my mind. I’m not always thinking about it so upfront. Kind of just like, I’ll go through the checklist in my mind, but still be focused on something else. I don’t know how effective that is. But yeah.
Some participants discussed planning ahead while traveling for work, particularly at conferences. Darby noted planning ahead for conferences is challenging but necessary for fat student affairs professionals. Darby explained that they think about transportation, excursions, walking distances, accessibility within the venue, nearby restaurants, availability of rideshares, and wardrobe. David added that seating at conferences requires a well-thought strategy that includes arriving early, securing a seat on the edge of the aisle, and skipping the refreshment lines and restroom breaks. Seats that accommodate larger bodies are rare and require sacrificing the breaks between sessions to obtain them.

In short, Jude noted that planning ahead is how fat student affairs professionals care for themselves, and in turn, practice self-advocacy:

I sometimes do have those feelings of shame or those feelings of just [self-consciousness]. But most of the time, I’m going to set myself up for success by planning, by surrounding myself with people who are understanding, and [by] being at establishments or corporations or companies or universities that value all people.

**Spending Personal Money**

Another way that fat student affairs professionals practice self-advocacy is by spending their personal money on work-related items. Spending personal money could be a coping mechanism as opposed to self-advocacy; however, participants mentioned spending their own money when asked about the numerous ways they advocate for themselves. Whether related to travel, apparel, or parking, participants felt that spending their own money made their work easier. None of them felt that the university would have supported them if they had requested the accommodations.

For example, Stephanie, who worked in recruitment, mentioned purchasing upgraded airline tickets in order to get a more comfortable seat, as well as to avoid being treated poorly by other passengers:
It was kind of like, “okay, do I decide to pay out of pocket to buy an additional seat or upgrade to first class?” I did do that sometimes; I would pay $100 to $200 on a long flight to upgrade to first class … [which] was a very significant amount of money, especially my first year out of grad school.

Stephanie added that spending the money often came down to their desire not to get “ridiculed” by people on the flight.

Jeffrey, a residential life staff member, spent personal money to pay campus parking meters to go on work-required rounds:

I would drive to the buildings instead of walking. I would get in my car, park, feed the meter, walk really quick to one building, do the round at that building, come back, feed the meter again, run back to the other building, do that route, and get back in my car, and drive back to my building to do a round at my building.

When asked if they ever thought about requesting accommodations for parking from their department, Jeffrey noted that they were afraid that the request would make it seem like they could not do their job appropriately.

Patricia, also in residential life, had a mattress break under them. Instead of accepting the university’s replacement mattress, the exact same mattress that broke under their weight previously, Patricia decided to purchase their own: “I don’t think they would have paid $1,500 dollars for a super supportive, heavy duty mattress.” Patricia also noted that they have experienced paying out of pocket for department-provided matching apparel for staff. Every staff member received department-branded clothing; however, Patricia was required to pay the additional cost of needing big and tall sizes: “I had to pay extra because my size was bigger. My philosophy is if you can’t afford to buy matching attire for everyone, then you shouldn’t be buying.” When asked if they went through with the purchase, Patricia responded, “I did. That’s the stupid part. I was so mad at myself later because I bought it. I just wanted to kind of fit in, and then I didn’t; I just looked stupid.” It turns out that Patricia’s size-appropriate clothing
options did not match the rest of the staff’s clothing; the department had to purchase it in a different color.

Office chairs were another commonly referenced out-of-pocket expense. Darby mentioned having to purchase two office chairs with their own money, one at work and the other one for working from home. Jude recalled having to spend personal money to see a doctor to get a note that specified they needed a larger chair. Without the note, the university would not purchase the size-appropriate chair: “It just feels like you’re jumping through hoops.”

**Creating Support Networks**

Participants reported that another way of practicing self-advocacy comes from building community. Brooklyn stated, “I really think that the biggest thing for fat student affairs professionals to persist and thrive is community … It’s having a network of people who can support you and validate your experiences.” Evelynne added, “I think something interesting is that most of my friends or colleagues that I hang out with are my size or larger, because I feel more confident and accepted with them.” Participants mentioned being able to share honest feelings and be authentic are important. Evelynne continued, “You’re just open to be yourself, you feel comfortable, you don’t have to hide, which I think is really, really nice.” Nicole added, “with fat people, it’s so much more peaceful, genuine. I’m lucky to have a couple of fat friends that work at the same college, to share space with them without feeling like I’m taking up too much of that space.” For example, Krystal mentioned having a group of fat student affairs professionals who all work at different universities but will gather during conferences: “we’ve all had comparable experiences. And I feel like with them, professionally, I can be myself.”

Participants also discussed how fat student affairs professionals can support each other in ways that non-fat colleagues cannot. For example, Isa stated:
I think with other fat student affairs professionals, we’ve got something else in common, right? We go through similar things in classrooms and, you know, meeting spaces. We are more considerate about the spaces and places that we frequent, and I think that’s something different. … I think those interactions will never happen with someone that can just sit down in a chair. Because they have no idea how that feels.

Isa was referring to the idea that fat colleagues can walk through a space and find the table or the chairs that will accommodate everyone. They are also able to offer empathy when spaces are not comfortable. Fat people will often try to hide their discomfort in front of others, but their emotions and discomfort are often shared and validated when they are among their support networks.

Brady shared a similar sentiment about building support networks when they discussed their colleagues who helped them grow into their identity: “I owe a lot to two colleagues that I had who are in my cohort who are also people of size. I [was] able to really come into my fat identity with them before I entered into the professional world.” Brady explained that fat people will find each other in a room of non-fat people:

You’re like, I see you, I understand what you’re going through. Especially if there’s some sort of violence that’s happening in the room; like, you’re all sitting in these chairs with these tiny arms, you definitely communicate, you know, through the air like, “oh yeah, I know what you’re going through.”

Besides casually meeting other fat student affairs professionals at work, participants noted two specific ways in which they purposefully build support networks: (a) fat workplace affinity groups and (b) the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group.

**Fat Workplace Affinity Groups.** One way that fat student affairs professionals have cultivated support networks on campuses is through affinity groups. While nearly all 15 participants discussed the utility of affinity groups, only one participant had actual experiences with them. Prior to their interview, Patricia had just finished their newly formed group’s first meeting:
We just actually had a first meeting of a group of fat professionals on campus that want to create an affinity group. So, we will see where that goes. I’ve always had colleagues who’ve been supportive when I bring things up and are receptive to feedback, but it’s really cool to see a group of actual people coming together to really center that conversation.

Patricia noted that the idea of the group first arose when four fat professionals from their campus, all of whom interested in the activism side of the fat acceptance movement, decided it was time for a group conversation:

We just kind of talked about what we might want from an affinity group on campus. So basically, we decided on a lot of activism and education, and also some peer-to-peer support. We decided it would be prudent to be aligned with the institution and not just this random group of people who happen to work at the institution. So, we were going to go through HR and actually talk about how [we can do this] in a formal way so that we can get, potentially, administrative or financial support.

Patricia noted that it is still early, but they hope that the interest and the momentum are there.

**Fat Student Affairs Facebook Group.** Another resource for self-advocacy that was regularly mentioned in the interviews is the Fat Student Affairs Facebook group, which was used to recruit the participants for this dissertation. Participants mentioned using this page for various reasons, including as an outlet for frustrations, a community crowdsourcing page for resources, and as a support network for those who lack in-person support on their own campus. Stephanie stated, “honestly, I think that’s why the Facebook community has been really helpful for me, because I haven’t had a lot of experience with other fat student affairs professionals.”

Krystal mentioned that they were originally opposed to the idea of the group, but eventually found it helpful and familiar:

When I got this invite to that group I was like, “excuse me, what are you inviting me to?” I think I literally said that. [But once] I was in there, I was like, “oh my gosh, yes. My fat family in student affairs!” It was nice to have that space. And there are some things that I want to communicate in the other groups, but I just feel more comfortable sharing in that group.
Some participants described using the Facebook group to help grow in their fat identity and learning how to practice self-advocacy. Jude mentioned:

I feel like I’ve been more comfortable in just using the word “fat” after finding the Fat Student Affairs Professional page. It just feels like it’s a much more welcoming community, and I’ve felt like it’s empowered me to talk about myself like that.

Brooklyn added:

The fat student affairs professionals group has been great because I do think you just feel better talking to people who, you know, get it. … And then, of course, also being able to be like, “how do you advocate for yourself? What are some changes you’ve made?” Things that I can’t ask here [at my campus]. I can’t just ask anyone normally, “how to advocate for fat professionals?” I don’t know. So, I have loved, loved it.

**Theme 6: Fat Student Affairs Professionals can be Recruited and Retained by Adding Campus Resources**

The sixth and final salient theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals can be recruited and retained by adding campus resources. While the previous theme addresses self-advocacy and the resources participants provided themselves, this theme addresses the institution-wide resources that participants felt campuses should provide.

This theme explored the following subthemes: (a) current resources, (b) accessibility and accommodations, (c) affinity groups, (d) employee benefits, (e) sizeism non-discrimination policies, and (f) weight diversity programming.

**Current Resources**

Participants felt that little to no resources currently exist that directly benefit and support fat student affairs professionals. When asked what resources currently exist that support them, Patricia stated, “none. I’m making the resource now.” Patricia was referring to the start of their fat employees’ affinity group. Other participants referenced access to health insurance or mental health counselors but argued that those resources are available to everyone and do not necessarily support weight diversity. For example, having access to nutritionists and other
wellness services is not necessarily beneficial for fat employees because these services often encourage weight loss instead of body positivity. For example, Jeffrey observed:

It is just ways to lose weight or advice on losing weight or dieting. I don’t see anything about body positivity or encouraging people to be happy in the skin they’re in. Even on the student level, I don’t see anything being offered, in that sense, anywhere. Unless you want to lose weight, then there [are] lots of resources for that.

Evelynne is the only participant who mentioned having a resource specific to support weight diversity: “We offer sizeism workshops as part of our leadership and diversity trainings. … We talk about the general idea of what is sizeism and implicit bias of sizeism.”

Participants did, however, mention several resources that they felt would add greater support to weight diversity in higher education. These resources include increased accessibility and accommodations across campus, the creation of affinity groups, the addition of a few select employee benefits, the addition of sizeism to campus non-discrimination policies, and the utilization of weight-inclusive programming.

**Accessibility and Accommodations**

Participants explained universities should be more accessible to people of all abilities and body sizes, in addition to providing more accommodations. To accomplish this, they argued, universities may need to look beyond name brands and one-size-fits-all marketed items and diversify their suppliers. Evelynne noted:

When we choose shirts or furniture, we might not always be able to choose the most “in-brand” items just because they look nice; we need to be considerate to everyone who works there and actually choose based off of need, not just look. Otherwise, are we not being discriminatory?

One of the first examples of universities’ resources that should be taken more seriously is apparel, which was mentioned extensively within the data. Patricia argued that universities should “review contracts with vendors to make sure that clothing fits fat people, and that we’re
not ordering from people who only go up to a 3X.” Joe added that free university t-shirts and branded department shirts are common, but that staff feel isolated and forgotten about when the sizing is not inclusive: “The institution purchases a ton of those for us, and they’re not usually accessible to the larger sizes. They don’t have options for our sizes because of the clothing they choose, the styles, [and] the brands.”

Participants also discussed access and accommodations in terms of facilities. This includes classrooms, dining halls, residence halls, bathrooms, and several other commonly used campus spaces. Brady stated:

[Universities] need to start creating equitable access to education; that’s physical spaces, that’s academic spaces for people of size, and then creating policies about how … you need to have a certain percentage of chairs that can accommodate someone of size—making sure that the student health center is not being fatphobic. … I think the biggest thing that people can do right now is just recognize that there is fatphobia and really take an internal look at their policies.

