Identifying Moral Distress Within Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education: Its Sources and Lived Experiences Among Student Conduct Administrators

Christopher T. Haug
Identifying Moral Distress Within Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education:
Its Sources and Lived Experiences Among Student Conduct Administrators

by
Christopher T. Haug

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Learning and Leading

University of Portland
School of Education

2018
Identifying Moral Distress Within Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education: Its Sources and Lived Experiences Among Student Conduct Administrators

by

Christopher T. Haug

This dissertation is completed as a partial requirement for the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree at the University of Portland in Portland, Oregon.

Approved: Redacted

Chairperson Redacted

Committee Member Redacted

If applicable:

Additional Committee Member Date

Additional Committee Member Date

Approved: Redacted

Graduate Program Director Redacted

Dean of the Unit Redacted

Dean of the Graduate School Date

Date

Date

Date
Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. The application of moral distress from the field of nursing and bioethics was utilized as the framework for exploring this research problem. Through a descriptive cross-sectional survey design that utilized convenience sampling among student conduct administrators in the United States, this study incorporated the previously tested Moral Distress Thermometer. The data were analyzed according to the following three aims: (a) to quantify the extent of moral distress among student conduct administrators; (b) to qualitatively report lived-experience sources of moral distress among the participants; and, (c) to qualitatively describe constraining factors that inhibit ethical action among the participants.

The mean moral distress rating reported on the Moral Distress Thermometer was 4.39 (n = 291), which was associated with the verbal anchor of “uncomfortable.” Sources of moral distress for student conduct administrators included: (a) lack of agency or control; (b) compromised student learning; (c) behavior of colleagues; (d) public perceptions, pressures, and politics; and, (e) resource limitations. Internal constraints preventing student conduct administrators from enacting moral action
included: (a) fear of retaliation or job loss; (b) perceived lack of control or power; (c) desire to avoid conflict; and, (d) socialization to follow orders. External constraints preventing student conduct administrators from enacting moral action included: (a) lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership; (b) policies or practices that conflict with student development; (c) unprofessional or manipulative colleagues; (d) constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics; and, (e) oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution.

Results of this study point to several local and national implications for practice. While data in this research suggest that changes could be enacted immediately that may relieve experiences of moral distress for student conduct administrators at the local level, moral distress may be the result of greater systemic issues within higher education and student affairs administration.

*Keywords: moral distress, moral distress thermometer, student conduct, student conduct administrator, student conduct administration, student affairs, student affairs administration, higher education administration.*
Acknowledgments

The support of a community has never been more evident to me as when I embarked upon my doctoral studies and this dissertation. My doctoral program has underscored the importance of good teachers in our lives. Thank you to all of my teachers who have provided me with the academic preparation for me to take on such an endeavor. I’m especially humbled by the extraordinary faculty at the University of Portland who have supported me throughout this program, particularly Dr. John Watzke, Dr. Loretta Krautscheid, and Dr. Eric Anctil who served on my dissertation committee. In addition, Dr. Randy Hetherington, Dr. Jackie Waggoner, Dr. Nicole Ralston, and Dr. Tom Greene who were fierce champions of my research and learning throughout my doctoral program. Dan McGinty, thank you for that one providential summer afternoon drive to Washington that served as the impetus for this entire project—I’m so thankful for your inspiration, colleagueship, and friendship.

I’m grateful for mentors throughout my student affairs career, as they have instilled in me a deep understanding of the power of reflective practice, creativity, and resilience. My colleagues and supervisors at the University of Portland have been extraordinarily supportive of my doctoral journey and this research—thank you.

The priests and brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross have formed me in my professional vocation and have loved my family along the way. I’m honored to now have a Holy Cross education. I’m grateful in a special way to Fr. John Donato,
C.S.C., Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Portland, for his early encouragement of my studies and continued cultivation of my intellectual curiosity.

The doctoral program was a both a commitment and sacrifice for my family. I’m especially grateful to my parents, Tom and Jane, for the gift and sacrifice of a Catholic education and for articulating an expectation that higher education was a nonnegotiable and required step for my future. Thank you, to my children—Joshua, Samuel, Mary, and Elijah—who tolerated my prolonged absences from family-time so that I could attend what they so cleverly dubbed “doctor school” classes. I’m deeply grateful to Debi—an amazing woman, mother, and spouse. Without her unfailing support, encouragement, and fortitude, this project would never have been realized. Half of this doctorate belongs to her!
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. The heart of my community.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii  

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................. v  

Dedication ......................................................................................................................... vii  

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. viii  

List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... xi  

List of Figures .................................................................................................................... xiii  

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study .............................................................................. 1  
  Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................... 5  
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 6  
  Significance ..................................................................................................................... 7  
  Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 9  
  Definitions ..................................................................................................................... 10  
  Summary ........................................................................................................................ 11  

Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................... 13  
  Literature Search Strategy ............................................................................................. 14  
  Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 15  
  Higher Education and Student Conduct Administration .............................................. 20  
  Professional Ethics and Ethical Decision Making Framework .................................... 32
Factors Contributing to Moral Distress ........................................................................... 40
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 51

Chapter 3: Methodology .............................................................................................. 53
Purpose of Study and Research Questions ..................................................................... 53
Rationale for Methodology ............................................................................................. 54
Participants and Context ................................................................................................ 55
Instrumentation .............................................................................................................. 56
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection ................................ 63
Timeline .......................................................................................................................... 65
Role of the Researcher ..................................................................................................... 65
Data Analysis Plan .......................................................................................................... 66
Ethical Procedures .......................................................................................................... 69
Summary .......................................................................................................................... 70

Chapter 4: Results ........................................................................................................... 72
Demographic Information ............................................................................................... 72
Research Question 1a ..................................................................................................... 74
Research Question 1b ..................................................................................................... 75
Research Question 2 ....................................................................................................... 87
Research Question 3 ....................................................................................................... 116
Summary .......................................................................................................................... 128
List of Tables

Table 1: Survey Questions and Response Type .......................................................... 62
Table 2: Data Analysis Plan ...................................................................................... 68
Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Participants ................................................ 73
Table 4: Frequency of Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) Ratings ......................... 75
Table 5: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Institution Type .......................................... 77
Table 6: One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary Table of Mean Moral Distress Rating by Institution Type ................................................................. 78
Table 7: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Position Type ............................................. 80
Table 8: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Years of Service ......................................... 81
Table 9: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Gender ....................................................... 82
Table 10: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Age .......................................................... 83
Table 11: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Ethnicity .................................................. 85
Table 12: Mean Moral Distress Rating by Region ..................................................... 86
Table 13: Workplace Situations Contributing to Moral Distress ............................... 90
Table 14: Sources of Moral Distress by Who is Contributing to the MD .................. 115
Table 15: Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action ................................................................. 118
Table 16: Internal Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action ......................................................... 120
Table 17: External Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action ......................................................... 124
Table 18: Comparison of Internal Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action .............................................. 150

Table 19: Comparison of External Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action .............................................. 153
List of Figures

Figure 1. Model of the Crescendo Effect .................................................................18

Figure 2. Moral Distress Thermometer ................................................................59

Figure 3. Content Analysis Abstraction of Workplace Situations Contributing to Moral Distress ..........................................................................................................................89

Figure 4. Content Analysis Abstraction of Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action ...117
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

With eroding job satisfaction among student affairs administrators attributed to a variety of factors, including work stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, institutions of higher education are at a crucial crossroads to identify the source of these factors in an effort to retain this highly trained and skilled group of student conduct administrators (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Berwick, 1992; Blix & Lee, 1991; Boyer, 1987; Brown, et al., 1986; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, Kicklighter, 1998; LeVant, 1988; Mooney, 1993; Murphy, 2001; Quiles, 1998; Stoves, 2014; Tseng, 2004). The title of a recent study best captured the problem by stating that a “crisis of caring” exists among student conduct administrators in higher education (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016).

Student conduct administrators, the highly-specialized and trained subset of professionals within the field of student affairs administration, maintain a critical role within colleges and universities. Although broadly referred to as student affairs professionals, student conduct administrators are specifically responsible for the administrative functions of the student disciplinary process while concurrently fostering the growth and development of students who come in contact with the student conduct process (Waryold, 2013). The work of student conduct administration historically focused on administering a discipline process that was rooted in integrity and due process with the ultimate aim of promoting student learning (Lancaster &
Waryold, 2008). Changes in higher education related to fiscal constraints, degree completion accountability, new legislative and government compliance, and an increasingly pro-litigation culture, has resulted in student conduct administrators now navigating a professional reality that is focused more heavily on compliance and institutional risk reduction (Lake, 2013). This could potentially leave little room for considering the student learning and formation objectives that ground the work of the student conduct administrator. Each individual student conduct administrator must reconcile the evolving landscape of higher education with the guiding principles of the student conduct administration, which includes autonomy, non-malfeasance, beneficence, justice, and fidelity (ASCA Ethical Principles and Practices in Student Conduct Administration, 2017). They must develop an approach to their work where they are able to balance institutional risk and compliance with the student development aims that underpin the profession. Furthermore, in everyday work, a student conduct administrator must internally negotiate their moral compass within the structures, systems, and hierarchies that make up higher education. It is in this negotiation that a student conduct administrator may be aware of the right action to take, but may be constrained from taking it due to internal or external factors.

When a professional has to make a decision to comply with external factors or appease a variety of stakeholders, they can simultaneously find themselves without the ability to follow their moral compass due to an actual or perceived obligation (Jameton, 1984), which may manifest in a variety of ways or situations in the workplace. For example, it may take the form of the student conduct administrator
having witnessed a colleague mocking a student after the student departs their office, or by having a student disciplinary decision or sanction overturned by their supervisor, or perhaps by having a coach intervene in the student conduct process in an effort to influence a discipline decision that may impact eligibility or playing time. These examples, or others, may cause a conflict within the practitioner where they feel constrained to take the ethically correct path due to internal or external factors.

First proposed by nursing ethicist Andrew Jameton in 1984, moral distress is a phenomenon in which one knows the right action to take but is constrained from taking it (Jameton, 1984). Subsequent research has added significantly to the body of knowledge around Jameton’s foundational work and the collective understanding of moral distress as experienced by nurses. Jameton’s moral distress framework has also been applied to psychologists, social workers, nursing students, medical residents, and hospital chaplains (Austin, Ranel, Kagen, Bergum, & Lemermeyer, 2005; Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hameric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984).

A common theme throughout the literature on moral distress is that internal and external factors play a key role in constraining the professional from engaging in what they believe to be correct moral action; such as institutional constraints, lack of support, power imbalances, or fiscal constraints (McCarthy & Deady, 2008; Sporrong, Höglund, & Arnetz, 2006). Wilkinson (1988) identified frustration, anger, guilt, anxiety, withdrawal, and self-blame as psychological characteristics of the manifestation of moral distress within the practitioner. The research indicates that if moral distress is left unchecked over time it can leave a moral residue, which
ultimately can have a crescendo effect that has been shown to lead to staff burnout, compassion fatigue, and departure from the profession (Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hameric, 2009).

While literature on moral distress in nursing and bioethics is robust (Austin et al., 2005; Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hameric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984; McCarthy & Deady, 2008; Sporrong, Höglund, & Arnetz, 2006; Wilkinson, 1988), research on the topic of moral distress in the field of student conduct administration within higher education is nonexistent. There did not appear to be a direct application of the moral distress theoretical framework to student affairs administration or student conduct administration in the current literature. Research in the student affairs literature has considered job satisfaction among student affairs administrators (Nagle-Bennett, 2010; Tseng, 2002; Lombardi, 2013; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), work stress (Berwick, 1992; Brown et al., 1986; Blix & Lee, 1991; LeVant, 1988), compassion fatigue (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Stoves, 2014), as well as resulting burnout and attrition (Buchanan, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998; Quilles, 1998; Murphy, 2001) among student affairs professionals. As indicated by the Association of Student Conduct Administration ethical principles (2017), an ethos of justice, care, ethical and moral alignment are key foundational elements of the student conduct profession. Several studies have been identified in the literature which considered professional ethics, moral development, and decision making among student affairs professionals (Blimling, 1998; Cuyjet & Duncan, 2013; Dalton, Crosby, Valente, & Eberhardt, 2009; Holzweiss & Walker,
2016; Jackson, 2014; Moeder, 2007; Thomas, 2002; Waller, 2013). However, there is no evidence of research which specifically addressed situations where student affairs professionals felt as if internal or external constraints thwarted their moral choices or actions, as described in the literature on moral distress. It is unknown if the same internal or external constraints that have been found to cause moral distress in nurses also may cause moral distress for student conduct administrators.

An application of the moral distress framework from the nursing literature to the field of student conduct administration may provide an interdisciplinary lens to more fully understand the extent that moral distress exists among student conduct administrators. In addition, exploring the sources of this distress along with why student conduct administrators felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting their moral action may provide insight for senior student affairs administrators. Uncovering the phenomenon of moral distress may assist senior student affairs administrators as they begin to eliminate these constraints within their divisional units so that student conduct administrators can carry out their job functions with minimal moral distress. Therefore, potentially reducing the likelihood of staff burnout, compassion fatigue, or attrition among this highly trained group of administrators, and as result may simultaneously raise the level of student care and mitigate institutional risk.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated
factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals.