Jeffrey posed a good question that universities should be asking themselves: “Is everybody going to be able to do this? We’re going to purchase this, [so] is everybody going to be able to participate in this and equally get something out of it?” Jeffrey recalled their frustration with their department’s consistent interest in making physical ability part of their annual staff training. They argued that it is neither helpful nor fun:

It frustrates me when we’re doing a training and the first thing we want to talk about is a ropes course. Why do we have to go embarrass [me], my physical activity, in front of everyone? Why do we have to do that? So, I think body size and body inclusivity are on the list of things to consider when they’re thinking about protocols … and how it’s going to be inclusive of everyone’s body size, body type, [and] ability.

Krystal argued that universities also need to examine the various forms of equipment that students are asked to use within university recreation and campus activities, such as the cardio machines and the kayaks: “there’s a weight capacity, so maybe it would be nice if they had some that were good for people who are 400 pounds, because we like to kayak, too.”
Inclusive office furniture was another salient topic; participants noted that university procurement offices should have a more comprehensive selection of desks and chairs that offer a better fit for both body size and weight capacities. Isa argued for the ability to select their own chair, one that they can sit in for eight hours a day, five days a week without causing pain or the fear of it breaking: “we’re not all the same, so make sure that you fit well in the chair that you have.” Participants also noted that more accessible furniture ordering may rely on raising the spending threshold since chairs with higher weight capacities often cost more money. And finally, Rose requested that universities make standing desks an option for staff who may feel more comfortable not sitting all day, noting that fat people often have pressure points that can be alleviated by standing every now and then.

The last request related participants had regarding accessibility and accommodations is the addition of a campus reporting system to review inaccessible spaces and request appropriate accommodations. Patricia noted that there should be “built-in structures for folks to review physical space for its accessibility, [for] people with physical disabilities, but also to fat people.” David added that accommodation requests need to be more streamlined and less stigmatizing:

How can we create better ways to ask for these accommodations without having to go through a whole medical process and say, “Hey, I need this accommodation?” I think the same thing for students as well. A lot of our classrooms aren’t accommodating, and so a student then has to go through our disability services to ask for a different chair to be added to their classroom … How can we create better avenues for people to request these accommodations that [don’t] make them feel like it’s a medical [issue]?

David offered similar critiques for staff: “Whenever you’re requesting any accommodation as an employee, you typically have to go through HR. Is HR really needed for me to ask for a different chair for me to do my work or feel comfortable when I work?” Instead, the reporting system, participants argued, would be a straightforward way to submit and receive approval on requests with minimal chances of further stigmatizing someone for their weight.
Participants explained that another valuable resource to have on college campuses would be a fat faculty and staff affinity group. Brady noted that affinity groups for other identities are common at universities. They are an effective way to keep the university informed about issues related to those identities and create a positive support network. Stephanie mentioned that creating an on-campus affinity group would offer them the ability to meet other colleagues of size: “it would be really nice to meet them … just having a plus-sized supervisor has been amazing; I would love to meet more people that look like me, but I don’t know where they are.” Luna added, “being able to network and find other people in other departments that I can be on the same page with would be amazing.”

Participants also noted that these affinity groups could be a support for students as well. Nicole mentioned that the affinity group could show students “that they can thrive/survive in the real world as a fat person.” Nicole suggested that the affinity group members could serve as advisors and mentors to fat students and could even help support a fat student organization. Rose noted that this affinity group would be a safe place for everyone: faculty, staff, and students. Rose stated, “I feel more empowered to participate or engage in the conversation if I know that it’s going to help the students feel like they belong on campus.” They reiterated a point they made earlier in that advocating for students seems easier than advocating for oneself. Working with students through the affinity group could bring positive, lasting change.

The last benefit that participants noted about affinity groups is that they could help provide valuable services to the university. For example, Isa noted that members of the affinity group could serve on campus committees and help inform policies and practices. Participants also noted that affinity groups can hold the university accountable for taking these issues
seriously through assessment and evaluation. Jude mentioned conducting a campus-wide climate survey to determine major areas of improvement. Additionally, Jude also suggested adding a question to exit interviews about accessibility and campus facilities. Regardless of the method, universities should aim to increase feedback: “making sure that we have avenues to give feedback regularly, and that we can see that the feedback’s actually being shared, and ideally ideas are taken into implementation.”

Participants offered other ideas related to the work that the fat faculty and staff affinity group could offer. For example, Brady mentioned that the affinity group could advocate for fat-specific spaces on campus, such as a center or a lounge that focuses on body-positive messaging and programming. Nicole proposed that the affinity group could compile a list of fat-positive spaces on campus and in the community, as well as Health at Every Size (HAES) doctors, counselors, and other professionals that employees could utilize. Nicole explained:

I think having a guide of some doctors available would help any employee, but like asterisk ones that are explicit about their Health at Every Size ideology, or something, would be really helpful because this is overwhelming. And that goes with therapists and counselors as well, I think they’ll be extraordinarily helpful and useful.

**Employee Benefits**

Participants discussed several employee benefits that they felt would make great resources for supporting fat student affairs professionals. For example, Joe mentioned that some institutions do not offer access to recreation services for staff members. Notably, many fat student affairs professionals felt that they would enjoy the use of a pool, which is a common workout method for people with a range of mobility issues.

Most participants requested employee benefits related to work travel. Fat student affairs professionals often travel for professional conferences where they represent the university. Isa suggested that universities allow people to purchase seats that fit their bodies: “if I’m
representing the institution in any way, I think it would be extremely helpful to have … either a first-class seat or if we have to purchase two seats, that would be good too.” Nicole also mentioned seat selection and the effects of being in a seat that is too small and feeling like a “burden” on other passengers when flying to work events:

It definitely affects you. Then getting off of the plane and going to your event, you just feel … bad. That is a really simple word, but I guess it’s like, you just feel bad, and so like how can you show up fully in a space if you feel bad about yourself?

David noted that they were able to purchase two seats for a flight, but only after they proved that Southwest had a refund policy for persons of size. Given that most airlines do not have a person-of-size policy, purchasing two seats may require the university to create their own person-of-size benefit that allows for the additional expense.

Patricia added that flying may not be the easiest form of travel for all fat student affairs professionals and that universities should allow employees to take the mode of transportation that best accommodates their size:

I’d love to have built-in policies where we don’t have to … take the most economical form of travel or things like that. I’d love to see that there’s some trust that as professionals, we’re using our money wisely. And if, you know, I need to rent a vehicle because the campus fleet vehicles don’t work, I don’t have to be an exception to the policy.

Another benefit that some participants discussed was a wardrobe budget. Krystal argued, “maybe a wardrobe budget? If you knew how much fat clothes cost … That’s a lot of money.” Noting the limitations of professional wear, such as sizing, cost, and availability, from earlier in the chapter, Nicole stated:

I think there should be an onboarding fund that professionals can get in order to get business clothes, especially … I mean, I know that this doesn’t really affect me, because again, my campus is super casual, but if I ever go to a new campus that’s not super casual … that clothing is so expensive. It would be helpful to be able to have something. If you have an expectation and a dress code, then you need to help me be able to do it.
**Sizeism Non-Discrimination Policies**

Another resource for fat student affairs professionals would be workplace protections. All 15 participants mentioned adding sizeism to campus non-discrimination policies. Nicole noted, “one of my biggest frustrations is that a lot of college campuses, and I mean the country as a whole, doesn’t consider size as a protected class.” Evelynne stated, “I think that would be a great opportunity for us to take workplace protections a step further. I’m surprised it isn’t already with how prevalent sizeism is, especially in our culture.” Several participants felt that weight discrimination should be taken just as seriously as other forms of social injustices. Additionally, David pointed out that adding body size to the list of protected identities would be more than just a symbolic move:

I think that would show that the institution is willing to have those conversations or acknowledges that weight discrimination is a real thing. It’s something that does happen. It’s been happening for a very long time. It’s not new, and so it’s showing that they’re willing to take a stance against it.

Participants noted that adding weight to the non-discrimination policy would change how they felt about working in higher education. Evelynne stated, “I would feel much more accepted, especially within our field. I would feel better prepared to help some of our students, as well, knowing all the things that do happen behind the scenes.” Luna added that it would change the way they feel about self-advocacy: “I think I would feel more connected with my university and more protected… I feel I wouldn’t have to advocate for myself as much.” Patricia echoed that idea: “It would just make things easier for fat people on campus to feel like they have grounds for asking for things that we need.”

**Weight Diversity Programming**

The last campus resource that participants mentioned adding was weight-specific diversity programing. Creating a campus culture that embraces weight diversity takes intentional
solutions, some of which can be done in the form of programs. Brady noted that universities should change “expectations around people doing programming, the way people are talking about health and nutrition, [and] eating habits.” Participants recommended that these programs include campus trainings, body-positive initiatives, and a shift away from weight-management to wellness.

Several participants called for the addition of campus trainings that raise awareness of sizeism and weight-based discrimination. Rose stated that campus leaders, in particular, should be better informed:

I would like managers or supervisors to have some sort of training on what weight discrimination looks like. So that when an RA comes to them and asks them to find a different size shirt or something along those lines, they know how to handle it, and it’s not an awkward conversation. I think that would be my biggest thing is feeling safe enough to go to a supervisor and have them understand that my body works differently.

Joe noted that the trainings should include language and the impact of one’s words on others. They specifically mentioned the usage of common phrases like “I’m so fat,” or “I’m feeling fat today.” Nicole added:

I’ve created an inclusive language guide, and so for all of the peer leaders or peer student employees that go through our office, they have to go through inclusive language training, which is really just like going over this guide and asking questions where they might not know things, and one of the sections on there is “body.” So, like, “what is the language that is really, really hurtful or things that you do and say?” So, I try really hard to make this part of my life and job.

Brooklyn added that trainings need to get people out of their comfort areas to learn about identities they do not hold: “they should sit in their discomfort so they can have a moment, hopefully, a moment of growth. Or even just to be like, ‘oh, I hadn’t thought about that.’”

Another area of programming participants discussed included flipping the script on weight and beauty. Jeffrey stated, “I would really like to see body-positivity initiatives. Encouraging professionals to be happy in their own skin.” Isa added that university recreation
centers could do more to show that being fit and healthy is not about weight or body size and that everyone is welcome: “maybe showing different body sizes for their promotions, things like that.” Brady noted that a body-positive message requires intentional marketing:

We need to rethink our marketing; we need to rethink how we’re promoting this because, and I’m not saying that body-positivity belongs just to fat people and that we own that whole thing, but I do believe that the body-positive movement in the United States has been co-opted by skinny people who are like, “I’m proud of being a size two.” … I just think it’s a larger conversation we need to have.

In other words, participants felt that universities should be sure to include marketing that depicts weight diversity.

And finally, participants discussed a shift away from weight-loss messages that are shared by university health centers and HR. Instead, these messages should focus on healthy habits and overall wellness. Brooklyn gave an example that their campus had a campaign on binge drinking; not only did the campaign explain the dangers of too much alcohol, they also discussed the number of calories in their drinks: “to me, that’s stupid. That is not that important to why binge drinking isn’t good for you.” Other participants mentioned the signs that some universities have sitting in front of their elevators that encourage people to choose the stairs as a healthier alternative despite the ableist rhetoric. Another example participants mentioned are the weight-loss challenges that HR creates for faculty and staff. Evelynne suggested a move away from incentivizing losing weight instead of finding ways to incentivize other forms of healthy behavior.

**Summary**

The findings of this phenomenological study provided insight into the experiences of fat student affairs professionals at colleges and universities within the United States. Six themes emerged from the 15 participant interviews. Each theme discussed the challenges and limitations
faced by the participants, as well as implications for policies and practices for better supporting weight diversity within higher education.

Overall, participants felt that being fat in student affairs led to various mental and physical health consequences because of work environments that perpetuate low self-confidence and self-deprecating thoughts. Moreover, participants expressed that they felt unsupported in their careers noting that issues of weight discrimination and fatphobia are often ignored by supervisors and administrators, and that campus facilities and office furniture are often not suitable for accommodating larger bodies. Interviewees also recounted several negative experiences related to weight-based stereotypes related to motivation, intelligence, and hygiene that provoked offensive workplace discourse, unsolicited advice, and rude behavior from colleagues. Furthermore, participants noted an intrinsic desire to “prove oneself” by working longer hours and taking on additional work as a way to disassociate fatness from laziness.

This study also found that fat student affairs professionals perceive a lack of future career options within higher education, both from personal limitations (withdrawing from the field due to negative experiences) and perceived weight-based discrimination within the hiring process for leadership and other public-facing positions. Participants called attention to the lack of representation within senior administrative positions as a contributing factor to the unsupportive campus environment, which often overlooks and undervalues weight-based accommodations and resources. For this reason, fat student affairs professionals explained that it is necessary for them to practice self-advocacy, such as planning ahead, spending personal money, and forming peer support networks to combat marginalizing work environments.

Participants recommended several policy and practice implications for colleges and universities wanting to better support weight diversity. Participants felt that campuses should
strive to be more accessible and accommodating of larger bodies by making necessary changes within procurement services to cover a broader range of office furniture and staff apparel. Additionally, interviewees noted the unique role of fat faculty and staff affinity groups, not only as a peer support group but also as a support to the larger community when planning and implementing changes to the campus’ facilities. And finally, all participants within the study advocated for weight-based protections to be added to universities’ non-discrimination policies, calling for necessary and lasting change.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Weight-based stigma and discrimination has been considered by many to be the last justifiable form of prejudice in our social world (Bowden, 2012; see also Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013), and that “persons with obesity are considered acceptable targets of stigma” (Kahan, 2016, para. 2). The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses and offer policy and practice implications to help make college campuses better for future higher education professionals.

Utilizing fat studies scholarship, critical theory, and interpretive phenomenology, four research questions were created that emphasized the participants’ interpretations of lived social experiences related to physical environments, resources, stereotypes, and discrimination:

1. How have fat student affairs professionals been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the university environment?
2. What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat student affairs professionals?
3. How have stereotypes of fat student affairs professionals, if reported, been perpetuated on college campuses?
4. How have weight-based discriminatory practices and policies, if they exist, been used against fat student affairs professionals?

The research questions guided the data collection process, which included 15 semi-structured interviews. Data from the interviews were analyzed and coded, and six salient themes emerged (which were outlined in chapter four). Chapter five discusses the findings of the study.
and their connections to theory and literature. This chapter also discusses policy and practice implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

**Discussion of Findings**

Critical theory, fat studies, and interpretive phenomenology form the conceptual framework of this study. Critical theory discusses power and privilege and works to address real-world problems by informing social institutions’ policies and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fat studies offers insight into activism, language, and the systemic oppression surrounding fatness (Cameron & Russell, 2016) and has four core tenets: (a) addressing the intersections of scholarship and activism, (b) understanding the use of language as a tool that empowers dominant identities, (c) ending the problematic medical rhetoric that further marginalizes fat individuals, and (d) exploring individuals’ experiences of stigma and discrimination (Brown, 2016). And finally, phenomenology offers an interpretive approach to understanding the essence of a particular social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), an appropriate method for exploring fat student affairs professionals’ experiences.

In this section, the six themes outlined in chapter four are discussed within the context of the critical theory and fat studies framework of the study:

1. Fat student affairs professionals face health consequences.
2. Fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their current positions.
3. Fat student affairs professionals encounter prejudice in the workplace on a regular basis.
4. Fat student affairs professionals perceive a lack of viable career options in higher education.
5. Fat student affairs professionals are required to practice self-advocacy.
6. Fat student affairs professionals can be recruited and retained by adding campus.
Moreover, interpretive phenomenology and critical theory both invite a certain degree of “pre-understanding,” or information already understood by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Theme 1: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Face Health Consequences**

The first theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals face health consequences. Stress in the workplace, low-self-confidence, self-deprecating thoughts, and the juxtaposition of weight and health were all salient subthemes that directly address the first research question, which asks: how have fat student affairs professionals been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the university environment? Aspects of this theme tie into the third tenet of fat studies, which address the intersections of health, body size, and ethics. For example, participants noted that their low self-confidence and self-deprecating thoughts resulted from the constant shame they felt within the workplace. This idea was reflected in the literature as internalized weight stigma.

Internalized weight stigma is the idea that a fat person begins to believe (internalize) all of the negative stereotypes and value-laded assumptions surrounding body size. According to Lewis et al. (2011), this stigmatization leads to fat people believing that their weight is a personal failure that often leads to self-blame and, according to Wardle and Foley (1989), embarrassment. Nearly every participant in this study discussed low self-confidence and self-deprecating thoughts. Rose discussed often feeling “unworthy” while at work, explaining that they felt unable to express the same nurturing values of a student affairs professional compared to thinner colleagues. Evelynne discussed their frustrations with always feeling like they take up too much space and wanting to “hide in a shell” at work.
Health consequences of internalized weight stigma were also discussed in the literature: “internalized fat stigma may elicit adverse psychological responses, consistent with stress-based models of disease. Negative psychological outcomes including depression, body image dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem have also been demonstrated…” (Lindly et al., 2014, p. 180). Participants discussed these negative consequences as side effects of student affairs work, noting that they often skip meals, exercise, and other forms of self-care due to the demanding hours and low pay.

Consistent with the literature, participants also noted that internalized weight stigma is worsened by negative interactions with colleagues involving jokes, slurs, and unsolicited dieting or exercise advice. The literature refers to this as weight shaming and is often believed to motivate an “overweight” person to lose weight (Hunger et al., 2020). However, the use of shaming practices can intensify internalized weight stigma, perpetuating poor mental and physical health, and lead to depression, anxiety, and even weight gain (Brody, 2017). Kahan (2016) calls weight stigma “one of the most damaging aspects of…our thin-obsessed society” (para. 1).

Participants also noted negative consequences to their mental and physical health as a result of universities failing to recognize the differences between weight and health. For example, Nicole noted, “when you talk about obesity, there’s never a thought about how an obese person is healthy.” Several participants called for more inclusive dialogue on weight that emphasized wellness and self-love, which ties directly to the Health at Every Size (HAES) literature (e.g., Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Brown, 2016; Burgard, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Hunger et al., 2020; Lee, 2012; Lupton, 2016). Participants argued that failing to understand that someone can be fat and healthy adds to the campus culture that perpetuates weight
stigmatization. Other studies have had similar findings, resulting in HAES advocating for more medical professionals, nutritionists, and food scientists that have a deeper understanding of how weight prejudice, discrimination, and stigma have biased the scientific studies that claim “overweight” means “unhealthy” (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Brown, 2016; Hunger et al., 2020).

**Theme 2: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Feel Unsupported in Their Current Positions**

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals feel unsupported in their current positions. Fatness being overlooked and ignored, feeling limited by professional attire, negative experiences with supervisors, intersectionality, weight as a disability, and feeling limited by physical space were all salient subthemes. Data from this theme directly addresses the fourth research question, which asks: how have weight-based discriminatory practices and policies, if they exist, been used against fat student affairs professionals? Aspects of this theme tie into the fourth tenet of fat studies, which address the need for personal stories that address experiences related to weight prejudice and discrimination.

There were several connections to the literature throughout this theme, including discussions surrounding intersectionality (e.g., Pausé, 2014) and weight as a disability (e.g., Brody, 2017; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009), both of which are critical. However, other notable connections were less salient in the literature that require further discussion. One notable connection was to the idea that fatness is invisible and that issues of discrimination related to fat identities are ignored (e.g., Neporent, 2013; Reidinger, 2012). Brady noted the contradiction of being both “bigger” and taking up more space yet being treated as invisible. Several participants reported often feeling invisible in the workplace, yet the literature only briefly touched on this issue. For example, Neporent (2013) stated, “fat stigma is rarely challenged and often ignored. In effect, it is the last acceptable prejudice” (para. 13). The argument here is that fatness is less
visible, which implies a lack of interest in fat-related social issues. However, based on participant stories, as well as the literature that covers fatness in media (e.g., Brody, 2017; Gurrieri & Brown, 2012; Neporent, 2013; Puhl et al., 2013a), it is known that fatness is widely discussed. So, it seems that fat student affairs professionals feel that their identities are invisible when, in fact, they are just being ignored. This speaks to a general complacency with weight-related prejudice. In other words, weight discrimination is “such a taboo thing that we don’t talk about it. We don’t point it out; we’ve … made it invisible,” Brady stated.

Another meaningful connection between the literature and the findings relates to physical space limitations. A majority of the literature surrounding physical space limitations for fat people in higher education discusses student desks. In Brown’s (2018) qualitative study, students reported that fixed-top desks were a common source of mental and physical anguish. Participants also complained about the usage of fixed-top desks and explained that student affairs professionals often find themselves in classrooms for a variety of reasons, including trainings, programs, departmental meetings, and even as students in graduate courses. Participants also noted several other physical space limitations such as elevators, inaccessible walking paths, non-ADA compliant bathroom stalls, campus furniture, and perhaps most notable, office chairs. Participants detailed stories of campus furniture and office chairs breaking underneath them, along with not being able to access certain parts of campus that were not accessible. While physical space limitations were discussed in the literature concerning faculty and students, this study is the first to shed light on the limitations from student affairs professionals’ perspectives.

Professional attire was another salient theme that emerged from the participant interviews but was only briefly mentioned in the literature. For example, Reidinger (2012) discussed being ridiculed about her attire by colleagues regarding their blouse and business slacks during a
campus meeting. Additionally, Lockard (2015) noted that big and tall and plus-sized clothing are often more expensive and only available at specialty stores, making them less accessible to higher education professionals, especially those on a budget. Two-thirds of the participants in this study agreed that professional attire for fat people is less attainable. However, they added that not only is it more difficult for fat people to find and afford appropriate clothing, but that the standards for fat people are higher than the standards for thinner colleagues. Nicole stated, “there’s just an additional level of professionalism needed for fat people.” Other participants observed that thinner colleagues could wear leggings and joggers to work and be considered “fashionable,” whereas the same outfit on a fat person would be deemed inappropriate. The differences in professional attire standards outlined in this study were not explored in previous research.

The literature broadly discussed traveling while fat, which included limitations of seating options on airplanes and the cost of purchasing two seats (e.g., Lockard, 2015). However, this study, pulling from the fourth tenet of fat studies, added the personal stories of fat student affairs professionals and their traveling experiences. Nicole stated that flying is the “bane of fat people’s existence.” Participant interviews made it clear that the complications with travel are not limited to the size of the seats, but also encompasses mistreatment from other passengers. Participants recalled being elbowed, stared at, complained to, and called names while on planes. These experiences led to participants admitting that they avoid flying altogether or pay out of pocket during work travel to upgrade their seats.