**Research Questions**

The research questions explored in this study include:

RQ1a: To what extent does moral distress exist among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education?

RQ1b: Do levels of moral distress differ by demographics (e.g., region, institution type, position type, length of service, gender, ethnicity, and age)?

RQ2: What are sources of moral distress, according to their lived experiences?

RQ3: What are the associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action?

The goal of this research was to identify the presence of moral distress among student conduct administrators and provided insight into the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. The ultimate aim of the research was to identify the internal and external sources of the moral distress. Doing so may assist professionals in minimizing moral distress in order to retain and develop current student conduct administrators in this highly-specialized role within student affairs administration in higher education.

Through a mixed-methods approach, a Qualtrics survey was developed by the researcher. The survey was emailed to the national membership of the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA). In the survey, participants were provided
with an operational definition of moral distress as established by Jameton (1984) along
with examples of what moral distress may look like in everyday life. Participants were
asked to rate their perceived level of moral distress on the Moral Distress
Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) during the most recent academic year (i.e.,
Fall 2016 – Fall 2017). Participants were then asked to provide a narrative example of
a situation where they experienced moral distress in the most recent academic year
that contributed to the moral distress rating they provided on the MDT. Each
participant then was asked to explore the reasons why they felt constrained from
engaging in ethical action or enacting their moral agency through an open-end
narrative response in the survey tool. The survey concluded by collecting demographic
data from each participant, such as region, institution type, position type, length of
service, age, gender, and ethnicity.

The initial Qualtrics survey was distributed in early September 2017, and two
email reminders were sent before the survey closed four weeks later. Measures of
central tendency were used to quantify moral distress among the participants and to
quantify demographic data. The open-ended narrative was analyzed using qualitative
content analysis (Creswell, 2007; Elo & Kyngä, 2008; Schreier, 2012) which
provided themes for the sources of moral distress and associated factors contributing
to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action.

Significance

Researchers have attempted to explore questions around job satisfaction among
student affairs administrators (Nagle-Bennett, 2010; Tseng, 2002; Lombardi, 2013;
Rosser & Javinar, 2003), work stress (Berwick, 1992; Brown et al., 1986; Blix & Lee, 1991; LeVant, 1988), compassion fatigue (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Stoves, 2014), burnout and attrition (Buchanan, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998; Quilles, 1998; Murphy, 2001), in addition to professional ethics, moral development, and decision making among student affairs professionals (Blimling, 1998; Cuyjet & Duncan, 2013; Dalton, Crosby, Valente, & Eberhardt, 2009; Dowd, 2012; Holzweiss & Walker, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Moeder, 2007; Thomas, 2002; Waller, 2013), but no research has offered an explanation for how student conduct administrators may be impacted by the presence of moral distress in their professional lives.

The results of this study will contribute to a burgeoning collection of research on the work of student conduct administrators. In changing economic and legislative times for higher education, the addition of literature on the topic of moral distress will have a professional application through the awareness of power, decision making, and institutional structures which have an impact on student conduct administrators. There is no evidence that any research has been conducted that utilized an application of the moral distress theoretical framework to the field of student affairs or student conduct administration. This study was the first to document moral distress among student conduct administrators in higher education. The application of the moral distress construct to student affairs is innovative, groundbreaking, and may provide new insight as to why burnout, personnel attrition, and compassion fatigue exist in the profession. Specifically, if this study will help identify ways for
minimizing moral residue and the crescendo effect, senior student affairs leadership may be able to retain quality staff over time, positioning their staff to be mentally healthy and present to their students, and reduce the likelihood of staff burnout in the field. An application of moral distress to the field of student conduct administration within student affairs administration will help to offer insight into the lived experiences of the student conduct administrator.

**Conceptual Framework**

The study of moral distress has been explored extensively in the field of nursing and bioethics. First proposed by Jameton (1984), moral distress is described as knowing the ethically correct action to take, but being unable to take that action due to internal and external forces. Commonly accepted in the field of nursing is the definition of moral distress, which is explained as a phenomenon that occurs when one feels otherwise constrained from taking personal action due to internal dynamics or external restrictions (Austin et al., 2005; Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984; Jameton, 1993; Marshall & Epstein, 2016; McCarthy & Deady, 2008; Oh & Gastmans, 2015).

Jameton’s (1984) definition of moral distress and the subsequent literature from bioethics and nursing served as the framework for exploring the research questions as they are applied to student conduct administrators in higher education, allowing the researcher to explore to what extent moral distress exists among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education, how these levels of moral distress may differ by demographics, and what are the sources of this
distress along with factors contributing to constraining ethical action according to the lived experiences of these professionals.

**Definitions**

*Moral distress (initial distress):* Moral distress (MD) is described as knowing the ethically correct action to take, but unable to take that action due to internal and external forces (Jameton, 1984).

*Moral residue (reactive distress):* Reactive distress, otherwise referred to as moral residue, occurs after the situation has concluded and includes the subsequent burden an individual must carry due in part to the experience of moral distress (Webster & Bayliss, 2000).

*Burnout:* Burnout is defined as “the inability to function effectively in a professional role, which may be exhibited by a significant loss of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy along with distinct changes in behavior” (Quiles, 1998, p. 130).

*Compassion fatigue:* The stress or physical exhaustion resulting from intense experiences of caring for others over time (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016).

*Crescendo effect:* The accumulation of moral residue over time due to repeated experiences of moral distress which eventually may lead to compassion fatigue and attrition (Epstein & Hamric, 2009).

*Student Affairs:* Student Affairs is the professional field of higher education administrators who are trained in delivering services and/or developmental support and formation to students enrolled in colleges or universities.
Student Conduct Administration: Student Conduct Administration is the highly specialized professional field of student affairs/higher education administrators who are trained specifically in administering the institution’s student code of conduct discipline process.

Student Conduct Administrator: For the purpose of this study, a Student Conduct Administrator (SCA) is a professional who has responsibility for investigating and adjudicating student discipline in higher education administration.

Summary

Based on the literature, there are potentially devastating impacts on the student conduct administrator, such as compassion fatigue or burnout which could ultimately lead to the departure of these professionals from student affairs. The root indicators of moral distress, as previously established in the nursing literature, may also apply to student conduct administrator, such as perceived powerlessness, self-doubt, institutional constraints, hierarchies within the institution, lack of collegial relationships, or fear of litigation. The field of student affairs is at a crucial crossroads to retain this critical group of highly trained and skilled professionals. This study has potential to provide new insight into this administrative leadership problem and may offer significant contributions to the field of student affairs administration.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The concept of moral distress and the purpose of the study is introduced in Chapter 1. A synthesis of literature currently available on moral distress, higher education and student conduct administration, as well as professional ethics, decision making, and factors
contributing to moral distress is presented in Chapter 2. The methodology used in this study is described in Chapter 3. The findings of the study to address the research questions are presented in Chapter 4. A discussion of the findings and proposed recommendations for practice and future research are outlined in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals.

This chapter is presented in four sections and covers the current state of literature around the topic of moral distress and decisions faced by student conduct administrators in higher education. First, a conceptual framework for Jameton’s (1984) moral distress along with recent scholarly additions to the body of research is established. Second, an overview of the history of higher education and student affairs administration is presented along with relevant literature around staff burnout and compassion fatigue experienced by student conduct administrators. Third, professional ethics and decision making of student affairs professionals is presented. Fourth, several of the internal and external factors which may contribute to moral distress are considered, such as power imbalance or institutional constraints including inadequate staffing, hierarchies within the organization, and fear of litigation. Finally, the chapter is summarized as a way to understand the application of moral distress among student conduct administrators.
Literature Search Strategy

The literature search process aimed to identify research surrounding moral distress in the context of student affairs and student conduct administration. The researcher identified subject areas in both nursing and education literature as relevant points of entry for the search process. As a result, four databases were primarily leveraged for this project: (a) Education Source, (b) ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), (c) CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature), and (d) ProQuest Dissertations. The search terms used include the following: moral distress, psychosocial factors, stress, emotions, coping, morals, moral issues, ethics, ethical decision making, emotional response, moral values, student personal services, student affairs administration, student conduct, student conduct administration, student conduct hearing officers, burnout, job stress, attitude, distress, power relations higher education governance, hierarchy, hierarchy in colleges universities, decision making, work stress, and compassion fatigue. Search terms connected more closely to bioethics and nursing were used in the CINAHL database to uncover prior scholarship around the framework of moral distress. Search terms tied to higher education and student affairs were used in the Education Source and ERIC databases to identify prior research involving those topics. Through this process, it was discovered that most relevant student affairs literature exists in the form of dissertation studies and not in the form of peer reviewed journal articles. This is an issue in the field of student affairs, which doesn’t have as rich a tradition of scholarship and publication as other fields. As a result, the review of literature
specifically around student affairs administration references a proportionately higher number of dissertation studies due to this reality.

**Conceptual Framework**

The study of moral distress has been explored extensively in the field of nursing and bioethics. First proposed by Jameton (1984), moral distress is described as knowing the ethically correct action to take, but being unable to take that action due to internal and external forces. A look at external forces is provided in the proceeding sections of this chapter; such as institutional hierarchy, power, power imbalance, or institutional constraints including inadequate staffing, lack of administrative support, incompetent colleagues, hierarchies within the organization, lack of collegial relationships, policies and priorities that conflict with care needs, compromised care due to pressure to reduce costs, or fear of litigation. Internal factors such as a perceived obligation or powerlessness experienced by a professional, lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, lack of assertiveness, self-doubt, or socialization to follow orders were considered as they had been identified in the literature as contributing factors to moral distress. The following section provides a review of the literature on moral distress and offers it as a theoretical framework for analyzing the problem of burnout, compassion fatigue, and attrition among student conduct administrators in higher education.

**Moral distress, moral residue, and the crescendo effect in practice.** Well established in the field of nursing is the definition of moral distress, which is explained as a phenomenon that occurs when one feels otherwise constrained from taking
personal action due to internal dynamics or external restrictions (Austin et al., 2005; Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984; Jameton, 1993; Marshall, & Epstein, 2016; McCarthy, & Deady, 2008; Oh, & Gastmans, 2015). Jameton (1984) identified initial distress and reactive distress as two forms of distress key to the understanding of this phenomenon. Initial distress, otherwise referred to as moral distress, occurs in the moment when a person experiences the distress (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). Reactive distress, otherwise referred to as moral residue, occurs after the situation has concluded and includes the subsequent burden an individual must carry due in part to the experience of moral distress (Webster & Bayliss, 2000).

Jameton’s (1984, 1993) foundational scholarship describes moral distress as both a concrete phenomenon and one that has characteristics which can be observed. These characteristics, or constraints, present in moral distress are either internal or external. The internal constraints can be deeply personal while the external constraints can be a result of the institutional structure (Jameton, 1993). Different from psychological distress, “moral distress is the result of perceived violation of one’s core values and duties, concurrent with a feeling of being constrained from taking ethically appropriate action” (Epstein & Hamric, 2009, p. 331). Based upon empirical research, the following are commonly accepted root causes of moral distress due to internal constraints: lack of assertiveness, lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, lack of personal fortitude or character, perceived obligations, perceived powerlessness by a professional, self-doubt, or a socialization to follow orders
Additionally, empirical research has identified the following as external constraints contributing to moral distress: fear of litigation, hierarchies or bureaucracy within the organization, inadequate department staffing, incompetent colleagues, institutional constraints or demands, interdisciplinary disputes, lack of administrative support, lack of collegial relationships, policies or priorities that conflict with care needs, power imbalance, pressure to reduce costs, or team conflicts (Austin et al., 2005, Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012). Research has shown that these constraints, both internal and external, can have direct implications upon the professional (Epstein & Hamric, 2009).

After a morally distressing situation has passed, the reactive distress, or moral residue remains (Jameton, 1984; Webster & Bayliss, 2000). These lingering feelings can have significant implications for a professional’s ability to move forward from the situation. When the individual is able to move forward, the research suggests it can lead to a loss of moral identity (Webster & Bayliss, 2000). Unlike moral distress, moral residue is more difficult to assess and it has not been studied extensively (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). However, the literature available suggests that moral residue can have lasting and powerful ramifications on the individual (Epstein & Hamric, 2009).

Epstein and Hamric (2009) uncovered the crescendo effect in their research on moral distress and moral residue. Essentially, when a person experiences an increase in moral distress and increase in moral residue during a particularly distressing event or crisis, the two elements build upon each other and ultimately result in a increase of
the distress within the individual (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). This can be especially problematic when it lingers over time and is not addressed. The value in understanding the crescendo effect model (see Figure 1) is that it helps illustrate how moral distress and moral residue are closely connected, even though they are conceptually distinctive (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). Although literature suggests the crescendo effect model has only been applied to nursing, the model has potential application to understanding moral distress in other disciplines.

Figure 1. Model of the crescendo effect (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). Used with permission.

**Measuring moral distress.** Early studies on moral distress utilized qualitative research. Hamric (2012) argued that the benefit of qualitative methods as a means to explore moral distress early on in its development as a research area was that it “gives a sense of the contours of the concept, and locates moral distress in the specific context within which it occurs…it sensitizes us to a more complete and nuanced understanding of moral distress” (p. 46). Subsequent studies over the past three
decades had utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain additional insight into the research area of moral distress.