There were a few salient themes that emerged from participant interviews that were not mentioned in previous literature. First, several participants noted having negative experiences with supervisors. These experiences ranged from subtle forms of microaggressions like diet
discourse in the workplace to overt forms of discrimination like forcing employees to sign-up for gym memberships during work meetings. Second, five participants discussed working in residential life as a fat student affairs professional. To date, no research has been conducted on fat residential life staff. Participants discussed struggles with performing building checks in spaces without elevators, responding to emergencies promptly without available parking across campus, and live-in apartment furniture that could not support their weight. And finally, all 15 participants mentioned frustrations with matching staff apparel. Within student affairs, offices will often purchase items like polos, dress shirts, and jackets with departmental branding. However, participants point out that the sizing on these items is not inclusive, making them feel isolated from the department. All three of these themes were not present in the literature but were salient themes within the findings.

Theme 3: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Encounter Prejudice in the Workplace on a Regular Basis

The third theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals encounter prejudice in the workplace on a regular basis. Fatness as negative, stereotypes, feeling marginalized by office discourse, negative experiences with faculty, and overcompensating were all salient subthemes. Data from this theme directly address the third research question, which asks: how have stereotypes of fat student affairs professionals, if reported, been perpetuated on college campuses? Aspects of this theme tie into the second and third tenets of fat studies that address inclusive language and health and ethics, respectively. This theme also ties into a core tenet of critical theory, which understands knowledge to be both political and value-laden.

There were several prominent connections between the findings and the literature for this theory. For example, critical theory understands that knowledge is political and value-laded a tenet shared throughout fat studies literature. Cameron and Russell (2016) explained that
institutions of learning “can turn bodies into political sites of privilege and oppression…” (p. 2). Moreover, Stewart (2018) noted, “we are told that there is an ideal physical body, and fat(ter) bodies are not the ideal … fatphobia still seems to be an acceptable form of bias, including on our college campuses” (p. 31). This notion was prevalent throughout the participant interviews. Stephanie explained, “for some people, that’s the worst thing that can possibly happen to them. They’d rather die than be fat.”

The literature explains that these negative associations with fatness are extensions of social values. For example, “thinness has come to symbolize important values in our society, values such as discipline, hard work, ambition, and willpower. If you’re not thin, then you don’t have [these values]” (Puhl, as quoted in Neporent, 2013, para. 6). The literature also notes that these values are depicted in the stereotypes held about fat people, such as laziness, lack of motivation or will-power, general unattractiveness, and stupidity (Fisanick, 2007; Russell, 2020).

Robinson et al. (1993) noted that fat people are seen as caricatures of people meaning that they are often depicted as undisciplined, which calls their work ethic into question. These stereotypes were also salient in this dissertation’s findings, and participants felt that they contributed to the negative experiences they faced on college campuses.

The literature shows that the stereotypes that exist against fat people directly impact how they perceived in their professional roles. For example, the notion that fat people have poor work ethic comes from the attribution theory lens, which pointed to the idea that the participants in the study felt biased against fat individuals based on the assumption that they have complete control of their weight yet lacked the self-determination to become thinner (Allison & Lee, 2015). Similarly, Chia et al. (1998) noted that increased weight is negatively correlated with perceived intelligence. In other words, the bigger the person, the less intelligent they are thought to be.
Hunt and Rhodes (2018) found that higher education employees often form habits of taking on more responsibilities than their thinner peers, thereby overburdening themselves to prove their worth and utility to themselves and to those around them (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018).

Overcompensation was a salient theme in the findings of this study. Participants noted that they often take on extra work and feel added pressure to perform above expectations in order to invalidate the stereotypes that exist for fat people. For example, Stephanie stated, “I think some of it is overcompensating because I want to prove that I’m not lazy. I am a hard worker.” While the pressures on fat individuals to overperform were mentioned in the literature (e.g. Hunt & Rhodes, 2018), this dissertation’s findings add stories specifically about fat student affairs professionals and their experiences with overcompensating in a field that is already notorious for being understaffed and overworked.

Another subtheme that was prevalent in the research is the concept of “obesity discourse.” This discourse was prevalent in the findings of this study in multiple forms, including unsolicited wellness advice, as well as open discussions of dieting and body size within the workplace. This discourse often “dominates and serves to reproduce a framework of thinking, talking, and action in which thinness is privileged and in which a ‘size matters’ message fuels narratives about fat people’s irresponsibility and lack of willpower” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 1). This subtheme also ties into the core tenet of fat studies that promotes the usage of inclusive language and calls for the erasure of obesity discourse: “the ways in which dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression, often expressed as fatphobia, fat hatred, and fat bullying, are being addressed within spaces and places of teaching and learning” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2). Participants discussed their experiences with this workplace dialogue as isolating and discriminatory. One of the common ways fat student affairs professionals
experienced this discourse was through campus weight loss challenges, which often normalized fatphobia. “Obesity discourse” was prevalent within the literature (e.g., Cameron & Russell, 2016; Stewart, 2018), but this dissertation further explores how this form of discourse shows up for fat student affairs participants.

**Theme 4: Fat Student Affairs Professionals Perceive a Lack of Viable Career Options in Higher Education**

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals perceive a lack of viable career options in higher education. Limitations of career advancement and a lack of representation in the workplace were both salient subthemes that directly address the fourth research question, which asks: how have weight-based discriminatory practices and policies, if they exist, been used against fat student affairs professionals? Aspects of this theme tie into the fourth tenet of fat studies, which addresses fat individuals’ lived experiences. This theme also has ties to a core tenet of critical theory, which views social reality as a product of power.

The results of this dissertation indicate that fat student affairs professionals are stereotyped as friendly, funny, and emotional; lacking intelligence; lazy and lacking self-control; unattractive and unhygienic; and unhealthy, all of which directly impact their ability to hired and promoted. The findings of this study are similar to previous research that demonstrated a lack of hiring and promotion for higher education employees. For example, Lupton (2013) noted that weight-based discrimination on a societal level has led to fat people being statistically “more likely to live in poverty, earn less income or be unemployed, have lower education levels, be employed in lower status jobs, and experience lower living standards” (para. 3). This dissertation’s findings showed that participants felt limited in their career aspirations within
student affairs, fearing that fat identities would be perceived as an impediment in completing their jobs.

The participants’ fears that their fat identities may be an impediment were supported by previous research. For example, Flint et al. (2016) investigated hiring policies and found that hiring managers perceived fat applicants as less suitable for leadership positions. Hunt and Rhodes (2018) found a similar result in their study on fat faculty and staff, which showed that they are more likely to experience prejudicial remarks that insult their credibility or shame them for their appearance. One participant in the study recalled being told by an interview committee that they were concerned about her stamina and ability to keep pace with students’ needs (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). “In reality, bodies do matter in academic culture, and fat academics remain susceptible to the fat-hating rhetoric that permeates American culture in general” (Fisanick, 2007, p. 237). While previous research focused on faculty and higher education employees’ experiences more broadly, this dissertation supports their findings, adding research that shows that student affairs professionals often face a similar degree of discrimination within hiring and promotion practices.

A lack of representation of fat-identified professionals within higher education supports the perception that discriminatory practices are being used within hiring processes. Fisanick (2006) researched fat faculty in the tenure and promotion trends within American higher education. “Professors not occupying the ‘normal professor body’ are at risk for not achieving institutional milestones…it is clear that a body bias exists in the academy” (Fisanick, 2006, p. 336). Participants in this study also perceived a lack of representation. Evelynne stated, “most of our entry-level folks, at least that I see across our campuses, most are on the larger side. And as you go up the chain, people seem to get thinner and very quickly.” Participants noted that fat
people are largely absent from public-facing positions, as well as positions charged with making policy and practice decisions for the university.

Moreover, only two of the participants had titles at the director level. Krystal, one of the two directors in this study, explained that being a senior leader in their department often means being placed in uncomfortable situations where they are the only fat person in the room: “I always feel weird about it. I’m always trying to hold myself a certain way or dress a certain way. It’s like I have this fear that I’m not going to be taken seriously because I’m plus-size.” Krystal explained that because of the lack of representation in fellow senior leaders, they are often the only advocate for weight-inclusive spaces across campus, despite their discomfort with speaking out about their weight.

Representation of fat student affairs professionals might also be impacted by discrimination and marginalization within graduate schools. Graduate degrees are often a requirement for student affairs work, even in many entry-level positions. So, discrimination against fat graduate students could impact fat representation in higher education overall. For example, Chris Parr (2013) in his article *Heavy Thinkers Need Not Apply*, reviewed 1,000 graduate school admission applications with a wide range of body mass index (BMI) scores. He found that in cases where graduate school applicants had in-person admissions interviews, there was a significant difference in the percentage of thinner candidates being accepted than heavier candidates. This difference was not found when candidates held phone interviews with admissions officers (Parr, 2013). While all of the participants in this study had earned their master’s degree, several of them noted challenges they experienced while in graduate school. For example, Joe recalled a time when their faculty advisors lectured them on professional attire and
how others were perceiving them. Instances like this could affect retention within graduate programs and thereby stifling representation of fat bodies in higher education.

Discrimination within graduate school admissions processes, as well as hiring and promotion practices across higher education, may not be the only reason for lack of fat representation in university leadership. Participants in this study also noted a degree of self-imposed limitations that was not reflected in previous research. Self-imposed limitations ranged from not applying to specific positions, such as public-facing positions or positions perceived as being very “active” with student engagement, to deciding to leave higher education altogether. For example, Rose noted that they had previously been interested in applying to dean of students roles, but because they understand those positions to be highly active with long hours, they decided it would not be a good fit for them: “That was a path that I thought that I really wanted earlier in my career, but that probably was derailed more by weight and hours. So, I probably kind of avoided thinking about those positions.” On the other hand, Joe is looking at leaving higher education: “I feel like weight and a lot of identities play a larger role in student affairs politics, and the politics is exactly why I’m trying to get out.”

Theme 5: Fat Student Affairs Professionals are Required to Practice Self-Advocacy

The fifth theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals are required to practice self-advocacy. Learning and practicing self-advocacy, planning ahead, spending personal money, and creating support networks were all salient subthemes that directly address the first research question, which asks: how have fat student affairs professionals been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the university environment? Aspects of this theme tie into the first tenet of fat studies, which addresses activism within the fat acceptance movement.
Fat activism is a crucial component of critical fat scholarship (Brown, 2016). “Fat activism has sought to end weight-based oppression and promote size acceptance, laying an important foundation for the development of fat studies and, more recently, fat pedagogy” (Russell, 2020, p. 1516). Despite its essential role, fat activism had very little presence in previous research in higher education. However, there is one example that focuses on the university recreation centers and the work they can do to promote a holistic view of weight diversity and wellness. Pickett and Cunningham (2017) proposed a “physical activity at every size” (PAES) model that included a cultural commitment, leadership commitment, inclusive physical spaces, body-size inclusive language, a sense of community among larger individuals. While not focusing on university recreation centers, this study found similar results when participants were asked about creating weight-inclusive workplace environments. For example, participants noted that the commitment to weight-inclusivity needed to be university-wide, and that representation was needed throughout upper-level administration, that physical spaces needed more accessible furniture and facilities, and that campuses needed support groups for fat employees. While most of these topics are explored in the discussion of theme six, it is important to note that participants did not currently see these resources on their campuses, which resulted in theme five: fat student affairs professionals are required to practice self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy was not covered in the literature on activism. However, the ways in which participants in this study described self-advocacy, it seems to be similar to the forms of activism listed in the literature (e.g., Lee, 2012; Russell, 2020; Russell & Cameron, 2016). Of course, the only difference is that participants felt they needed to do this activism on their own due to the lack of campus protections against sizeism and the lack of support groups. In short, participants felt that if they did not advocate for themselves, no one else would. Self-advocacy skills,
participants noted, often came from mentors in the field. For example, Brady explained, “there were other fat folks who were super empowering, who had already thought about these things before I had, and really empowered me to start thinking about more deeply.” The idea of mentors assisting other fat individuals in higher education was mentioned in the literature but emerged as a salient theme in this study.

It is also important to note that self-advocacy, whether covert or overt, was performed differently. One covert example of self-advocacy included participants taking additional time to carefully plan their daily schedule was a critical component to this advocacy. Preparation often included building in extra time between meetings to walk across campus and refresh in the bathrooms; selecting outfits and shoes that would allow them to be comfortable and efficient; and, researching facilities online to determine the types of chairs and other pieces of furniture that might not accommodate them. Another example of covert self-advocacy is that participants often mentioned spending personal money within the workplace in order to make themselves more comfortable. For instance, Stephanie explained that they would often pay for upgraded airline seats when traveling for work. Jeffrey noted that they pay extra for campus parking in order to limit how much walking they have to do for meetings while on campus. To some, these ideas may seem less like self-advocacy and more like reactions to an oppressive campus culture; regardless, participants viewed these actions as methods for making their work more accommodating to them and their needs, which can be seen as a form of activism.

Participants also discussed more overt forms of self-advocacy. One salient idea that emerged from the findings is that participants wanted fat support groups on campus. For example, Isa noted, “I think with other fat student affairs professionals, we’ve got something else in common, right? We go through similar things in classrooms and, you know, meeting spaces.
We are more considerate about the spaces and places that we frequent.” Brady added, “You’re like, I see you, I understand what you’re going through.” Participants mentioned that support groups could be in-person in the form of a campus affinity group or online, similar to the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group. Support groups within higher education institutions were not mentioned in previous literature, but participants felt that having connections to fat colleagues across campus would making working on college campuses easier and more enjoyable.

**Theme 6: Fat Student Affairs Professionals can be Recruited and Retained by Adding Campus Resources**

The sixth theme that emerged from the interviews is that fat student affairs professionals can be recruited and retained by adding campus resources. Addressing current resources, as well as adding resources on accessibility and accommodations, affinity groups, employee benefits, sizeism non-discrimination policies, and weight diversity programming were all salient subthemes that directly address the second research question, which asks: what are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat student affairs professionals? Aspects of this theme tie into one of the core tenets of critical theory, which addresses research as being transformational and pragmatic.

Addressing higher education employees’ concerns was a common theme within previous literature on fat studies in academia. For example, Cameron (2016) noted, “the importance of identifying strategies for reducing obesity stigma in higher education…cannot be understated, given the role higher education can play in forming (or changing) attitudes and beliefs about obesity, bodies, and health” (p. 120). However, very little research focused on the resources that would help recruit and retain higher education employees, and more specifically, fat student
affairs professionals. In fact, between the literature and the findings of this study, there was only two areas of overlap.

First, previous literature demonstrates the importance of non-discrimination policies related to sizeism (e.g., Brody, 2017; Jones, 2015; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; Suh et al., 2014; Taking Legal Action, n.d.). As noted in the literature, there are only a few states that offer weight-related anti-bullying laws, but these laws only pertain to youth in K-12 school systems. These include Michigan (Martin, 2017), New York, Maine, and New Hampshire (Brody, 2017). However, a few cities, including Binghamton, N.Y., Santa Cruz, and Washington D.C., and one state, Michigan, offer weight-based non-discrimination for employment (Martin, 2017; Nieves, 2000). Federal law within the United States does have protections for “obesity” under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); however, ADA protections only apply if the person’s weight was caused by a separate medical condition that is already covered by ADA guidelines (Brody, 2017). In other words, weight alone is not protected; instead, it is only covered if it is a symptom of a previously diagnosed illness. For this reason, all 15 participants in this study argued for adding sizeism to their campuses’ existing non-discrimination policies.

Second, previous literature covers the many challenges that fat people face while traveling, most notably flying. For example, Lockard (2015) discussed that traveling while fat can be costly due to airline policies that often require fat passengers to purchase two seats. Several participants in this study explained that travel is sometimes required for various student affairs positions. Purchasing two seats is often not an option due to budget constraints and institutional travel policies. Participants and previous literature agree that universities should reevaluate travel policies to make them more inclusive of body-size diversity.
Participants in this study also recommended a number of resources that could be added to college campuses to support fat employees that were not mentioned in previous research. These recommendations included addressing procurement policies that limit sizing on apparel, furniture, and other university functions; supporting the creation of fat affinity groups; and establishing a range of employee benefits that include access to weight-inclusive university recreation centers, increased travel allotments, and professional development funds that could be used to professional attire. Previous research focused heavily on the experiences of fat faculty and students (e.g. Cameron, 2015, 2016; Fisanick, 2007; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Stewart, 2018), both of which require resources unique to their roles on campus. This study adds to the literature the experiences of fat student affairs professionals, as well as the resources that they feel would increase their job satisfaction in higher education.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of fat student affairs professionals and to provide appropriate policy and practice implications for better supporting weight diversity on college campuses. This study’s conceptual framework, utilizing critical theory and the core tenets of fat studies, supports the idea that research should be transformative and pragmatic. Critical theory, for example, is used within qualitative research to study “social institutions and their transformations through the meanings of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and [as] a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 29). Additionally, fat studies exists as a counter-narrative to the “harmful and oppressive assumptions, behaviors, and actions” of society’s discourse on obesity and weight-based health concerns (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2). Together, these theoretical frameworks are used in this study to identify and address real-world
problems affecting fat student affairs professionals by informing the policies and practices that impact their daily lives.

**Implications for Policy**

This section outlines three policy implications, including (a) adding sizeism to campus non-discrimination policies, (b) addressing procurement policies for travel and apparel, and (c) addressing human resource policies around hiring and promotion.

**Implication 1: Add Sizeism to Campus Non-Discrimination Policies**

Higher education institutions should consider adding sizeism to their campuses’ non-discrimination policies. This implication is supported by previous research that shows weight-based discrimination as a widely accepted form of prejudice with very few protections within the United States (e.g., Bowden, 2012; Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013). Michigan is the only state that offers workplace protections based on body size (Martin, 2017; Taking Legal Action, n.d.). Overall, only 21 institutions offer sizeism protections, 18 of which are in Michigan, and the remaining three institutions include Indiana State University, the College of William and Mary in Virginia, and Point Park University in Pennsylvania (see Table 1 in Appendix B). Moreover, federal ADA protections for weight only apply when weight is a symptom or side effect of an illness, medication, or disability (Brody, 2017). Multiple studies have found significant public interest in establishing sizeism non-discrimination policies (Jones, 2015; Suh et al., 2014), an interest that the participants in this dissertation reflected. All 15 participants agreed that offering protections against forms of weight discrimination on their campus would minimize the amount of self-advocacy needed in the workplace and provide a foundation for request accommodations. Moreover, participants argued that adding these protections would increase the conversations surrounding fatness, thereby
weakening the idea that fat identities are invisible and that fat-related accessibility challenges can be ignored.

**Implication 2: Address Procurement Policies for Travel and Apparel**

Higher education institutions should consider addressing procurement policies related to travel and apparel. Traveling, especially flying, was addressed both in previous research (e.g., Lockard, 2015) and by this dissertation’s participants. Participants noted that most universities have procurement policies related to travel that limit university faculty and staff to flying in the cheapest available economy seats. For fat individuals, flying in economy is not only painful but often not feasible. Reasonable accommodations for fat individuals include the ability to purchase two seats instead of one or purchasing a first-class/business-class seat. The justification of airplane seating accommodations for fat employees should center less on *increased comfort* and more on *minimizing pain*. Other travel options should be considered like driving or taking trains, even if those options are more expensive than flying.

Procurement policies also often provide parameters around professional attire and departmental apparel. Policies that address clothing and uniforms should account for more size-inclusive brands, as well as the increased cost of big and tall or plus-sized options. All 15 participants in this study noted challenges with professional wear, particularly their inability to afford professional attire for the office. If colleges and universities have professional dress codes for employees, fat employees should be afforded the ability to use a portion of their professional development funds to purchase professional attire. Additionally, some departments purchase branded items (with logos) for employees, but several of the participants noted that were charged out-of-pocket if they needed larger sizes. For example, employees who fit clothing sizes between small and extra-large were not charged for their departmental attire, but those requiring anything
over an extra-large were required to pay for the overage. Other participants noted that the weight-inclusive options for branded apparel often did not match, either in color or design, the branded options selected for their thinner colleagues—actions like this left participants feeling isolated and marginalized. Departmentally-branded shirts, jackets, and other items should be size-inclusive so that everyone in the department can match with no out-of-pocket expenses for fat employees.

**Implication 3: Address Human Resource Policies Around Hiring and Promotion**

Higher education institutions should consider making policy adjustments related to hiring and promotions. Previous literature (e.g., Brown, 2018; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Ingeno, 2013; Parr, 2013), as well as the findings of this dissertation, have shown weight-based employment discrimination across higher education. The findings indicate that employee evaluation and interview processes systemically disadvantage fat student affairs professionals. Policy reviews should include adjustments to required travel for prospective employees, allowing interviewees to select appropriate accommodations for their size. Adjustments to interview policies consist of removing the walking portions of campus tours, lessening extensive multi-day interviews, and finding inclusive spaces for candidate interviews, meals, and lodging. Additionally, to help reduce bias within hiring practices, human resource offices should include stereotyping, prejudice, and weight-based discrimination in mandatory search committee diversity trainings.

Some adjustments may be needed within promotion practices within student affairs. For example, requiring implicit weight bias trainings could reduce prejudice within employee evaluation and internal hiring processes. Furthermore, additional attention should be paid to the annual employee evaluation process to ensure that personal biases and prejudices about body size do not impact ratings and reviews. In some cases, a blind review process of internal
applications and annual reviews might be used to avoid implicit or explicit weight-based
discrimination. In short, policies requiring supervisors and HR specialists to become better
informed about the stereotypes and prejudicial behaviors against fat employees will help identify
forms of systemic oppression and discrimination within the workplace.

**Implications for Practice**

This section outlines four practice implications, including (a) creating mechanisms for
accommodations and reporting, (b) adding critical weight scholarship to campus trainings and
curriculum, (c) creating fat-inclusive spaces on campus, and (d) adopting HAES tenets for
campus health programs.

**Implication 1: Create Mechanisms for Accommodations and Reporting**

Higher education institutions should create mechanisms for addressing accommodation
requests from fat employees and reports of bias or discrimination related to sizeism. Previous
research and the findings of this dissertation call for increased communication surrounding issues
of body-size diversity. Participants noted that requesting accommodations has proven
challenging. For example, some institutions require employees to register with the offices of
disability services, while others require a note from a doctor outlining their needs. Moreover,
some institutions do not have a process for addressing accommodations related to body size.
Participants noted that when accommodation practices were not present, they tended to spend
personal money when possible to make their own accommodations at work. Participants also
noted that consistently being in spaces that do not support their body size led to stress, lower
self-confidence, and even self-deprecation—a finding that is supported by previous research on
internalized weight stigma (e.g., Brownell, 2005; Cameron, 2015; Kahan, 2016; Lupton, 2013;
Neporent, 2013). Along with the ability to request accommodations, participants also indicated
the need for reporting mechanisms for instances of bias and discrimination within the workplace. Reporting mechanisms, as well as the appropriate review protocols, would allow for institutions to effectively address issues of sizeism in ways that support and affirm fat employees.