Quantitative instruments have been developed to measure acute moral distress, such as the Moral Distress Scale (Corley, Elswick, Gorman, & Clor, 2001) and the Moral Distress Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). These instruments have provided researchers the opportunity to study multiple variables in relationship using large samples for the purpose of ultimately understanding intervention techniques that could benefit the field (Hamric, 2012). A limitation of both the Moral Distress Scale (MDS) and the Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) is that to this point, they have generally only been applied to research involving nursing and bioethics. As indicated in the literature, since moral distress is both personal and subjective (Jameton, 1984), instruments that measure moral distress have utility across disciplines.

One particular study explored the presence of moral distress through a multidisciplinary approach. In an effort to explore the moral distress of psychologists, researchers at the University of Alberta utilized an interpretive inquiry method of hermeneutic phenomenology (Austin, Rankel, Kagan, Bergum, and Lemermeyer, 2005). The justification for a qualitative study was to uncover the lived experiences of the psychologists. Researchers uncovered lived experiences that exhibited the characteristics of moral distress as outlined by Jameton (1984). Their study found that psychologists described situations where they felt internal and external forces compromised their integrity. Specifically, the participants in the study cited “institutional and interinstitutional demands, team conflicts, and interdisciplinary
disputes” (Austin et al., 2005, p. 197) as acting against their moral compass. The participants reacted to the moral distress by “silence, taking a stance, acting secretly, sustaining themselves through work with clients, seeking support from colleagues, and exiting” (p. 197). These findings, although from a study among psychologists, may provide insight into the broader application of moral distress as a framework for understanding similar phenomena in higher education and student affairs.

**Conceptual framework needed to analyze the problem.** The seminal work of Andrew Jameton (1984) around establishing moral distress as a phenomenon, along with the groundbreaking work of Epstein and Hamric (2009) and Epstein and Delgado (2010) around moral distress, moral residue, and the crescendo effect, and the innovative interdisciplinary work of Austin et al. (2005) which sought to understand the lived experience around moral distress served as a model for applying moral distress to higher education. This conceptual framework was leveraged to help make meaning of the phenomena in student affairs administration, with the aim of affording insight into the constraints present to student conduct administrators who are often placed in a position requiring a high level of integrity and moral discernment.

**Higher Education and Student Conduct Administration**

Student affairs administrators make up 62% of the academic workforce and are recognized as the largest professional group within higher education (Cepin, 2015). Within this group, student conduct administrators represent a small but important subcategory of this professional group. Glick (2016) explored the professional identity of student conduct administrators and established that the field of student conduct
administration now meets the criteria established in the literature and possess the necessary qualities of a profession. Prior to Glick’s (2016) study, there was no empirical research conducted to affirm that student conduct administrators met the criteria outlined in the literature to be recognized as a profession. This newly established professional identity gives credibility to the profession and serves as the necessary foundation for which new research and exploration can be conducted (Glick, 2016).

Waryold (2013) described student conduct administrators as professionals “charged with responsivity for student discipline on college and university campuses…[they] are dedicated professionals striving to positively affect student behavior while respecting individual rights as defined by the law and the institutions’ mission” (p. 10). Specifically, these professionals are responsible for administering the student code of conduct and the disciplinary process. Their daily work includes meeting with students after a violation of the student code of conduct has occurred. In those meetings, which can be either informal or formal, a decision of responsible or not responsible generally has to be determined. If the student has been found responsible, sanctions will be assigned to the student. These sanctions are generally educational or formative in nature, but could include consequences up to and including suspension or dismissal from the university depending on the violation or the past behavior of the student (Lancaster & Waryold, 2008).

Up until the 1960s in the United States, colleges and universities were generally rooted in the Oxbridge Model, where faculty lived with the students in the
residence halls (Hudson & Swinton, 2013). This provided the opportunity for institutions to have students living and studying in close proximity to faculty, but also created a level of institutional responsibility for managing student care. During that time, this holistic view of education supported *in loco parentis* (i.e., in place of parents) and was fundamental to how student misconduct was addressed by administrators (Hudson & Swinton, 2013).

With the changing incoming student population after World War II, and with student activism and governance on the rise on college campuses, the 1960s marked a significant change with the general societal shift away from *in loco parentis*. The 1961 court case Dixon v. Alabama is seen as an influential event that changed the landscape of student conduct administration and focused special attention on the rights of students (Hudson & Swinton, 2013). Institutions no longer stood in for parents as disciplinarian (Hoekema, 1994). The absence of *in loco parentis* moving forward meant that colleges and universities moved away from articulating a student’s moral and social life (Hoekema, 1994). For many institutions, without the support of a general acceptance on behalf of the student that they are to play the role of the parent, many institutions withdrew from the practice of morality and character formation. Hoekema argues, “this retreat from responsibility…is both unnecessary and unjustified” and “there is a place for colleges and universities in the moral and social as well as intellectual lives of students” (p. 19).

Although to a lesser degree than prior to the 1960s, in recent years there has been a general movement back toward *in loco parentis* due to increasing pressure from
parents to protect their tuition investment and the wellbeing of their child while in college (Hudson & Swinton, 2013; Lake, 2013). As a result, the field of student conduct administration has responded and pivoted as well. However, a tension still exists between due process and student rights and responsibilities and that of meeting the increasing expectations of parents (Lake, 2013). In particular, at private institutions where tuition is much higher, parents sometimes attempt to insert themselves into their student’s discipline process in order to advocate on behalf of their child as a means of protecting their financial investment (Hudson & Swinton, 2013).

Student conduct administrators utilize various models when developing an institutional approach for student discipline that meets the needs and expectations on their campus. Hoekema (1994) provides a model of student discipline with three goals: (a) to prevent harm to students, (b) to prevent an atmosphere that undermines free discussion and learning, and (c) to promote a sense of moral responsibility and community among its students. Hoekema’s three goals are each grounded in a moral foundation and afford an institution the ability to effectively manage the student experience outside of the classroom. Juxtaposition to the legalistic approach to student conduct, Hoekema’s model of student discipline centers from a moral and educational philosophy lens (Dannells, 1997). Hoekema’s model calls for campuses to foster a moral community—one that requires role modeling and dialogue.

As a result of landmark court cases since the 1960s impacting higher education (Dixon v. Alabama, 1961; Esteban v. Central Missouri State College, 1969; Goss v.
Lopez, 1975), many institutions have adopted processes that resemble the judicial system, complete with legalistic terms describing the conduct process (Hudson & Swinton, 2013; Lake 2013). Lancaster and Cooper (1998) indicate “contemporary administration of higher education often reflects a litigious and legalistic society on a collision course with developmental approaches to college and university administration” (p. 95). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Hudson and Swinton (2013) identified that institutions “adopted more legalistic language and processes…and created more confusion and unnecessary bureaucratic red tape for residents trying to resolve disputes with the campus or with each other” (p. 93). Donald Gehring (2001), founder of the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), believed that “professionals should avoid focusing on the legal and procedural necessities, because then it is easy to overlook the learning that can be gained in the process” (p. 466). However, Martin and Janosik (2004) found that legalistic language is still present in approximately 75% of student conduct codes. Although still a prominent aim of many colleges and universities student conduct offices, Fitch and Murray (2001) found that incorporating a student development approach, such as outlined by Hoekema (1994), tends to be more effective in handling misconduct. This is likely due to the competing demands upon the student conduct administrator, such as legal compliance or parent over-involvement. This reality may leave the student conduct administrator on the frontlines of a conflict between competing stakeholders where there may be no clear winner. This workplace reality may leave the SCA fatigued, stressed, or burned-out from the work and decisions they are asked to make on a daily basis.
Job satisfaction, stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and attrition. Several studies have explored job satisfaction, work stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and attrition among student affairs administrators in higher education. As early as 1993, an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that out of all campus jobs examined, student affairs administrators ranked among the highest turnover at 16% (Mooney, 1993). The changing landscape of Title IX and resolving issues around campus sexual assault has also altered the role of the student conduct administrator. A headline from a 2016 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education stated that these administrators “pay a price for navigating a volatile issue” (Wilson, 2016, retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com). Wilson (2016) reported that they “feel pressure from people within their institutions who want to influence a case,” and “making unpopular decisions—even decisions that harm your own institution’s reputation—are a common outcome.” The high level of attrition in student affairs administration has caused several researchers to explore this question. Some of these reasons relate to the nature of the entry-level work, which at a point creates a bottle-neck effect and leads to staff departures (Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998). Other reasons are related to the vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue due to the management of student issues and mental health (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Berwick, 1992; Brown et al., 1986; Cloud, 1991; LaVant, 1988; Stoves, 2014). While other reasons for staff attrition are related to pay and benefits of the profession (Blix & Lee, 1991).

In an effort to summarize prior research on student affairs professionals’ job satisfaction, Tseng (2002) conducted a meta-analysis by calculating population
correlation coefficients. The researcher conducted 43 meta-analyses in this study, 40 of which were on the antecedents of job satisfaction and 3 on the correlates of job satisfaction among student affairs professionals. Of particular significance was the correlation between job satisfaction and role ambiguity and role conflict. Among the recommendations for practice, the study identified that providing staff with ways to navigate stressful or demanding job conditions as a key component in cultivating higher satisfaction among these professionals (Tseng, 2002).

A quantitative study examined job satisfaction among student conduct administrators at four-year public institutions in the United States (Nagle-Bennett, 2010). In addition, the study aimed to identify the intent of these professionals to stay or depart their current position. Through the use of an on-line survey, 38% of the 358 members of the Association of Student Conduct Administration participated in this study. The results indicated that 86.4% of respondents were satisfied to some degree with their job, although this varied by gender in that men were significantly more satisfied than women. In addition, a majority of student conduct administrators surveyed intend to stay in their current role for the coming year and they cited working with students as a key component of job satisfaction in their current role. However, Nagle-Bennett (2010) uncovered that institutional politics were a factor in job dissatisfaction. Due to the quantitative design of the study, it is unclear as to exactly how the respondents experienced politics at play within their institution.

Among mid-level managers in student affairs, Lombardi (2013) considered the relationship of personal characteristics, job characteristics, and fit upon job
satisfaction. Utilizing an explanatory, cross-sectional method, this quantitative study leveraged three instruments for measuring the variables. Through the use of a web-based survey tool, Spector’s Job Satisfaction Survey, Saks’s and Ashforth’s Person-Job fit and Person-Organization fit surveys, along with demographic questions were emailed to a random sample of 2,291 midlevel student affairs professionals from across the United States. After eliminating responses due to established selection criteria, 845 professionals were included in the study, which was an overall response rate of 36.9%. The results of this study demonstrated the significance of fit, along with personal- and job-related characteristics upon job satisfaction. Although participants among this sample reported that they are generally satisfied with their job, they did indicate low levels of satisfaction with the supervision they receive (Lombardi, 2013). Their position within an organizational hierarchy may reflect their dissatisfaction with their supervision experience.

A peer-reviewed national study examined the quality of midlevel student affairs administrators professional and institutional work life (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Specifically, this study aimed to explore the intentions of midlevel student affairs administrators to leave their current position. A structural equation model was utilized to demonstrate how job satisfaction and morale impact the likelihood of a student affairs administrators’ intention to leave their career in student affairs. Responses from 1,166 participants among a sampling of 2,166 student affairs midlevel administrators yielded a 54% response rate. This study found that there was a significant reduction of morale the longer a student affairs administrator worked at an
institution. Respondents reported that they “perceive themselves as less loyal and committed to an institution that is less fair and caring” (p. 822). The results uncovered that these professionals “do not have a sense of common purpose or feel valued as employees…however, due to their years of service to the field of student affairs, they are less likely to leave their position or institution” (p. 822). This study also found that student affairs administrators with higher salaries also had lower morale, but were not as likely to indicate that they would leave their positions. In addition, participants indicated that staff attrition is an issue within their units (Rosser & Javinar, 2003), but due to the quantitative design of this study reasons for the attrition were left unexplored.

In a peer-reviewed quantitative study about burnout and related factors between men and women in student affairs, Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, and Kicklighter (1998) studied 344 full-time student affairs administrators. Among the participants, 159 were men and 185 were women, all of which were sampled in the southern United States. 850 members of the Southern Association for College Student Affairs were invited to participate and the study yielded a 52.9% response rate. After eliminating unusable surveys due to exclusion criteria, the remaining surveys represented 40% of usable data. Respondents were asked to self-report personal and job-related data such as number of hours of sleep per night, weekly exercise, number of staff members supervised, time devoted to specific job functions, along with salary. The survey utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which is a self-reported instrument developed for professionals who work at educational institutions that
includes three subscales that measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The study found that women reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion. In addition, women had lower salaries and fewer colleagues available to help them during the workday than their male counterparts (Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998). The findings of this study support the research around contributing factors in the workplace for burnout and also highlight gender differences among student affairs professionals.