**Implication 2: Add Critical Weight Scholarship to Campus Trainings and Curriculum**

Higher education institutions should add critical weight scholarship to campus trainings and curriculum. With nearly 80 percent of the adult population, and over 30 percent of children now meeting the medical standard of “overweight” (Hobbs, 2018), mixed with the prevalence of weight bias in the United States (Brody, 2017), colleges and universities need to do their part in correcting the miseducation about body size. Most institutions offer some form of diversity and inclusion training that explores forms of discrimination and raises awareness against biases and systems of oppression. Critical weight scholarship, such as the core tenets of fat studies and HAES, should be a part of those trainings, helping to raise awareness of and ending forms of weight discrimination at all institutional levels. Moreover, scholars within the field of fat studies have begun teaching courses on critical weight scholarship and the impact of weight stigma in society. Courses like these would be useful additions to an assortment of sociology, psychology, kinesiology, education, and nutrition science courses, and resources to help teach these courses have already been created (see *The Fat Pedagogy Reader*). Helping correct the miseducation surrounding body weight would help reduce prejudice against fat individuals in higher education.

**Implication 3: Create Fat-Inclusive Spaces on Campus**

Higher education institutions should create fat-inclusive spaces on their campuses. Participants in this study noted various physical spaces on college campuses that are typically not inclusive of fat bodies. These spaces often include elevators, bathroom stalls, communal area seating, and even office furniture. Higher education institutions can work closely with
architecture and design firms to make new construction more inclusive, using the most up-to-date, universally designed materials, furniture, and specifications. Some participants noted that residential life is particularly challenging, with live-in apartments furnished with beds, couches, and other pieces of furniture that do not have the appropriate weight capacities to hold them. University recreation centers were also commonly discussed within the findings as places where fat student affairs professionals felt particularly marginalized. Pickett and Cunningham (2017) provided solutions for recreation centers that may be adaptable for the campus environment, such as a cultural shift in education around weight and furniture compatible with different body sizes and shapes, creating a greater sense of community among fat individuals.

Creating community adds a vital element to this implication in that fat-inclusive spaces can be both physical and social. For example, all 15 participants called for the formation of fat affinity groups wherein fat faculty and staff could build community, address their concerns, and advocate for changes to campus policies (like economy travel) and practices (like weight loss challenges). Participants also noted that fat affinity groups could advise campus leaders on critical decisions that may impact fat individuals within the campus community. Creating fat-inclusive spaces is critical to ending weight-based systems of oppression against fat student affairs professionals.

**Implication 4: Adopt HAES Tenets for Campus Health Programs**

Higher education institutions should adopt Health at Every Size (HAES) tenets for campus health programs and marketing. The tenets of HAES include (a) maintaining holistic health that is unique to each person, (b) an appreciation of one’s own and of others’ bodies for each of their unique qualities, (c) eating well based on individual needs and interests, (d) the enjoyment of balanced physical movement for pleasure, and (e) a recognition of the diversity of
bodies and their abilities (Burgard, 2009). Previous literature suggests that adopting the HAES model allows fat individuals to feel more comfortable participating in wellness activities (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017) because there is an increased understanding that wellness does not always mean losing weight, and instead, promotes holistic wellness which includes mental health (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020).

The literature also provides two examples of the HAES model is being used on college campuses. The first example is Embodied, a student organization at California State University, whose mission is to raise awareness of the HAES tenets through programming. This organization also hosts a week-long “Love Every Body” calendar of events with speakers and activities (Vasquez, 2014). The second example includes a team of dietitians at the University of California Berkley who actively promotes the HAES model with students seeking nutrition and dieting assistance (Minkow, 2017). Higher education institutions can use these two examples as models for incorporating HAES into their campus cultures.

Participants in this study advocated for increased awareness of dieting, exercising, body size, and related health consequences. They noted that most of the marginalization they feel within the workplace comes from misinformed dialogue with colleagues. Participants emphasized the need for wellness and self-love, a core tenet of HAES (Burgard, 2009). Participants argued that failing to understand that someone can be fat and healthy adds to the campus culture that perpetuates weight stigmatization. Higher education institutions can use HAES to advocate for more medical professionals, nutritionists, and food scientists to be trained on weight prejudice, discrimination, and stigma. Adding HAES tenets would help make fat student affairs professionals and higher education professionals as a whole more welcomed and supported on campus.
Limitations

This study explored the lived social experiences of fat student affairs professionals. There were a few limitations that were identified throughout the research process, including: (a) lack of previous research to inform the study, (b) the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) the lack of senior-level administrators in the participant pool.

The lack of previous research was identified as a limitation because it hindered the ability to ask more substantive questions. All of the literature surrounding critical weight scholarship in higher education focused on faculty and students’ experiences. These studies were, however, utilized to help inform the interview protocol of this study, but the themes remained within the interview protocol were fairly surface-level and exploratory. A semi-structured interview process was used to adapt the protocol as needed to explore themes that emerged mid-interview. However, several themes emerged in this study that were not present in previous literature due to this limitation.

Another limitation of this study is that participant recruitment, selection, and interviews occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education institutions were not immune to the effects of the pandemic. Many institutions in the United States shut down in early March 2020 and either remained closed for the fall 2020 semester or opened partially for a hybrid model with some faculty, staff, and students reporting to campus and others working virtually. Participants were interviewed in September 2020, and all 15 mentioned the effects of COVID on their jobs. One participant indicated that they had minimal on-campus experiences at their current institution because they had been hired only a month prior to the start of the pandemic. COVID-19 also had an interesting effect on participants’ self-confidence, with several of them noting that the new online web-conferencing culture of student affairs impacted how they viewed
themselves. More specifically, participants noted that when using web-conferencing software, they focused more on their appearance and how they felt others perceived them. This phenomenon would likely not have been a salient subtheme if COVID-19 had not occurred during the interview process for this study.

The final limitation of this study is that there were no senior-level administrators in the participant pool. The majority of the participant pool consisted of coordinators and assistant/associate directors. There were two participants whose titles were at the director level, one of whom self-identified as a senior leader within their department. However, there were no participants identified as part of their university’s senior administrative team. There are a few reasons why this limitation might have been present. First, participants were recruited using the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group. It could be that fewer senior-level administrators are a part of that group, and therefore were systematically and unintentionally excluded. The second possibility is that there are just fewer fat senior-level university administrators overall. Furthermore, it could be some combination of the two. Regardless, this study focused primarily on mid-level administrators, but that was not the intention of the study.

**Future Research**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses and offer policy and practice implications to help make college campuses more inclusive. This study was mostly exploratory; and, the emerged themes prompts several possible future research ideas, including: (a) comparing experiences with various levels of non-discrimination protections, (b) exploring the experiences of fat employees who have left higher education, (c) examining the experiences of fat staff outside of student affairs, and (d) utilizing quantitative research to collect data on a larger scale.
Future research could compare fat employees’ experiences across higher education institutions with varying levels of sizeism non-discrimination policies. These policies might include statewide protections, municipal ordinances, as well as institution-specific policies. For example, Michigan is the only state that offers workplace protections for fat identities. Future research could compare the experiences of fat student affairs professionals working at public higher education institutions in Michigan to those working outside of Michigan at institutions without protections. This study could better explore the impact that sizeism protections have on workplace satisfaction among fat employees.

Second, future research could look at the experiences of former higher education faculty and staff with fat identities. In other words, what factors contributed to fat professionals finding positions outside of higher education? Better understanding why fat employees left the field of higher education could, in ways, be more telling of the policy and practice reforms needed to better support these individuals.

Third, future research needs to expand beyond student affairs and look at university staff more broadly. Studies could explore the experiences of fat employees working in campus facilities, enrollment management, academic affairs, administrative support roles, athletics, and other non-student affairs positions. What are the unique challenges experienced by fat employees across these various staff positions? Policy and practice implications from these studies may vary based on several factors, including required level of educational attainment, physical qualifications listed in job descriptions (e.g., walking, standing, climbing stairs, and the ability to carry items up to a specific weight capacity), and the degree of public-facing interactions.

Fourth, future quantitative studies can examine fat student affairs professionals’ experiences on a larger, nationwide scale. For example, survey data can be collected on hiring
and promotion trends among fat student affairs professionals and compared to trends within the field overall. Additionally, institutional research offices can utilize existing employee satisfaction surveys to ask questions around body-size diversity and fat employees’ experiences across campus. These quantitative studies could better inform campus leaders’ decisions regarding recruitment and retention across all levels of body-size diversity.

**Conclusion**

Weight-based stigma and discrimination have been considered by many to be the last justifiable form of prejudice in our social world (Bowden, 2012; see also Brody, 2017; Fisanick, 2007; Kahan, 2016; Kavic, 2001; Neporent, 2013). Forms of weight bias, prejudice, and discrimination have been well documented in social institutions across the United States, including higher education (Brody, 2017). College campuses are “extensions of society fraught by hierarchies and structures of dominance;” therefore, it is essential to understand how “dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression, often expressed as fatphobia, fat hatred, and fat bullying, are being addressed within spaces and places of teaching and learning” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2). In fact, research has already been conducted on this idea and it is evident that fat faculty and students regularly experience bias, prejudice, and discrimination on college campuses (Cameron, 2015, 2016; Fisanick, 2007; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Stewart, 2018). Moreover, fat studies research within higher education has focused primarily on the experiences of faculty and students. The experiences of staff, and more specifically, student affairs professionals, have been overlooked.

This dissertation explored instances of bias, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by fat student affairs professionals on college campuses through a fat studies and critical theory framework. Second, this dissertation explored policy and practice implications for addressing and
supporting body-size diversity within higher education utilizing a phenomenological approach. This dissertation had four overarching research questions that focused on the following topics: the limitations of physical space on college campuses, perceptions of available resources, stereotypes of fat bodies, and discrimination against fat employees.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer these four research questions. Participants felt that being fat in student affairs led to a variety of mental and physical health consequences, low self-confidence, and self-deprecating thoughts. Participants also expressed feeling unsupported in their roles, both by supervisors and by physical spaces on campus. And finally, participants felt marginalized by weight-related stereotypes that provoke offensive workplace discourse surrounding body size, dieting, and exercise, which leads to the impulse to overcompensate by working longer hours and taking on additional tasks at work in an effort to disprove stereotypes that fat people are intrinsically lazy or unmotivated. The challenges faced by fat student affairs professionals have led to participants’ desire to leave higher education. That, combined with the notion that fat employees are less likely to be hired or promoted, has created a lack of representation of fat bodies within senior-level administrative positions. Given the lack of representation, participants explained that they are often required to practice self-advocacy, or, in other words, educating others about their experiences and fighting for accommodations that the university does not typically offer.

This dissertation outlines several policy and practice implications for colleges and universities wanting to better support weight diversity. Findings include three policy implications: (a) adding sizeism to campus non-discrimination policies, (b) addressing procurement policies for travel and apparel, (c) and addressing human resource policies around promotion and hiring. This dissertation also outlines four practice implications: (a) creating
mechanisms for accommodations and reporting weight-based challenges, (b) adding critical weight scholarship to campus trainings and curriculum, (c) creating fat-inclusive spaces on campus, (d) and adopting HAES tenets for campus health programs. This dissertation adds to the literature the experiences of fat student affairs professionals, as well as the policies and practices that impact their recruitment and retention within the field of higher education.
APPENDIX A. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK MAP

Theoretical Framework

Critical Theory
- Guides purpose, RQs, and Lit Review.
- Purpose (two-fold): (a) Understanding experiences, and (b) Inform practice and policy.
- Frames the discussion.