However, in a quantitative study among student affairs professionals at 52 metropolitan universities, women did not experience statistically significant higher levels of burnout than men (Murphy, 2001). The study utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Moos Work Environment Scale to examine this population. Among the 371 student affairs administrators who were invited to participate, 58.22% responded to the survey by mail. Although the results of the study found average levels of burnout among the population, it did uncover that burnout decreased with age and years in the profession for both genders (Murphy, 2001).

A quantitative study among senior student affairs administrators considered work ethic, negative affectivity, demographics, and work environment factors among reasons for burnout (Quiles, 1998). The study aimed to predict burnout of senior student affairs administrators by utilizing a linear structural relations model (i.e., LISREL). The researcher described this model as “a powerful statistical method expected to contribute new insights to the literature about burnout” (p. 8). A sample of 800 senior student affairs administrators from across the United States were invited to
participate in this study by completing a survey by mail. The response rate was 61%,
and the usable data from 478 participants was used in the analysis. The results
indicated that “personal, structural, and environmental factors are important predictors
of burnout symptomatology” (p. 129). In addition, the study concluded that
appropriate management of work-related factors within student affairs was key for
reducing the risk of burnout (Quiles, 1998). While not focused directly on student
conduct administrators, this study does provide insight into the importance of work-
based conditions that could lead to burnout among senior student affairs
administrators.

In a qualitative study, Buchanan (2001) identified factors that contributed to
attrition and turnover of new professionals within the field of student affairs
administration. Through the use of a demographic-questionnaire to screen potential
participants, 5 participants were invited to participate in a one-hour interview which
explored factors which may contribute to attrition. Through the use of a multiple case
methodology, themes emerged from the interviews. Among the findings, this study
identified that salaries, career advancement, and supervision were significant
contributing factors to why new student affairs professionals departed the field
(Buchanan, 2001).

In an effort to understand the nuances around attrition among student affairs
professionals, Stoves (2014) conducted a qualitative study that considered how student
affairs professionals negotiated compassion fatigue in their daily work. Utilizing an
interpretivism methodology, this study consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews of
student affairs administrators in South Texas, USA. The protocol also included visual observations of the participant’s offices and workspaces. Through analysis using grounded theory techniques to perform an inductive analysis, this study uncovered issues involving capacity building among student affairs professionals. Specifically, the results raise questions about how student affairs professionals see their role, how much emotional connection they take on with a particular student’s situation, and how resilient they are overall. The themes identified may provide insight into the lack of resilience protective factors in play for student affairs professionals.

A recent study suggested that there is a crisis of caring among student conduct administrators (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016). This quantitative study explored compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress among 381 student conduct administrators who self-reported data through the use of a web-based survey that utilized Stamm’s Professional Quality of Life Scale (i.e., ProQOL). The results of this study found that professionals experienced average levels of the indicators listed above. There was a statistically significant finding between burnout and Title IX adjudication. There was a positive correlation discovered between burnout and secondary traumatic stress, and a negative correlation discovered between compassion satisfaction and secondary traumatic stress. Due to the quantitative nature of this study, however, the researcher found that questions relating to why professionals experienced compassion fatigue were left unexplored (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016).
Professional Ethics and Ethical Decision Making Framework

The highly-specialized work of the student conduct administrator is rooted in a tradition of ethics and ethical decision making. In addition to ethical codes and standards provided by professional associations and literature published discussing the moral domain and development of student affairs leadership (Blimling, 1998; Cuyjet & Duncan, 2013; Thomas 2002), several studies have been conducted that explored questions surrounding the intersection of personal values and professional ethics (Jackson, 2014; Holzweiss & Walker, 2016) and ethical decision making (Moeder, 2007; Waller 2013).

Professional ethics. The Ethical Principles and Standards of Conduct, published by the Association of Student Conduct Administrators (ASCA) along with the competencies of the student conduct administrator, help to guide the profession by offering both a structure and rules of engagement for all professionals. Specifically, a competency articulating ethics, professional integrity, and decision making is included as a marker that “intentional decisions are grounded in professional integrity and the ethical standards that define the profession” (Baldizan, Lancaster, & Mackin, 2013, p. 34).

In a joint document published by the two leading student affairs professional associations, ACPA College Student Educators International and NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, professional competencies for all student affairs administrators are outlined. In particular, one competency specifically refers to personal and ethical foundations necessary for good practice. The knowledge, skills,
and dispositions called for in the personal and ethical foundations competency include the following as markers of advanced professional dispositions: (a) model adherence to ethical guidelines and mediate disparities, (b) consult with colleagues and students to provide ethical guidance, (c) develop and support an ethical workplace culture, and (d) dialogue with others concerning the ethical statements of professional associations (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The NASPA/ACPA (2015) joint document calls student affairs professionals to “know ethical codes and professional standards, how ethics intersects with legal obligations and cultural influences… [with an] ability to articulate one’s ethical code and protocol for decision making, hold others accountable, and consult with others about ethical practice” (p. 26). These professional competencies expect student affairs professionals to not only be ethical, but also to lead ethically.

**Moral domain and development of student affairs administrators.** An emerging body of literature has been identified which discussed the evolving landscape of moral and ethical issues in student affairs. Thomas (2002) identified ethical values, integrity, and courage as central to student affairs administrative leadership. Courage to do the right thing at the right time can only be accomplished by guiding core values (Thomas, 2002). Blimling (1998) stated “although student affairs administrators might be primarily interested in exploring ways to solve ethical issues concerning sex, drugs, alcohol, academic dishonesty, and violence, the answers are often less important than the ethical standards or core values that guide decision making in our changing professional culture” (p. 65). Blimling (1998) pointed out that “many decisions are a series of compromises” (p. 67). As such, Blimling (1998)
offered three informal decision making theories present among student affairs administrators: (a) peace at all costs, (b) win at all costs, or (c) fight when you can win and retreat when you cannot. Blimling (1998) articulated that moral judgement is a combination of the “capacity to know what is right and the ability to act on what is right” (p. 66). Capacity refers to formation, and is a “function of development, circumstances, experience, and age” (p. 66). Blimling (1998) identifies moral behavior, that is acting on what is right, as central to administrative decisions.

As an important component of moral decision making, Cuyjet and Duncan (2013) argued that cultural awareness and cultural competence are key to enhancing the moral and ethical decision-making abilities of student affairs administrators. They stated, “culturally aware and competent practitioners can serve as role models, mentors, and guides to similar cultural and moral development among the students they serve” (p. 308).

Decision making. Within an organization, regardless of the particular hierarchical or bureaucratic structures in place, decisions have to be made by administrative staff each day. The structures in place often determine how those decisions are made and the degree of autonomy provided to a staff member when making a decision. Making rational decisions that create outcomes that are both sound and maximize the values held by the individual provide an essential basis for decision making (Birnbaum, 1988; Manning 2013; Simon, 1955, 1979).

Simon (1955, 1979) outlined seven steps in decision making: (a) identity the problem, (b) gather information, (c) analyze the situation, (d) develop options, (e)
evaluate the alternatives, (f) select an alternative, and (g) act on the decision. This model may resonate with decision makers, as it has been found that in practice many administrators have reported they often retrospectively construct these steps for decisions that may have actually been achieved arbitrarily (Manning, 2013).

The university administrator lives in a dual tension as both a linear rational decision maker as well as a nonlinear sense maker (Birnbaum, 1988). As a rational decision maker, they give attention to analyzing data, consider costs-benefit ratios, and ensure accountability. On the other hand, as a nonlinear sense maker, they live in a subjective world of interpretation where they spend their time negotiating and framing their role to stakeholders though dynamic communication and leveraging interpersonal relationships (Birnbaum, 1988). It can be in both these instances that a university administrator can experience conflict with groups of people or stakeholders who do not agree with the decision or cannot make sense out of the decision-making process that was utilized.

**Moral action and ethics in decision making.** Kohlberg and Candee (1984) identified four sequential steps in helping to explain how a person moves from moral judgement to moral action. The first step involves the understanding and commitment of a principle based on a moral stage. The second step involves a decision making based on a judgement of what is *right*. The third step includes some sort of action or follow-through based on judgement of responsibility. The fourth and final step involves action based on the intelligence or ego of the decision-maker.
Student affairs professionals are in a unique position to encounter ethical situations in daily work due to their place within the hierarchy of the institution and also due to their privileged place with such direct contact with students and managing student issues. Dalton, Crosby, Valente, and Eberhardt (2009) stated, “the goal of ethics is to enable an individual to act on the basis of moral reflection and commitment” (p. 183). To serve as a guide for professionals, Dalton, et al. (2009) outlined five domains of ethical responsibility that student affairs administrations may encounter are as follows: (a) student welfare, (b) the institution, (c) the profession, (d) the community, and (e) personal conscience. Their model indicated that each of these domains represented both duty and responsibility the student affairs administrator must fulfill as part of their ethical obligations to the student affairs profession (Dalton, et al., 2009). At the heart of student affairs administration is the holistic welfare of students and this moral focus underpins the profession (Bryan, Winston, & Miller, 1991; Dalton, et al., 2009; Hoekema, 1994; Gehring, 2001; Whitt, 1997).

According to Dalton, et al. (2009), student affairs administrators developed and maintained a personal moral compass that utilizes “established ethical benchmarks and decision making criteria to point the way to one’s moral responsibility in specific situations” (p. 184). The ability of an administrator to solve ethical problems through both a normative and contextual approach is referred to as a “multi-lens perspective” (p. 180). As Dalton, et al. (2009) established, this multi-lens perspective to ethics consists of the following four components: (a) “identifying and understanding the nature of the ethical conflict with which one is presented, (b) examining the
appropriate domain(s) or ethical responsibility that are entailed, (c) applying appropriate ethical principles to the moral conflict, and (d) deciding and acting on the basis of one’s ethical conclusions” (p. 184). Following a well calibrated moral compass is essential for a student affairs administrator when making ethical decisions due to the high expectations stakeholders have for a student conduct process that is rooted in integrity. Dalton et al. (2009) stated, “being an ethical professional makes it possible to take unpopular stands when taking the easy way is so inviting…[and] gives one an enduring place to stand in the midst of constant change” (p. 185).

A quantitative study which explored fit between student conduct administrators’ personal values and professional codes of ethics sought to bridge the research gap between these two areas in the profession (Jackson, 2014). Utilizing the Character Values Scale, participants completed a web-based survey. ASCA members were invited to participate in this study through a series of email invitations. Among the 2,800 professionals contacted, 647 responded which is a 23% response rate. The five most identified character values were: honest (73.8%), open-minded (66.8%), respectful (63.2%), fair (62.7%), and responsible (61.8%). According to this study, participants employed at secular institutions were 1.6 times more likely to experience high levels of fit than those employed at faith-based institutions (Jackson, 2014). Jackson (2014) also pointed out that this finding is in direct contradiction to previous research among professionals at faith-based institutions.

In a study which explored the moral decision making of university housing and residence life professionals within student affairs administration, Moeder (2012)
examined the relationship between moral decision making among these professionals. The study identified levels of moral decision making among professional who regularly encounter students in relation to student discipline, student leadership, role modeling, and hiring. Utilizing a quantitative method, a survey was developed which incorporated Rest’s Defining Issues Test (i.e., DIT). Approximately 800 full-time housing and residence life professionals from Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were invited to participate in the study. Of the original sample, 139 completed surveys were analyzed. The results indicated a statistically significant finding that the level of moral decision making was most impacted by the age of the respondent.

In a qualitative study, Waller (2013) examined the decision-making practices and moral reasoning of student conduct administrators. Through a purposive sampling technique, the researcher identified 8 student conduct administrators who were full-time professionals with at least 5 years of experience in student conduct and were currently working at large public research institutions, representing a balance in gender. Participants were first asked to complete a web-based instrument that incorporated the Moral Justification Survey, followed by in an interview. The results indicated that student conduct administrators utilized both justice and care in their professional work, but to varying degrees based on the situation or circumstances. For example, through the lens of justice, student conduct administrators identified *groundwork, procedures, and verification* as elements of the work of justice. When considering the lens of care, student conduct administrators identified *response,*
consequences, and help as elements of the work of care. Of particular significance was that student conduct administrators more often identify the work of justice during the finding phase of the student conduct process when they must identify possible policy violations (Waller, 2013). Student conduct administrators primarily saw the work of care during the sanctioning phase of the student conduct process when they must determine an appropriate outcome for the alleged policy violation (Waller, 2013).

In a peer-reviewed descriptive qualitative study, Holzweiss and Walker (2016) explored ethical dilemmas faced by new professionals in higher education administration. A random sample of 1,500 NASPA members were invited to participate in this study. Among them, 227 responded which was an 18% response rate. Utilizing a rigorous constant comparative method, the researchers were able to identify themes in the qualitative responses. The following top five dilemma types emerged: justice (25%), beneficence (14%), fidelity (14%), autonomy (11%), and nonmaleficence (11%). These five dilemma types align with previous research on the subject. However, self-management (9%) emerged as a new dilemma type (Holzweiss & Walker, 2016), which may provide insight into the internal factors contributing to moral distress.