Fat Studies
- Asks what is the essence of a phenomenon?
- Used to study people’s experiences with a shared lived experience.
- Interpretive analysis.
- Incorporates theoretical lenses and pre-understandings.

Method/Approach

Phenomenology

- Emphasis on a social phenomenon
- Phenomenological Reflection
- Hermeneutic/Interpretative Approach
- What was experienced, and how it was experienced
- Interpreting the essence of a phenomenon

Social Phenomenon
- Reality as a product of Power
- Knowledge is political and value laden
- The researcher’s pre-understandings inform the study
- Transformational/Pragmatic

Activism: individual rights, social justice

Language: challenge obesity discourse

Challenge
- Medicalization: health is not morals
- Focusing on the Individual: lived experiences
# APPENDIX B. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WITH NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES THAT INCLUDE WEIGHT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Schools with non-discrimination policies that include weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indiana State University</strong></td>
<td>Indiana State University does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, age, national origin, sexual orientation, including gender identity or expression, religion, disability, or veteran status. In line with its commitment to equal opportunity, the University will recruit, hire, promote, education, and provide services to persons based upon their individual qualifications meeting established criteria. Examples of prohibited discrimination may include, but are not limited to: Denying raises, benefits, promotions, leadership opportunities or performance evaluations on the basis of a person’s gender, gender identity or gender expression, pregnancy, race, color, national origin or ancestry, disability, sexual orientation, age, religion, veteran status, height, weight or marital status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oakland University (Michigan)</strong></td>
<td>The Board of Trustees approved an Equal Opportunity Policy (&quot;Policy&quot;) that provides that there shall be no unlawful discrimination against any person on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, age, height, weight, disability, color, religion, creed, national origin or ancestry, marital status, familial status, or veteran status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>William &amp; Mary (Virginia)</strong></td>
<td>Unless otherwise constrained by law, William &amp; Mary is committed to providing an environment for its students, employees and others present within the community that is free from discrimination based on any personal factor unrelated to qualifications or performance. Such “irrelevant personal factors” include (without limitation) race or color, citizenship, national origin or ethnicity, ancestry, religion or creed, political affiliation or belief, age, sex or sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, physical or mental disability, marital status, pregnancy status, parental status, height, weight, military service, veteran status, caretaker status, or family medical or genetic information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hope College (Michigan)</strong></td>
<td>Hope College seeks to be a community that affirms the dignity of all persons as bearers of God’s image. It is Hope College policy not to discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, family status, genetic information, height, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, sex, or weight, except in the event of a bona fide occupational qualification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ferris State University (Michigan)</strong></td>
<td>Ferris State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion or creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, marital status, veteran or military status, height, weight, protected disability, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected by applicable State or federal laws or regulations in education, employment, housing, public services, or other University operations, including, but not limited to, admissions, programs, activities, hiring, promotion, discharge, compensation, fringe benefits, job training, classification, referral, or retention. Retaliation against any person making a charge, filing a legitimate complaint, testifying, or participating in any discrimination investigation or proceeding is prohibited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Delta College (Michigan)</strong></td>
<td>Delta prohibits discrimination in accordance with, and as defined by, applicable federal, state, and local law, particularly non-discrimination in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma College (Michigan)</td>
<td>Alma College will not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment, student or applicant for admission on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national or ethnic origin, physical or mental disability, age, height, weight, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, arrest record, genetic information, or any other protected category under applicable local, state or federal laws; including protections for those opposing discrimination or participating in any resolution process on campus or within the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or other human rights agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central Michigan College</td>
<td>It is the policy of North Central to offer admissions, housing, employment, campus activities and financial aid without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, height, weight, marital status or familial status or disability protected by relevant law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>Discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, religion, height, weight or veteran’s status as set forth in and/or the SPG 201.35, Nondiscrimination Policy Notice will not be tolerated at the University of Michigan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>Unlawful acts of discrimination or harassment are prohibited. In addition, the University community holds itself to certain standards of conduct more stringent than those mandated by law. Thus, even if not illegal, acts are prohibited under this policy if they: Discriminate against any University community member(s) through inappropriate limitation of employment opportunity, access to University residential facilities, or participation in education, athletic, social, cultural, or other University activities on the basis of age, color, gender, gender identity, disability status, height, marital status, national origin, political persuasion, race, religion, sexual orientation, veteran status, or weight; or Harass any University community member(s) on the basis of age, color, gender identity, disability status, height, marital status, national origin, political persuasion, race, religion, sexual orientation, veteran status, or weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne State University (Michigan)</td>
<td>This policy embraces all persons regardless of race, color, sex (including gender identity), national origin, religion, age, sexual orientation, familial status, marital status, height, weight, disability, or veteran status, and expressly forbids sexual harassment and discrimination in hiring, terms of employment, tenure, promotion, placement and discharge of employees, admission, training and treatment of students, extra-curricular activities, the use of University services, facilities, and the awarding of contracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Tech</td>
<td>In keeping with its responsibilities as an educational institution, Michigan Technological University is committed to a policy of affording equal opportunity to all of its employees, students, applicants for employment, and applicants for admission without regard to race, religion, color, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, height, weight, genetic information, or marital status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Michigan University</td>
<td>Western Michigan University prohibits discrimination or harassment which violates the law or which constitutes inappropriate or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
unprofessional limitation of employment opportunity, University facility access, or participation in University activities, on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, protected disability, veteran status, height, weight, or marital status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Policy Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point Park University (Pennsylvania)</td>
<td>Point Park University does not discriminate on the basis of: sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, age (40 years and over), ancestry, individuals with disabilities, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, height, weight, genetic information, marital status, caregiver status or familial status, in the administration of any of its educational programs, activities or with respect to employment or admission to the University’s educational programs and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Detroit Mercy (Michigan)</td>
<td>The University of Detroit Mercy is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all persons and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, marital status, sex, disability, religion, height, weight, veteran status or any other trait protected by state or federal law in employment, educational programs and activities, and admissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davenport University (Michigan)</td>
<td>Davenport University maintains a policy of non-discrimination regarding students on the basis of age, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, weight, height, marital status, sexual orientation, veteran status, physical or mental limitations and/or disability in the administration of its admissions policies, educational policies, scholarships and loan programs and other University administered programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern Michigan College</td>
<td>Northwestern Michigan College is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all persons and does not unlawfully discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, disability, genetic information, height, weight, marital status, or veteran status in employment, educational programs and activities and admissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan-Flint</td>
<td>The University of Michigan is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all persons and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, religion, height, weight or veteran status in employment, educational programs and activities, and admissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Michigan University</td>
<td>Northern Michigan University does not unlawfully discriminate on the basis of ancestry, race, color, ethnicity, religion or creed, sex or gender, gender identity*, gender expression, genetic information, national origin, immigration status (unless restricted by State or federal laws and regulations), age, height, weight, marital status, familial status, pregnancy, disability, sexual orientation, military or veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by federal or state law in employment or the provision of services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saginaw Valley State University (Michigan)</td>
<td>Saginaw Valley State University (“University”) is committed to providing work and learning opportunities without regard to age, color, disability, gender identity, genetic information, height, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, veteran status, weight, or on any other basis protected by state, federal, or other applicable law, and to achieving its objectives in compliance with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations that prohibit discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Michigan University</td>
<td>Unlawful acts of discrimination or harassment by members of the campus community are prohibited. In addition, even if not illegal, acts are prohibited if they discriminate against any university community member(s) through inappropriate limitation of access to, or participation in, university programs and activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in, educational, employment, athletic, social, cultural, or other university activities on the basis of age, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, gender identity, genetic information, height, marital status, national origin, political persuasion, pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions, race, religion, sex, sex-based stereotypes, sexual orientation, transgender status, veteran status, or weight.
APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Posted to the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group:

If you identify as a fat student affairs professional, you may qualify to participate in a research study. In particular, we are looking to hear about on-campus experiences related to one’s employment, such as policies, practices, and/or physical environment at colleges and universities within the United States.

Selected participants will take part in a 40-80 minute online or phone interview. Please note: not all qualified individuals will be selected to participate in the study due to time and resource constraints.

If you are interested in learning more about participating in this study, please fill out the following survey:

https://tinyurl.com/FatSAPros

If you have any questions, please do not the researchers below.

Thank you,
Wesley E. Heath, M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate
Louisiana State University
weheath@lsu.edu

Ashley B. Clayton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Louisiana State University
aclayton@lsu.edu
APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Exploring the Experiences of Fat Student Affairs Professionals
Participant Recruitment Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 You are invited to participate in a research study that examines the experiences of fat student affairs professionals. In particular, we are looking to hear about on-campus experiences related to one’s employment such as policies, practices, and/or physical environment. If you qualify for the study and are selected, you will be invited to take part in a 40–80-minute interview with a member of the research team. The interview will take place in a web-based format (e.g., Skype, Zoom), or over the phone. Each interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. Please note: not all qualified individuals will be selected to participate in the study due to time and resource constraints.

Participants will not receive compensation for participating in the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and confidential, and at no point will your name appear in any publication. Participants have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form prior to participation in the study.

Q2 Investigators
The following investigators are available for questions about this study:
Wesley E. Heath, M.A., Louisiana State University, weheath@lsu.edu
Dr. Ashley B. Clayton, Louisiana State University, aclayton@lsu.edu

Q3 Are you interested in participating in this research study?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Page Break
Q4 Are you currently a student affairs professional working at a college or university in the United States?

- Yes
- No
- I recently worked as a student affairs professional at a college or university, but not currently.
- I am a student affairs professional working at a college or university, but not in the United States.

Q5 Do you identify as fat?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Q6 Do you require, at a minimum, big and tall or plus-size clothing?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No
Q7 Please answer the following questions:

- First Name ________________________________________________
- Last Name ________________________________________________

Q8 Are you at least 18 years old?
- Yes
- No

Q9 Please indicate your gender identity (select all that apply):

- Transgender
- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Agender
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe: ____________________________________________
Q10 Please indicate your race and/or ethnicity (select all that apply):

☐ Native American, First Nations, Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black, African American, African Heritage

☐ Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

☐ White

☐ Hispanic, Latino/a/x, Spanish Origin

☐ Prefer not to answer

☐ Other/Prefer to self-identify ________________________________________________

Q11 What is the best email address to reach you?

________________________________________________________________

Q12 What is the best phone number to reach you?

__________________________________________

Page Break
Q13 How often would you say that you have experienced challenges (e.g., limitations, bias, discrimination, or other forms of oppression) related to your body size while employed as a student affairs professional?

- Weekly
- Monthly
- 2-3 times per semester
- Less than one time per semester
- Never

Q14 Indicate below all the titles you have held (or those closest to it) as a student affairs professional at a college or university in the United States:

- Coordinator
- Program Manager
- Assistant/Associate Director
- Director/Department Chair
- Assistant/Associate Dean
- Dean
- Assistant/Associate Vice President/Provost
- Vice President/Provost
- President/Chancellor/Provost
- Other: ________________________________
Q15 Please select all of the options below that best describe your current (or most recent) place of employment?

☐ Community College/Vocational College/Two-year institution

☐ Teaching College/Liberal Arts College/Small Four-year Institution

☐ Regional Research Institution/Research 2 University

☐ Large Institution/Research 1 University

☐ Professional College/University

☐ Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

☐ Tribal College

☐ Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)

☐ Public Institution

☐ Private Institution

☐ Religiously Affiliated

☐ Online Only
Q16 Please select the highest level of education you have completed:

☐ Some college, no degree

☐ Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)

☐ Bachelor’s degree (e.g., BA, BS)

☐ Master’s degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)

☐ Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD, DDS, DVM)

☐ Doctorate (e.g., Ph.D., EdD)

☐ other: ________________________________________________

Q17 Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. If you qualify, a researcher will reach out to schedule an interview with you.