A national study explored the ethical dilemmas faced by student conduct administrators (Dowd, 2012). The mixed-methods study provided a web-based survey to 1,595 professionals within ASCA membership, at a 24.38% response rate. The instrument incorporated open-ended questions and a Likert-scale based on Kitchener’s model of resolving ethical dilemmas. 63.6% of respondents indicated that they are
influenced by their professional code of ethics. While 48.5% of respondents indicated that legal concerns heavily influence them when making decisions in their daily work. Institutional mission strongly impacted 41.5% of the participants in this study. Of the respondents, those working at smaller institutions were significantly more likely to be frequently influenced by institutional mission (Dowd, 2012).

Ethical decision making abilities and a strong moral compass are key attributes for student conduct administrators who are charged with making decisions within the hierarchy and bureaucracy of a college or university when power dynamics are at play at each level of the organization. The ethical and moral context of the institution plays an important role in how administrative staff feel empowered to make decisions within their positional jurisdiction yet also within the supervisor responsibility of those in superior roles within the hierarchy.

**Factors Contributing to Moral Distress**

The literature suggested that the factors contributing to moral distress can be categorized as internal and external. This section considered each of these categories and explored the variety and scope of what may contribute to moral distress for a practitioner. Based on empirical research, the following were commonly accepted root causes of moral distress due to internal constraints: (a) lack of assertiveness, (b) lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, (c) lack of personal fortitude or character, (d) perceived obligations, (e) perceived powerlessness by a professional, (f) self-doubt, or (g) a socialization to follow orders (Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012). While the following as reasons were established in the literature for why
individuals felt constrained from engaging their moral action: (a) fear of litigation, (b) hierarchies or bureaucracy within the organization, (c) inadequate department staffing, (d) incompetent colleagues, (e) institutional constraints or demands, (f) interdisciplinary disputes, (g) lack of administrative support, (h) lack of collegial relationships, (i) policies or priorities that conflict with care needs, (j) power imbalance, (k) pressure to reduce costs, or (l) team conflicts (Austin et al., 2005; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012). Among the external factors outlined, power and power relations serve as a common lens through which to consider how they uniquely contribute to moral distress. As such, the following section explores power, organizational hierarchy and bureaucracy, and decision making within higher education.

Colleges and universities, like other large organizations, are often structured with a hierarchy that affords the institution the ability to function at a broad and deep level (Birnbaum 1988; Mann, 2008). The aim of this organizational hierarchy was to operate at an efficient level while maintaining power and control mechanisms necessary for the mission to be delivered (Akella, 2003; Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Mann, 2008; Parker, 2009). Although necessary for institutional functioning for a variety of reasons, hierarchy can have unintended consequences for an organization at any level, including the use and misuse of power and power relations (Mann, 2008; Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012).
Which, in turn, may create a professional reality for the student conduct administrator that may result in the occurrence of moral distress.

Acknowledging the presence of power in any group is acknowledging that human beings organize themselves in a way to provide structure and order (French & Raven, 1959; Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). The need for structure and order often varies based on the leader and the followers, the needs of the group, and the intended outcome the leader or group seeks (Birnbaum 1988; Thompson, 1967). Exploring the hierarchy present within institutions of higher education allows one the ability to consider the power relations at play between groups of administrators, each with authority over elements of the organization yet few with powers that extend over all the organization. Ultimately, the hierarchy and power relations at play may have an impact, either intended or unintended, on the decision-making process (Mann, 2008).

**Power.** Power has been described as, “the ability to produce intended change in others, to influence them so that they will be more likely to act in accordance with one’s own preferences” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 12). In an organization, researchers argue that power is necessary for the effective management of staff and departments (Birnbaum, 1988; Forsyth, 2014; Mann, 2008). In their seminal work, French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of power which include: (a) reward, (b) coercive, (c) legitimate, (d) referent, and (e) expert. After continued research on influence, Raven (1965) added informational power as a sixth type of power. Reward power is the ability of one person to have control over job assignments, pay level, and promotions. Coercive power is the ability to issue reprimands, warnings, or...
termination of employment. Legitimate power occurs when one individual represents the group and their role is sanctioned by the group. Referent power exists when someone is admired or respected by others and has influence over others who identify with them. Expert power is when one person is thought to have superior skills or abilities and can provide solutions to problems or provide advice to others. Informational power is the influence of a leader through the use of rational requests and evidence-based arguments. Through the culmination of their research, French and Raven (1959, 1965, 1992, 1993, 1998) have recognized that power is relational and that these six forms of power outlined above are based on control over resources and punishments. Specifically, the control is rooted in inequalities between members in the group (French & Raven, 1959).

While each of the bases of power outlined by French and Raven (1959) have positive attributes for how leaders are able to get things accomplished in their organization, power has negative effects (Forsyth, 2014). Among the negative effects of power includes how a leader may compromise their ethics in their role. Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) found that power can sometimes cause individuals to treat others unfairly. In their study, they found that the context of the situation and the source of the power to the power-holder, specifically when a leader felt powerful, was an indicator as to how a leader may misuse their power (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). Specifically, left unchecked, a leader with power may treat others unfairly if they are more focused on their self, rather than focused on the good of their followers or the group. Their power, by extension, could then influence the decisions of other
group members (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). Therefore, while some power is
granted structurally or through policy, arguably the power that has the greatest impact
is that granted to the power-user by those over whom the power is being imposed,
either knowingly or not.

Foucault (2003) conducted research around ethics and found that individuals
have the capacity to see how their individual acts have an impact on others. In
addition, it was discovered that a person can see one’s self as a moral subject and, as a
result, how they conduct themselves to obey a set of prescriptions is described as
‘technologies of the self’ or in other words, the ability to engage in self-examination
(Foucault, 1988, 2003; O’Leary, 2002). This ability to self-examine or to possess the
ability to confess one’s transgressions may be key to the ability for leaders to possess
empathy among those they lead. In addition, it can be essential to engage in self-care
in their position, therefore reducing the likelihood of misuse of power (Foucault, 1988,
2003; O’Leary, 2002).

**Categories of power.** Pimentel Bótas & Huisman (2012) argued that power
cannot exist on its own and that freedom is a critical component of power. In his
research on power in higher education governance structures, Pimentel Bótas (2000)
identified four categories of power: (a) consent, (b) domination, (c) compliance, and
(d) resistance. When considering how consent is provided by a party or attained by a
leader, Pimentel Bótas and Huisman (2012) state that “consent requires previous
approval and responsibility for the decision from the party which is consenting” (p.
374). Unlike domination, where the possibility of resistance does not exist, there is a
choice or a freedom when consent exists (Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012). In higher education, the threat of a loss of funding or the redistribution of resources within the institution are examples of leaders using dominance as a category of power (Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012). Burbules (1986) established that compliance involves negotiation. Pimentel Bótas (2000) believed that a power relationship involved a combination of “economic, political, or social incentives” (p. 375). Resistance, when considered as a category of power, has the ability to make those subjected to the power see the power as seductive and exciting (Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012) and therefore creating a situation where a desire would develop to attain that same power and control over a person or situation. In large organizations like higher education, resistance of this nature is typical when career advancement, rather than security, is the ultimate goal of either or both participants in context. The four categories outlined above are not only a way for a leader to assert control, but they also serve as a way for a leader to prevent conflict in the first place (Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012). Therefore, power relations involve active decision making as well as non-decision making (Pimentel Bótas, 2000).

**Power relations.** Power relations, as defined by Pimentel Bótas and Huisman (2012) are associated with “control, direction, prevention and domination, as well as associated with the production and creation of power” (p. 375). Pimentel Bótas’ (2000) research outlines five mechanisms of power relations: (a) authority, (b) influence and/or manipulation, (c) bargaining and/or negotiation, (d) surveillance and/or supervision, and (e) coercion. In the context of power relations, these
mechanisms do not stand independently of each other, but rather complement each other in a web-like system that provides the power-holder to maintain influence and control over a decision or situation (Pimentel Bótas, 2000). By their design as organizations that are concerned with the creation of knowledge through research and assessment, Mann (2008) asserts, institutions of higher education are inherently structures that rely on relations of power in order to accomplish such aims. In a framework developed by Mann (2008), context played an essential role in determining how power operates within an institution of higher education. Context referred to the mutual expectation, responsibility, and accountability and how one interprets these identities and obligations (Mann, 2008). Specifically, in student affairs administration, middle managers who had significant responsibility but lacked final authority around issues such as budgetary decisions or strategic planning felt powerless (Mills, 2009). The context of that reality, situated in student affairs, has real and direct implications, such as staff morale or the ability for middle managers to pivot the delivery of services or learning opportunities for students, since they may not always feel an integral part of the decision-making process (Mills, 2009).

Acknowledging the presence of power in higher education institutions, along with the bases of power (French & Raven, 1959), the categories of that power (Pimentel Bótas, 2000), and the power relations at play in organizations (Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012), allowed for the consideration of the interplay of power within the institutional hierarchy and the subsequent impact on how decisions are made. Love and Estanek (2004) found that student affairs professionals frequently
view the use of power as distasteful. However, Stringer (2009) argues that mindset is limiting and the presence and use of power should be acknowledged and leveraged effectively to promote the goals of an organization when necessary.

**Organizational hierarchy and bureaucracy.** Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) argue that despite changes in society toward leaner organizations that are flatter, hierarchical orders are still present, and as a result their research investigates relationships between formal and informal hierarchy in organizations. Thompson (1967) outlined three levels of organizational control: technical, managerial, and institutional. From those three levels, Birnbaum (1988) described that in higher education, the technical level involves the delivery of services directly by the faculty, such as teaching and research. The institutional level is made up of the regents or board members, along with the institution’s president or chancellor (Birnbaum, 1988). The managerial level is comprised of all administrators and staff charged with carrying out the daily functions of the university (Birnbaum, 1988). Birnbaum (1988) identified an important friction that exists between the technical level and the institutional level in this model—that of the competing demands from a variety of key stakeholders that the managerial level must navigate. Oftentimes this friction can present itself in the form of competition for limited fiscal resources, fluctuations in student enrollment (Birnbaum, 1998), or even in administrative decisions related to student conduct that could have far reaching implications in the classroom or outside the university from a public relations perspective.
Forsyth (2014) acknowledged that organizing humans into status groups is not perfect and groups can quickly fail or experience dysfunction as a result of a misuse of power or misalignment of the individual needs of particular members. Although a perceived benefit of organizational hierarchy allowed for the functioning of an organization while maintaining power and control mechanisms (Akella, 2003; Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010; Clegg et al., 2006; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Mann, 2008; Parker, 2009), hierarchy presents a unique set of limitations (Kishida, Yang, Quartz, Quartz, & Montague, 2012). Kishida et al. (2012), found that a person with low status in a group will sometimes fail to perform to their full potential, thus undercutting their motivation and cognitive functioning. If employees lower on the institutional hierarchy are feeling less motivated and experiencing reduced cognitive functioning, it can have devastating results on the overall health of the organization (Kishida et al., 2012). Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) assert that whenever “formal hierarchy decreases, informal hierarchy increases” (p. 1516).

The multigenerational nature of the workplace has particular implications for institutional operations, and therefore should be considered as well as particular generations may have a general leaning in their leadership style. Mills (2009) outlined that Traditionalists (born between 1925-1945) generally subscribe to a hierarchical leadership style, while the Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964) lean on consensus seeking in their leadership style, and Generation X leaders (born between 1965-1983) prefer a competence-based approach to leadership, and Millennials (born
between 1984-2002) tend to embrace a team approach to leadership where the expectation is that everyone pulls together. The leadership style preferred, or mindset as previously discussed, impact decisions made in hierarchies. There is a growing and evolving body of research on the multigenerational workplace which is important to acknowledge, as it is very fluid and can have largely unforeseeable implications to future changes and growth in an organization.

Baldridge’s (1971) theories of conflict and power underscore the essential elements present in university functioning. Essentially, the interplay of staff within and outside of the university create a unique political landscape which have direct implications for the dynamics within the organization (Baldridge, 1971). This political landscape can take many forms and can have a variety of impact. For instance, media, parents, alumni, are all to a degree external to the university, but their interest in the institution and ability to leverage particular segments of the organization can have loud and substantial consequences.

Manning (2013) addressed structures of colleges and universities through the lens of bureaucratic perspective. She stated, “though many decry the red tape and glacial pace of bureaucracies, it is difficult to imagine administrative operations without this form” (p. 112). Aspects of bureaucracy are present in nearly every institution of higher education and inform how universities function, from decision making to the delivery of services or instruction (Manning, 2013). Max Weber’s work served as the seminal foundation for the study of bureaucracy. Its application to higher education underscore the importance of rational thought and objectivity (Manning,
2013), two values held in high regard in academia. Bureaucracies afford administrative staff the ability to execute responsibilities, but not necessarily the ability to influence the policy (Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Manning, 2013). From a bureaucratic perspective, “higher education organizations contain considerable authority in the executive offices of the president” (Manning, 2013, p. 117) and as a result are organized in a way to promote this authority and maintain this power. Manning (2013) identifies “authority, power, and responsibility as interrelated concepts in organizations” (p. 117). Due to the unique nature of college campus as places that embrace student activism and academic freedom, administrative professional power and authority is often times in tension in traditional bureaucratic structures (Manning, 2013).