End of Block: Default Question Block
APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT

Exploring the Experiences of Fat Student Affairs Professionals
Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring the Experiences of Fat Student Affairs Professionals

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of fat student affairs professionals on college campuses. In particular, we are looking to hear about on-campus experiences related to one’s employment, such as policies, practices, and/or physical environment at colleges and universities within the United States. If you qualify for the study and are selected, you will be invited to take part in a 40–80-minute interview with a member of the research team. The interview will take place in a web-based format (e.g., Skype, Zoom), or over the phone. Each interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Risks: There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Participants may experience some discomfort in discussing their experiences with body weight/size, but no physical or psychological harm should result from these discussions. Participants are not required to answer any question with which they feel uncomfortable.

Benefits: Participants will not be compensated for participating in the study. However, the results from this study will inform the policies and practices of college and university administrators as they relate to body-size diversity among their employees.

Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study: Wesley E. Heath, Louisiana State University, weheath@lsu.edu; and Dr. Ashley B. Clayton, Louisiana State University, aclayton@lsu.edu.

Performance Sites: Web-based or phone interviews with employees at colleges and universities within the United States.

Number of Subjects: 20

Subject Inclusion: Subjects in this study must 1) identify as fat or larger-bodied, 2) work as a student affairs professional at a college or university within the United States, 3) require, at minimum, big and tall or plus-size clothing, and 4) be 18 years or older. Populations excluded are those who do not identify as fat, have not worked as a student affairs professional at a college or university within the United States, those who do not wear big and tall or plus-size clothing, and those who are minors (under the age of 18).

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/irb.

I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________

The study participant has indicated to me that they are unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

Signature of Reader: ___________________________ Date: ______________
APPENDIX F. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

TO: Heath, Wesley
LSUAM | Diversity | Multicultural Programs

FROM: Alex Cohen
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: 31-Aug-2020

RE: IRBAM-20-0188

TITLE: Exploring the Experiences of Fat Student Affairs Professionals

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application

Review Type: Expedited Review

Risk Factor: Minimal

Review Date: 31-Aug-2020

Status: Approved

Approval Date: 31-Aug-2020

Approval Expiration Date: 30-Aug-2021

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 20

LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*

2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.

3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.

4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.


8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research

Louisiana State University
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

O 225-578-5833
F 225-578-5983
http://www.lsu.edu/research
## APPENDIX G. CODEBOOK

Experiences of Fat Student Affairs Professionals Codebook

This document outlines the various parent codes (identified by numbers) and child codes (identified by letters), as well as code descriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Fatness and Lacking Self-Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Intersectional Identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Self-Identifiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Fat as Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Weight on a Spectrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Everyday Life Support Structures and Coping Mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Planning Ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Overcompensating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Spending Personal Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Long-term Support Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Create Fat-Positive Environment Outside of Work</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss relationships with friends, family, and colleagues and other forms of self-care outside of work that support/empower them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. <strong>Building Relationships with other Fat Student Affairs Professionals</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss building and maintaining friendships and support networks with other fat student affairs professionals on their campus, within affinity groups, and online via the Fat Student Affairs Professional Facebook group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. <strong>Self-Advocacy</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss their ability to advocate for themselves when needed, either by calling out jokes, slurs, or inappropriate dialogue; or by addressing their needs that are not being met, such as appropriately sized chairs, travel needs, matching apparel, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Fatness as Invisible</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe how others (people with thin privilege) fail to realize the challenges that fat people experience, including limitations with language, furniture, and physical space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Issues Around Weight being Ignored</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss how others (people with thin privilege) notice challenges that fat people experience but fail to address them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <strong>Experiences with Professional Attire</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss challenges related to finding, purchasing, and maintaining a professional wardrobe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Limited Sizing for Matching Staff Apparel</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe their experiences with matching departmental/office apparel that everyone is expected to wear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <strong>Feeling Marginalized by Office Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe experiences where colleagues made jokes, slurs, or other comments related to fat bodies that made them feel uncomfortable and/or unwelcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Diet Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe experiences where colleagues discussed dieting openly within the workplace or where they received unsolicited diet advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. <strong>Exercise Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe experiences where colleagues discussed exercise openly within the workplace or where they received unsolicited workout/exercise advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. <strong>Size Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe negative experiences in which colleagues discussed body size or “obesity” openly within the workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. <strong>Weight Loss Challenges</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe their experiences with workplace weight loss challenges that emphasize fat reduction instead of holistic wellness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Feeling Marginalized by Physical Space</td>
<td>Participants discuss experiences in which they felt marginalized, oppressed, or discriminated against by the workplace environment.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Campus Facilities</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss negative experiences with campus facilities, including bathrooms, elevators, and other communal campus spaces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. <strong>Campus Furniture</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss negative experiences related to their office/workspace, including desks, office size, and office chairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. <strong>Challenges Specific to Residential Life</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss challenges with their physical environment as they relate to being student affairs staff within residential life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. <strong>Walking on Campus</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss challenges with campus environments related to walking, parking, and stairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. <strong>Work Travel</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss negative experiences related to conferences and air travel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Feeling Marginalized by Treatment from Others</td>
<td>Participants recall experiences where they were marginalized, oppressed, or discriminated against due to their weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Eating on Campus</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss their experiences eating on campus, as well as eating in front of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. <strong>Negative Experiences with Student Affairs Professionals</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss situations in which they were treated negatively by other student affairs professionals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. <strong>Negative Experiences with Faculty</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss situations in which they were treated negatively by faculty members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. <strong>Experiences with Students</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe both positive and negative experiences with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Existing Resources for Fat Student Affairs Professionals</td>
<td>Participants discuss the resources, or lack of resources, that directly relate to assisting fat student affairs professionals on college campuses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Suggested Resources for Fat Student Affairs Professionals</td>
<td>Participants offer suggestions for possible resources that colleges and universities could offer that would directly benefit fat student affairs professionals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <strong>Accessibility and Accommodations</strong></td>
<td>Participants advocate for resources that would increase accessibility and accommodations, such as a streamlined process for accommodation requests, better campus transportation, inclusive interview practices, revised meeting policies, inclusive office furniture, and additional sizing for matching staff apparel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b. **Affinity Groups**  
Participants advocate for resources related to fat staff affinity groups, advisory committees, and resource centers.

c. **Employee Benefits**  
Participants advocate for resources such as access to campus recreation facilities, seat accommodations within travel policies, and stipends for professional attire.

d. **Sizeism Non-Discrimination Policy**  
Participants advocate for increased awareness of sizeism and instances of weight discrimination, as well as weight discrimination protections within campus non-discrimination policies.

e. **Weight Diversity Programming**  
Participants advocate for the removal of weight loss challenges that emphasize fat reduction as opposed to holistic wellness. Participants may also advocate for inclusive programming within health centers or university recreation centers. May include advocating for the “Health at Every Size” model to be incorporated onto campuses.

f. **Weight Inclusive Marketing**  
Participants advocate inclusive marketing that includes resources that benefit fat student affairs professionals on campus and in the community, as well as more inclusive language in campus communications.

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14. **Stereotypes**  
Participants discuss stereotypes related to fatness.

a. **Friendly/Funny**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as emotional, approachable, and as the comedic relief.

b. **Lacking Intelligence**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as less intelligent or perhaps lacking competence about nutrition or wellness.

c. **Lacking Self-Control**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as lacking self-control; in other words, feeling that fat people are not able to control impulses or desires (may relate to food urges or perhaps the lack of control over the amount of food being consumed).

d. **Lazy**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as lazy, unmotivated, and unwilling to work hard (uninspired work ethic). May also relate to fatness as a choice (choosing to be fat versus working hard/exercising).

e. **Unattractive**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as unattractive, unhygienic, smelly, and sweaty.

f. **Unhealthy**  
Participants describe being stereotyped as unhealthy; in other words, fat people do not care about fitness or cannot be fit/athletic. Can also refer to an overindulgence in food.

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15. **Career Advancement within Student Affairs**  
Participants describe their careers, career goals, and their experiences working within student affairs as a fat-bodied person.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career Aspirations</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss how they see themselves progressing within student affairs. Some discuss leaving the student affairs field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences with Job Interviews</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss their experiences with job interviews for student affairs positions. May include conversations about questions they received, invitations for on-campus interviews, as well as campus tours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences with Job Promotions</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss their experiences with job promotions (or the lack of promotions) within student affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public-Facing Positions</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss public-facing positions within student affairs and their perceptions of who receives those types of positions. In other words, participants discuss people in public-facing positions having thin privilege.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>16. Inclusive Work Environment</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss student affairs as either a supportive field of work within higher education or as a field that is not inclusive of body size diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions with Supervisors</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe experiences with supervisors (positive and negative) and how those experiences affected them.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Representation</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss the representation of body size diversity within student affairs. Many participants discuss how there are fewer fat people in higher-level student affairs positions. Some participants discuss a lack of representation and how that affects them and their ability to advocate for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive Colleagues</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss experiences with supportive student affairs colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17. COVID-19 Experiences</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss experiences related to COVID-19. These experiences often relate to experiences working from home/virtually, and well as their experiences with Zoom video conferencing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18. Health Consequences Associated with Student Affairs</strong></td>
<td>Participants describe health consequences, both mental and physical, related to working within student affairs. These consequences often relate to time-management, work-life balance, mental strain. Some participants discuss their experiences with weight loss surgery while working in student affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19. Mental Health</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss the effects of oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and other forms of prejudice on their mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mistreatment Causing Anger</strong></td>
<td>Participants discuss experiences with being marginalized and how those experiences cause anger, irritation, and frustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Self-Deprecating Thoughts</td>
<td>Participants discuss experiences with marginalization and how those experiences lead to self-deprecation and self-hatred.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Weight and Disability</td>
<td>Participants describe the differences and similarities between weight and disability. This may include conversations related to ADA accessibility standards, as well as disability accommodations on college campuses and the advantages of universal design. Participants also discussed how being fat is not a disability, but the accommodations between the two may be similar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Weight Versus Health</td>
<td>Participants explain the difference between being fat and being healthy. Participants also described medical complications that lead to weight gain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Implicit attitudes can change over the long term. (2019, January 7). Association for Psychological Science.


VITA

Wesley E. Heath (he/him/his) earned his dual Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and Psychology from Manchester University in North Manchester, Indiana in 2014. He received his Master of Arts degree in Sociology from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana in 2016.

Wes joined the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Louisiana State University (LSU) in November 2016 as the Assistant Director for Cross-Cultural Affairs. In this role, Wes focuses on researching, designing, and implementing strategies that encourage members of the campus community to work across social lines, exploring complex notions of diversity, intersectionality, and social justice. Wes serves as the advisor for Asian American, Latinx and Hispanic, LGBTQ+, and Native American student services. Wes also provides oversight to LSU’s MLK Week programming and the LGBTQ+ Project.

Wes was accepted into the LSU Higher Education program within the College of Human Sciences and Education in the fall of 2017. He began coursework for the Doctor of Philosophy degree for Higher Education Administration in January 2018. Wes served as an instructional assistant for Dr. Ashley Clayton’s Finance in Higher Education course in fall 2019.

As a scholar-practitioner in higher education administration, Wes has extensive experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion practices; assessment and evaluation; budgeting and higher education finance; strategic planning; student advising, advocacy and accountability; retention initiatives; programming and event planning; and interdepartmental collaboration.