**Results of power imbalance.** Although many of the decisions a student conduct administrator will make in a typical day are fairly standard and predictable, they can easily find themselves in the middle of a political fire storm depending on a variety of political factors present in the institution or involving stakeholders (e.g., student athletes and the athletics department, a legacy-student and a key university donor, or a sexual misconduct case and Title IX government compliance related to gender discrimination and access to federally assisted financial aid programs). The role of the student conduct administrator, being situated within the context of the university hierarchy, presents a unique set of power structures. Within these power structures, Thompson (1967) outlined three levels of organizational control: (a) technical, (b) managerial, and (c) institutional. Depending on the institutional
structure, the student conduct administrator is situated at either the technical or managerial level. Either of those levels could present challenges when a particular conduct decision is made that may conflict with the interests of other managerial levels within the organization or may not be the outcome desired by an individual at the institutional level, such as the university president or a board member.

While many universities afford their student conduct administrators the autonomy to hear student discipline cases and make subsequent decisions, so long as they follow the process outlined in the student code of conduct, the literature does suggest that the opportunity does exist, as it does in any organization, for a member of the university community to misuse their power and place pressure upon the student conduct administrator (Lake, 2013).

**Summary**

Where the student conduct administrator is situated within the context of the university structure may have a notable impact on how decisions are made, what power is negotiated in the process, and the degree of freedom to which the decision-maker is permitted to exercise upon the decision. In an ideal structure, a student conduct administrator has the ability to make decisions without the influence of external forces or unbalanced power relations. However, that may not be the case within all organizations and with all decisions. Oftentimes, decisions can be heavily influenced by other factors outside the control of the student conduct administrator (Lake, 2013).
Although several studies in student affairs literature have been conducted involving job satisfaction among student affairs administrators (Nagle-Bennett, 2010; Tseng, 2002; Lombardi, 2013; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), work stress (Berwick, 1992; Brown et al., 1986; Blix & Lee, 1991; LeVant, 1988), compassion fatigue (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Stoves, 2014), as well as resulting burnout and attrition (Buchanan, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998; Quilles, 1998; Murphy, 2001) there is no evidence that it has ever been studied through the lens of moral distress, moral residue, and the crescendo effect. While these studies set out to answer the questions they had proposed, collectively a gap still exists to explain the phenomenon of moral distress. Although this is a gap in the student affairs field, the application of empirical research from nursing and bioethics may provide new insight for future research in student affairs administration. Furthermore, the existing literature on the topic of job satisfaction leaves unanswered questions as to the root sources of job dissatisfaction, especially how it may be related to misalignment with one’s moral compass.

The following chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology used to examine moral distress among student conduct administrators in higher education.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used in this mixed-methods research study. The purpose of the study, research questions, instrumentation, participation, data collection and analysis are outlined to demonstrate the quantitative and qualitative methods that were employed in this study. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The goal of this research was to identify the presence of moral distress among student conduct administrators and to provide insight into the sources of this distress. The ultimate aim of this study was to uncover these sources of distress so that senior student affairs leaders can work toward eliminating these sources in order to retain and develop current student conduct administrators in this highly-specialized role within student affairs administration in higher education. The research questions explored in this study include:

RQ1a: To what extent does moral distress exist among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education?
RQ1b: Do levels of moral distress differ by demographics (e.g., region, institution
type, position type, length of service, gender, ethnicity, and age)?

RQ2: What are sources of moral distress according to their lived experiences?

RQ3: What are the associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained
from engaging in ethical action?

Rationale for Methodology

A mixed-methods descriptive approach was selected to answer the research
questions in this study. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design allowed for the
measurement of moral distress disaggregated by demographics, as well as the ability
to identify reasons student conduct administrators do not take action during distressing
situations in the workplace along with the associated factors contributing to why
practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action. The quantitative survey
items allowed the researcher to collect demographic data and run an analysis of
descriptive statistics including a comparison of means across demographics, as well as
measures of central tendency based on the rating participants gave on the Moral
Distress Thermometer (MDT). The open-ended items allowed for the collection of
qualitative data on the sources and lived experiences of the student conduct
administrator. Specifically, the open-ended survey items collected examples of moral
distress in their work along with reasons they felt constrained from engaging in ethical
action.

Previous nursing studies utilized this methodological approach when exploring
moral distress (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007) and it was determined by the researcher to be an
appropriate method to explore the phenomena of moral distress among student conduct administrators. A particular benefit of this approach is that the use of descriptive inductive and deductive content analysis allowed for the creation of “replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to new action” (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 108). When no previous studies exist addressing a phenomenon, Elo & Kyngäs (2007) conclude that qualitative inductive content analysis is to be used to analyze the data. A review of the literature on moral distress among student conduct administrators indicated that no previous studies exist, therefore inductive content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data in this study.

This study provided insight into both how much moral distress was experienced by this group of professionals, as well as why they experienced moral distress. Use of the MDT as an acute screening tool allowed for the analysis of how much moral distress a student conduct administrator experienced in their professional work, while the open-ended survey items provided insight into the sources of moral distress.

**Participants and Context**

Student conduct administrators were invited to participate in this research study through a convenience sampling strategy. Access to participants was obtained through the Association of Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) Research Committee (Appendix G). ASCA serves as the premier professional association for
student conduct administrators with a membership of over 2,500 professionals (J. Waller, Personal Communication, March 18, 2017). Access to the ASCA membership afforded the researcher ease of access to every student conduct administrator who is a member of ASCA. The survey was emailed to the entire ASCA membership in an effort to capture the largest sample available which afforded disaggregation by demographics during data analysis. This kept the sample selection method simple based on whoever volunteered to study. However, a disadvantage of this sampling strategy was that the results of the study were more difficult to generalize (Mills & Gay, 2015) since participants could have a variety of motives for participation and all data collected was self-reported by respondents.

**Instrumentation**

A survey (Appendix B) was developed by the researcher for this study that collected demographic information of the participants and incorporated the previously tested and validated Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) as well as open-ended questions which provided an opportunity for each respondent to recount their lived experiences in relation to the questions.

To assure content validity and trustworthiness, this survey was reviewed by four university faculty with both quantitative and qualitative research experience. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) recommend that obtaining reviews from content experts can strengthen the design of an instrument. Therefore, three student affairs professionals who were not currently serving as student conduct administrators but had working knowledge of the student conduct field were solicited to review the
survey prior to distribution. An added benefit of seeking research approval through ASCA Research Committee was that the chair of the research committee reviewed the protocol, instrument, and survey design during the approval process and provided feedback and suggestions during the review and approval process. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) advised that pilot testing is useful specifically for web-based surveys since it can assist in identifying any technological or content design issues, and “any paradata collected during the pilot can be examined for indications of problems in the questionnaire” (p. 343). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the survey was pilot tested by doctoral students enrolled in a graduate course at the University of Portland. In addition to completing the web-based survey, participants in the pilot study were asked to provide feedback on the usability of the survey, including question protocol, language and phrasing, and design and flow. The data collected during the pilot testing was not used in the data analysis.

Changes were made to the survey based on the review and feedback of the faculty members, content experts, ASCA Research Committee, and the pilot study are outlined. For instance, content expert reviewers provided suggestions for clarifying to participants how to mark their moral distress level in the slide bar beneath the MDT. The ASCA research committee chair, along with a faculty reviewer offered suggestions around demographics. For instance, one change was made to offer an open-ended response to the gender question. Doing so allowed for an inclusive gender question and only required minimal coding and sorting during the analysis of the data.
Upon completion of the quality control and pilot testing procedures, the survey was revised and submitted to Institutional Review Board at the University of Portland for approval (Appendix B). The four-part survey asked student conduct administrators to report the following (see Table 1): (a) if they have experienced moral distress within the last academic term (i.e., Fall 2016 to Fall 2017) and to assign a moral distress rating via the Moral Distress Thermometer, (b) brief written narrative describing a workplace situation that contributed to moral distress along with a follow-up prompt seeking additional on the same topic, (c) brief written narrative outlining their reasons for feeling constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting their moral action along with a follow-up prompt seeking additional on the same topic, and (d) demographic data.

Permission to use the Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) was granted by the author, Lucia Wocial at Indiana University’s Charles Warran Fairbanks Center for Medical Ethics (via personal communication, June 27, 2017). In addition to having been successfully evaluated for convergent and concurrent validity, the MDT has been tested for reliability, credibility, psychometric testing demonstrated “acceptable reliability and support for concurrent validity measures of moral distress in hospital nurses” (Wocial & Weaver, 2013, p. 171). When testing the reliability and validity of the instrument, Wocial and Weaver (2013) concluded “The MDT has great potential as a screening tool for use in research, evaluating the effectiveness of intervention designed to decrease a nurse’s level of MD” (p. 172). The MDT is easy to use and provides an “11-point scale from 0-10 with verbal descriptors to help anchor the
degree in a meaningful way” (p. 169). Zero indicates no moral distress and 10 is associated with the worst possible moral distress (see Figure 2). A limitation of the MDT in this study is that it has not been tested among student conduct administrators. However, in the absence of such an instrument designed specifically for student conduct administrators, the researcher determined the MDT to be an acceptable tool to measure MD among a new population, since it allowed for the “rapid measurement of MD and tracking changes in MD over time” (p. 172). The only minor modification made to the MDT was that the operational definition and examples from practice provided were written specifically for the audience of student conduct administrators.

Figure 2. Moral Distress Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). Used with permission.
The four descriptive open-ended questions in the survey were developed by the researcher to provide participants the opportunity to offer personal narrative for the following elements: (a) description of a workplace situation that contributed to moral distress, and (b) reasons they felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting their moral action. The use of descriptive open-ended questions presented a liability to the survey instrument because “they require respondents to exert a great deal of effort to report their responses” (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p. 131). To address this issue, descriptive open-ended questions were used at a minimum. To explore workplace situations where moral distress may take place, survey question #2 asked participants the following open-ended question: *Please provide a brief description about a workplace example associated with your moral distress rating.* When asking an open-ended question, Dillman, Smyth, & Christian (2014) recommend following up with a question that prompts the respondent to build upon their prior response. To provide respondents an additional opportunity to elaborate on their first narrative response, survey question #3 asked the following open-ended question: *Please provide a brief description about any additional workplace examples associated with your moral distress rating.* To explore the associated factors for why student conduct administrators may feel constrained from engaging their moral or ethical action, survey question #4 asked the following open-ended question: *Please share the reasons why you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.* In an effort to provide respondents with an additional opportunity to build upon their previous response as recommended by Dillman,
Smyth, & Christian (2014), survey question #5 asked the following open-ended question: *Please provide a brief description of any additional reasons you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.*

The survey concluded with the collection of demographic data from each participant. The elements of what was collected included the following: a) ASCA region (East, West, South, Midwest, Canada, International Region); (b) institution type (private 2 year, private 4 year, public 2 year, public 4 year, community college, faith-based institution, other); (c) position type (senior student affairs officer (VP or AVP), director of student conduct, associate/assistant director of student conduct, student conduct coordinator/administrator, hall director, with conduct responsibilities, Title IX coordinator or administrator, graduate student, other); (d) currently serving as a student conduct administrator (yes, no); (e) years of service (0-5, 6-11, 12-20, or 21 or more years); (f) age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 or older), (g) gender (open-ended response), and (h) ethnicity (White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Response Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> In your current role, do you serve as a student conduct administrator? (yes, no)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> Please select the number (0-10) on the Moral Distress Thermometer that best describes how much moral distress you have been experiencing related to work in the past academic year (Fall 2016-Fall 2017), including today (0 = no moral distress, 10 = worst possible moral distress).</td>
<td>Moral Distress Thermometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong> Please provide a brief description about a workplace example associated with your moral distress rating.</td>
<td>Open-ended narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong> Please provide a brief description about any additional workplace examples associated with your moral distress rating.</td>
<td>Open-ended narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong> Please share the reasons why you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.</td>
<td>Open-ended narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong> Please provide a brief description of any additional reasons you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.</td>
<td>Open-ended narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong> Please select your current ASCA member region. (East, West, South, Midwest, Canada, International Region, uncertain)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8</strong> Which category best describes your institution type? (private 2 year, private 4 year, public 2 year, public 4 year, community college, faith-based institution, other)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9</strong> Which title best describes your position? (senior student affairs officer (VP or AVP), director of student conduct, associate/assistant director of student conduct, student conduct coordinator/administrator with conduct responsibilities, Title IX coordinator or administrator, graduate student, other)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10</strong> How many years have you served in the student affairs/student conduct field? (0-5, 6-11, 12-20, or 21 or more years)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong> What is your age? (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 or older)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12</strong> To which gender do you most identify?</td>
<td>Open-ended response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>13</strong> What is your ethnicity? (White, Black or African Amer., Amer. Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other)</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data collection used in this study consisted of a mixed-methods Qualtrics survey developed by the researcher (Appendix B). Data collected by participants completing the survey were stored securely on the University of Portland’s Qualtrics server. After the proposal was approved by the ASCA Research Committee and Institutional Review Board at the University of Portland, the ASCA central office contacted each ASCA member via email on September 1, 2017 with an invitation written by the researcher (Appendix C). A reminder email written by the researcher was emailed to the association membership by the ASCA central office on September 12, 2017 (Appendix D). A final request to participate in the study was written by the researcher and emailed to the association membership by the ASCA central office on September 26, 2017 (Appendix E). All email correspondence to participants included a link to the survey instrument hosted on-line through Qualtrics. The survey closed for all participants on October 1, 2017. There was no follow-up correspondence with participants after completion of the survey.

In an effort to increase motivation to complete the survey among the participants, three techniques were used in this study. The first was to offer examples of where moral distress may exist in their professional life, as informed by the nursing literature. Since participants may not have been previously familiar with the construct of MD, doing so would prime the participant with the intent to keep their interest in the new subject matter high. The second motivation technique employed in this study was providing the opportunity for the participant to view the MDT and indicate what
level of MD they have experienced in the past academic year on the MDT. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) believe that inviting the participant to provide clarifying information is another technique to keep motivation high. Therefore, the third motivation technique used in this study was to provide the participant with the opportunity to explore the reasons they felt constrained from engaging or enacting their moral action in the second open-ended question. Providing an opportunity for each participant to offer descriptive open-ended responses, rather than a predetermined set of closed-ended responses, afforded the researcher the ability to capture their thoughts without limiting their responses (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

In the email correspondence to participants, background information about moral distress was briefly presented along with some potential professional risks inherent in professionals who experience MD. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) recommend that providing participants a motivational explanation has been shown to increase response length, the number of respondents who elaborate on their responses, and the amount of time a participant took in providing their written response. For participants who present as highly committed to the field of student affairs administration, the likelihood may be higher that they may be concerned about the future health of their profession or their health and welfare in the profession. Therefore, inviting them into a study which explores issue of MD may resonate with them and may provide additional intrinsic motivation for participation.
Timeline

The following timeline was established and followed in order to complete this dissertation study:

- Monday, July 31, 2017 – Defend Proposal
- Tuesday, August 1, 2017 – Submit IRB
- Friday, September 1, 2017 – Initial request to participate emailed
- Tuesday, September 12, 2017 – Reminder email sent to participants
- Tuesday, September 26, 2017 – Final request to participate emailed
- Sunday, October 1, 2017 – Survey closed
- October 2017 – Data analyzed
- November 2017 – Report findings and draft Chapter 4
- December 2017 – January 2018 – Draft Chapter 5
- February 1, 2018 – Final draft of dissertation to Committee submitted
- March 2, 2018 – Defend final dissertation

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is a student affairs professional with supervisory responsibility for the student conduct functions at his institution. He has worked as a student conduct administrator in a variety of roles at several institutions, including University of Portland (OR), University of Notre Dame (IN), Winthrop University (SC), and Ball State University (IN). Through regular conference attendance and participation at the state and national level, the researcher is a well-connected and committed colleague in
the field of student conduct administration. The researcher maintains several personal and professional relationships with colleagues within the ASCA membership. Due to the design of this study, there was no way for the researcher to access the identity of specific participants. Only one participant in the ASCA membership is known to be a direct report of the researcher. Their participation in this study does not present any known conflict of interest for the researcher.

In his experience as a student conduct administrator, the researcher believes that moral distress may exist in situations in the workplace. However, in an effort to minimize any biases the researcher may have, the researcher was deliberate about laying aside preconceptions during the data analysis process. Doing so was particularly important during the coding stage of the qualitative content analysis process, as to not inadvertently distort the inductive method.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The data collection used in this study consisted of a Qualtrics survey developed by the researcher (Appendix B). Within the survey, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to address the research questions (see Table 2). Each of the three email invitations to participate in this study were sent to 2,806 members of the Association of Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), with 218 bounces for invalid email addresses. The ASCA central office that sent the email invitations reported, that of the 2,588 valid emails sent, no forwards or spam notices were generated (S. Minnis, Personal Communication, January 3, 2018). In total, 344 people responded to the invitation to participate, which was a 13% response rate. Surveys
were deleted from the study if the participant indicated that they did not serve as a student conduct administrator as indicated in survey question #1 (n = 28). In addition, surveys were deleted from the study if they did not provide a numerical rating on the Moral Distress Thermometer (n = 25). Ultimately, 291 valid responses were collected and the results of the analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

The quantitative data collected were analyzed using EZAnalyze, a Microsoft Excel add-in tool for statistical analysis. Measures of central tendency were reported based on the rating participants gave on the Moral Distress Thermometer. Mean values were computed for each demographic category and for the aggregate on the MDT. A comparison of mean scores across demographics was also conducted using a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The demographic categories examined were: (a) institution type, (b) position type, (c) length of service, (d) age, (e) gender, (f) ethnicity, and (g) region.

The qualitative open-ended narrative data were analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis (Creswell, 2007; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Saldana, 2016; Schreier, 2012) which provided themes for the (a) sources of moral distress and (b) associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action. The inductive content analysis process is “represented as three main phases: preparation, organizing, and reporting” (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109), which includes “open coding, creating categories, and abstraction” (p. 109). During the opening coding phase, the researcher read through the narratives and assigned as many headings as necessary to describe the data. The headings were then collected onto
coding sheets in Microsoft Excel and categories were generated. The categories were then clustered under headings, which compacted the number of categories. Following the creation of categories, the researcher began the process of abstraction which named each category using content-characteristic terms. Any similar subcategories were grouped together as categories and this process continued as far as practical so that the essence of the category was not compromised (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Table 2

Data Analysis Plan

| Research Question                                                                 | Data Collected to Answer | Data Analysis Technique(s)                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|******************************************************************|
| RQ1a: To what extent does moral distress exist among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education? | Survey item #1           | Measures of central tendency                                    |
| RQ1b: Do levels of moral distress differ by demographics (e.g., region, institution type, position type, length of service, gender, ethnicity, and age)? | Survey item #1, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 | Mean values, comparison of mean scores across demographics using a ANOVA |
| RQ2: What are sources of moral distress according to their lived experiences?    | Survey items #2, 3       | Qualitative inductive content analysis                         |
| RQ3: What are the associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action? | Survey items #4, 5       | Qualitative inductive content analysis                         |
Ethical Procedures

The research for this study was completed according to high ethical standards. Prior to survey administration, Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Portland reviewed the project and granted permission to conduct this research study on August 7, 2017 (Appendix H). In addition, the ASCA Research Committee required that studies involving access to their professional membership rosters studies must designate that participation in the study is both voluntary and anonymous for all respondents. This research presents minimal risk to participants and obtaining signed consent would be the only document linking the identity of the subjects to the study. Therefore, IRB waived the use of a signed consent form for the study of human subjects. Instead, a written information sheet (adapted and used with permission by author, Dr. Lorretta Krautscheid, personal communication, June 24, 2017) was imbedded at the beginning of the Qualtrics instrument and participants were also provided an opportunity to download the document (Appendix F) prior to beginning the survey. Completion of the survey constituted consent and no personally identifying information was asked of the participants, therefore protecting anonymity. Participants were informed that they could exit the survey and end their participation in this study at any time.

All data collected were protected using password-protected documents, pseudonyms, and numerically assigned codes where appropriate. To reduce researcher bias, the survey instrument was anonymous and did not collect identifying information such as name, e-mail address, or institution name.
In an effort to maintain fidelity during the qualitative inductive content analysis process, the researcher employed a triangulation strategy. Specifically, three researchers were utilized to serve as triangulating analysts. According to Patton (2002), a triangulating analyst is when “two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings” (p. 560). Each of the triangulating analysts provided the researcher with their themes and sub-themes and assisted in the crystallization of the categories of the qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). This strategy contributed to maintaining high ethical standards during the project, as it ensured for trustworthiness.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the purpose and rationale of this mixed-methods study which was designed to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their role as a college or university student conduct administrator and what are the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. Through a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, which utilized convenience sampling, this study was organized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Incorporating the previously tested Moral Distress Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) allowed for a moral distress score among student conduct practitioners to be reported. A plan was also outlined for how the quantitative data were to be analyzed and compared across demographics, while qualitative data were to be coded according to an inductive content analysis method (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Research was performed ethically and
all data were protected throughout the process. The findings and results of the measures for each research question in this study are presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. Specifically, this mixed-methods study had three aims: (a) to quantify the extent of moral distress among student conduct administrators, (b) to qualitatively report lived-experience sources of moral distress among the participants, and (c) to qualitatively describe constraining factors that inhibit ethical action among the participants. The following chapter presents a description of the sample, followed by the results from a data analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey data. The chapter is organized by research question and concludes with a summary of key findings.

Demographic Information

The survey instrument collected demographic information from respondents and the resulting participant demographics are identified in Table 3. Demographic results revealed that study participants primarily worked in public, four-year institutions (38.83%), as department directors (32.65%), and many participants declined to identify years of service (28.18%). The majority of participants were female (27.11%), White (59.11%), and declined to identify their age (28.52%) and their region (28.18%).
Table 3

**Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 291)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 4 year</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>38.83</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>28.18</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>26.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, 4 year</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>23.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>65 or older</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 2 year</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>28.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>32.65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>59.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>28.18</td>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>28.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16.49</td>
<td>Black/African</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (VP,</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.87</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>Amer.Ind./Alaska</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title IX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>28.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>22.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of service</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21.31</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-11 years</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>24.40</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-20 years</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16.49</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+ years</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>28.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>37.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>32.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>29.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender queer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1a

To what extent does moral distress exist among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education?

The survey instrument incorporated the previously tested and validated Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) and asked participants to assign a moral distress rating on an 11-point scale from 0 to 10 with verbal anchors indicating 0 = no moral distress and 10 = worst possible moral distress. Descriptive statistical tests were conducted on the aggregate data. The mean moral distress rating reported was 4.39 (n = 291), which was associated with the verbal anchor of uncomfortable (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). The median moral distress rating was 4.0, the mode was 2.0, and the standard deviation was 2.39 with a range of 10. The frequency of each point on the Moral Distress Thermometer as reported by respondents is presented in Table 4.
Table 4

*Frequency of Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) Ratings (N = 291)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MDT Rating</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 1b**

*Do levels of moral distress differ by demographics (e.g., institution type, position type, years of service, gender, age, ethnicity, and region)?*

Mean scores and standard deviation were calculated, and a one-way analysis of variance was conducted for each demographic category. The Moral Distress Thermometer (MDT) mean scores reported for each demographic category along with the results of each ANOVA statistical test are included in the following section and are supported by tables for those with statistically significant results.
**Institution type.** The demographic category of institution type was separated into six options for participants to select. Eighty-two (28.18%) respondents declined to indicate their institution type. Mean moral distress values for each institution type are presented in Table 5.

The seven respondents that selected public two-year institution (2.41%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 5.14 on the MDT. This was the highest among all institution types and associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing on the MDT. A mean moral distress rating of 4.62 on the MDT, associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing, was reported among the 82 respondents who declined to indicate their institution type (28.18%).

The 113 respondents that selected public four-year (38.83%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.58 on the MDT, the 47 respondents that selected private four-year institution (16.14%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.47 on the MDT, and the four respondents that selected other as their institution type (1.37%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.50 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing.

Nineteen respondents selected faith-based institution (6.53%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.37 on the MDT, and the 19 respondents who selected community college (6.53%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.00 on the MDT, both of which were associated with verbal anchors of mild to uncomfortable distress. No respondents indicated that they were employed at a private two-year institution.
Table 5

Mean Moral Distress Rating by Institution Type (N = 291)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based Institution</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant effect of institution type on moral distress ratings among respondents \(F(6, 284) = 2.16, p < .05\) between three of the groups: community colleges, faith-based institutions, and those who declined to reply. A one-way analysis of variance summary table of mean moral distress rating by institution type is presented in Table 6.

Among participants who selected community colleges, the unadjusted \(p\)-value revealed a statistically significant effect between their group and the following other groups: (a) those who declined to reply to the demographic information \([p = .008]\), (b) private four-year institutions \([p = .025]\), (c) public two-year institutions \([p = .020]\), and (d) public four-year institutions \([p = .005]\). Among participants who work at faith-based institutions, the unadjusted \(p\)-value indicated a statistically significant effect between their group and those who work at public four-year institutions \([p = .034]\).
Among participants who declined to reply to the demographic information, the unadjusted $p$-value revealed a statistically significant effect between their group and those who work at faith-based institutions [$p = .044$].

Table 6

*One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary Table of Mean Moral Distress Rating by Institution Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variance</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>$SS$</th>
<th>$MS$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between-group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>72.63</td>
<td>12.11</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-group</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>1588.71</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>1661.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data were adjusted for a small sample size by using a Bonferroni post-hoc analysis. The Bonferroni test for each of the groups above indicated no statistical significance among the various groups.

**Position type.** The demographic category of position type presented seven options for participants to select within the survey instrument, based on the membership categories designated by the Association for Student Conduct Administration. Eighty-two respondents declined to indicate their position type (28.18%). Mean moral distress values for each position type are presented in Table 7.

Three respondents selected Title IX coordinator or administrator (1.03%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 2.33 on the MDT, which was associated with a verbal anchor of mild distress. Twenty respondents selected senior student affairs
officer (6.87%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.80 on the MDT, 12 respondents selected student affairs professional with conduct responsibilities (4.12%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.83 on the MDT, and 30 respondents selected student conduct coordinator/administrator (10.31%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.00 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of mild to uncomfortable distress. Forty-eight respondents selected associate or assistant director of student conduct (16.49%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.17 on the MDT. A mean moral distress rating of 4.68 on the MDT was reported by the 95 respondents who selected director of student conduct, and one respondent indicated graduate student (0.34%) and reported a moral distress rating of 5.00 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing. A mean moral distress rating of 4.62 on the MDT was reported for the 82 respondents who declined to indicate position type (28.18%), which was associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of position type on moral distress ratings among respondents \[F = (7, 283) = 1.08, p > .05\].
Table 7

*Mean Moral Distress Rating by Position Type (N = 291)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of student conduct</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate/assistant director of student conduct</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student conduct coordinator/administrator</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior student affairs officer (VP, AVP)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA professional, with conduct responsibilities</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title IX coordinator or administrator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Years of service.** The demographic category of years of service was delineated into five options for participants to select. Mean moral distress values of each category for years of service are presented in Table 8.

A mean moral distress rating of 4.62 on the MDT was reported for the 82 respondents who declined to indicate years of service in the field (28.18%), 71 respondents selected six to eleven years of service (24.40%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.79 on the MDT, 62 respondents selected zero to five years of service (21.31%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.06 on the MDT, 48 respondents selected 12 to 20 years of service (16.49%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.06 on the MDT, and 28 respondents selected 21 or more years of service (9.62%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.00 on the MDT, all of
which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing moral distress. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of years of service on moral distress ratings among respondents \([F(94, 286) = 1.39, p > .05]\).

Table 8

*Mean Moral Distress Rating by Years of Service \((N = 291)\)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-11 years</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-20 years</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+ years</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gender.** The demographic category of gender provided respondents with the opportunity to submit an open-ended response to which gender they most identify. The responses were then recoded by the researcher to the categories of male, female, and gender queer for data analysis. Eighty-six respondents declined to indicate gender (29.55%) in the survey instrument. Mean moral distress values for each gender category are presented in Table 9.

A mean moral distress rating of 4.50 on the MDT was reported for the 108 responses coded as female (37.11%), and 96 of the responses coded as male (32.99%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.16 on the MDT, both of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing. A mean moral distress
rating of 4.56 on the MDT was reported for the 86 respondents who declined to indicate gender (29.55%), which was associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing. One participant indicated gender queer (0.34%) and reported a moral distress rating of 1.00 on the MDT, which was associated with verbal anchors of none to mild distress. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of gender on moral distress ratings among respondents \( F(3, 287) = 1.19, p > .05 \).

Table 9

*Mean Moral Distress Rating by Gender (N = 291)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender queer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Age.** The demographic category of age was divided into the five categories for participants to select. Eighty-three respondents declined to indicate their age (28.52%). Mean moral distress values for each age category are presented in Table 10.

A mean moral distress rating of 4.58 on the MDT, associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing, was reported for the 83 respondents who declined to indicate their age (28.52%). Seventy-seven respondents selected 35 to 44 years old (26.46%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.57 on the MDT, 67 respondents selected 45 to 54 years old (23.02%) and reported a mean moral distress
rating of 4.42 on the MDT, 43 respondents selected 55 to 64 years old (14.78%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.00 on the MDT, and three respondents selected 25 to 34 years old (1.03%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 5.33 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing.

Eighteen respondents selected 65 years old or older (6.19%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.44 on the MDT, which was associated with verbal anchors of mild to uncomfortable distress. No respondents selected 18 to 24 years old.

A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of age on moral distress ratings among respondents \([F(5, 285) = 1.08, p > .05]\).

Table 10

*Mean Moral Distress Rating by Age (N = 291)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or older</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Ethnicity.** The demographic category of ethnicity was presented as five options for participants to select based on the ASCA association membership categories. Eighty-four respondents declined to indicate their ethnicity (28.87%). Mean moral distress values for each ethnicity category are presented in Table 11.

A mean moral distress rating of 4.29 on the MDT was reported for the 172 respondents who selected White (59.11%) on the MDT, 84 (28.87%) respondents declined to indicate ethnicity and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.60 on the MDT, 24 respondents selected Black or African American (8.25%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.46 on the MDT, and six respondents selected Other (2.06%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 5.33 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing.

Four respondents selected Asian (1.37%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.25 on the MDT, while one respondent selected American Indian or Alaska Native (0.34%) and reported a moral distress rating of 2.00 on the MDT, both of which were associated with verbal anchors of mild to uncomfortable distress. No respondents selected Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander as a demographic category. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of ethnicity on moral distress ratings among respondents [$F(5, 285) = 0.75, p > .05]$. 
### Table 11

**Mean Moral Distress Rating by Ethnicity (N = 291)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Region.** The demographic category of region, based on the Association for Student Conduct Administration membership designations, presented as five options for participants to select. Eighty-two respondents declined to indicate region (28.12%). Mean moral distress values for each region are presented in Table 12.

A mean moral distress rating of 4.62 on the MDT associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing was reported for the 82 respondents who declined to indicate region (28.18%). Sixty-five respondents selected the Midwest region (22.34%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.83 on the MDT, while three respondents selected the Canadian region (1.03%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 3.67 on the MDT, both of which were associated with verbal anchors of mild to uncomfortable distress. Fifty-five respondents that selected the South region (18.9%) reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.76 on the MDT, 48 respondents selected the East region (16.49%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.31 on
the MDT, 37 respondents selected the West region (12.71%) and reported a mean moral distress rating of 4.41 on the MDT, all of which were associated with verbal anchors of uncomfortable to distressing. One respondent selected the International region (0.34%) and reported moral distress rating of 7.00 on the MDT, which was associated with verbal anchors of distressing to intense. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of region on moral distress ratings among respondents \([F(6, 284) = 1.20, p > .05]\).

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral distress rating combined</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to reply</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the demographic survey findings and mean moral distress ratings, the results suggest moral distress is higher among participants who work at four-year public institutions \((x = 4.58)\), in student conduct director positions \((x = 4.68)\), and among participants who have six to eleven years of service in the profession \((x = 4.79)\). In addition, higher moral distress ratings were noted among females \((x = 4.50)\),
among 25 to 34 years-old participants ($x = 5.33$), among black or African American participants ($x = 4.46$), and among participants in the southern region of the United States ($x = 4.76$).

**Research Question 2**

*What are sources of moral distress, according to their lived experiences?*

The survey instrument asked respondents to “*provide a brief description about a workplace example associated with your moral distress rating*” followed by a secondary question which provided them an opportunity to offer “*any additional workplace examples associated with your moral distress rating.*” Among the 291 respondents, 384 examples were collected through the survey tool and analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis. The data for the sources were coded into two broad categories: (a) what types of workplace situations are described by participants as the source of the moral distress, and (b) within the workplace situations described by participants, who are among the individuals contributing to the experience of moral distress.

What types of workplace situations are described by participants as the source of the moral distress? When considering the research question from the lens of *what types of workplace situations are described by participants as the source of the moral distress*, inductive content analysis resulted in the construction of five themes with 19 related sub-themes among the 384 examples of workplace situations contributing to moral distress (Figure 3).
The five themes included: (a) lack of agency or control, (b) compromised student learning, (c) behavior of colleagues, (d) public perceptions, pressures, and politics (e) resource limitations. The following section includes definitions for each of the five themes. When professionals experienced a lack of control or agency in their work, the examples they described were most closely associated with experiences when their work-related decisions were overturned, when they received pressure from leadership within their organization, when their leadership’s views differed from their own, or when they experienced a conflict of interest in the workplace. Participants indicated that moral distress occurred when they witnessed student learning compromised, which was described as a result of student behavior, limitations or inconsistency in student conduct practices, when safety or a financial situation impacted student learning, or through the presence of a student’s mental health issues. Behavior of colleagues contributed to experiences of moral distress and presented in the workplace when professionals witnessed the unprofessional behavior of their colleagues, including colleagues having inappropriate student contact, meddling or applying pressure in the student conduct process, showing bias or favoritism toward students or others, as well as victim blaming or causing disparate impact upon marginalized groups. Public perceptions, pressures, and politics also emerged as a cause of moral distress for a student conduct professional due to a fear of litigation or experiencing pressure to mitigate institutional risk, instances when parents or families intervene on a student’s behalf, occurrences when public or internal pressures are applied, or witnessing an inconsistency in campus culture or institutional politics.
Fiscal or personnel resource limitations, including workload disparities and enrollment pressures emerged from the data as distinct experiences contributing to moral distress. The five themes and associated sub-themes are presented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Content analysis abstraction of workplace situations contributing to moral distress.

The percentages of these themes, along with frequency counts, related to workplace examples contributing to moral distress are presented in Table 13. Of the 384 workplace examples provided, several of the examples were able to be assigned to
multiple codes, and therefore the percentages included in Table 13 exceed 100% since they are based on total number of examples provided, not on the frequency count.

Table 13

*Workplace Situations Contributing to Moral Distress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency Count</th>
<th>%*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of agency or control</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>48.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromised student learning</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>41.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior of colleagues</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>32.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public perceptions and pressures</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>13.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource limitations</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 384. Total of percentages is not 100 because it is based on a total number of workplace examples provided (N = 384), not frequency count.

Themes, sub-themes, and exemplar statements are provided in the following section to illustrate the sources of moral distress, according to the lived experiences of student conduct administrators.

**Lack of agency or control.** Moral distress occurred most frequently when student conduct administrators experienced a lack of agency or control in a workplace situation. One-hundred and eighty-six (48.44%) workplace situations were described that contributed to the individuals’ moral distress; from these, four dominant narratives emerged: decisions overturned, pressure from or behavior of leadership, leadership’s views differ, and a conflict of interest in the workplace.
**Decisions overturned.** Participants associated moral distress with situations where what they thought to be a sound decision in a student case was overturned. Situations that involved senior-level leadership overturning their decision in a student conduct case were frequently described: (1) “A student was charged with an academic integrity violation. The student copied his answers to homework from a copy of the solutions manual. He eventually admitted his actions, but still refused to accept responsibility for the offense. I found him responsible and sanctioned according to past precedent for first offenses of this nature. He appealed my decision, appealed the board's decision, and appealed the Vice Chancellor's decision. The Chancellor overturned all our decisions”; (2) “I had three students who broke into another student's apartment and beat him up. I expelled all three students. Two of the alleged students were approaching graduation. Our vice president overturned the expulsion and instead suspended them and allowed them to graduate by finishing up their credits through correspondence”; (3) “My supervisor instructed me to suspend a student. When the student appealed the decision, my supervisor overturned the suspension and gave no sanctions for the case”; (4) “Appeals are reviewed by another, higher administrator who's not in our department. Said administrator will review appeals and has a history of amending/changing recommendations after the recommendation is appealed by an appeal board that consists of students, faculty, and staff”; (5) “The President wanted to overturn my suspension of a fraternity”; (6) “A student violently attacked another student. I dismissed the student as per the college's policy of a zero tolerance for violence. The decision was overturned because there was 3 weeks left in
school and the student was slated to graduate”; (7) “Appeal decisions are frequently modified or overturned without explanation or seemingly any consideration of evidence. No explanation is given to conduct officers so that they may reevaluate how [they] are making decisions”; (8) “Our final-level appeal officer often overturns properly adjudicated and sanctioned cases based on his own de novo reading of the evidence in the case and a discussion with the accused student”; and (9) “A decision that resulted from an investigation I completed was overturned, allowing a student who had been found responsible for a policy violation twice to re-enroll at the institution.”

An additional prevalent narrative emerged from the descriptions participants gave for situations when they believed their sound decision was over-turned by an appeal board: (10) “Suspended 10+ students for a hazing incident. Judicial Hearing Board heard the appeals and decided sanctions should be more minimal [which] went from a year suspension & community service hours to disciplinary probation and community service hours”; and (11) “I had nearly all of my decisions around eviction and suspension of residence students overturned by the campus appeal board. We had many students who did not belong in the community. However, I was consistently overruled and informed that my decisions were irrational, inappropriate, and ill informed. The current composition of the campus board has no residence or residence life representative. These decisions made it difficult to return to the professional and student staff team in residence and try to answer questions about why these students
were still members of the community and we were seemingly unable to hold them accountable for subsequent and continued disruption of the community.”

**Pressure from or behavior of leadership.** Respondents reported situations that involved pressure or over-reaching involvement from senior leadership contributed to their experiences of moral distress: (1) “A student made a poor choice that was sent out via social media. My administrators, who are very hands-off 99.999% of the time, overreacted and I was required to suspend the student”; (2) “We have had many accusations of Greek life hazing that have gone un-investigated due to our Dean's insistence that…‘we know this is the problem, but we don't want to find them responsible for hazing and kick them off campus’”; (3) “Supervisor told me to not pursue an intoxication violation, like the others we receive, because the student “has an important job it could hinder’”; (4) “Administrators pushing a case forward without seeking other avenues that could resolve the problem”; (5) “My direct supervisor tells me on many occasions what the outcome of a case “must” be without taking into consideration my thoughts, opinions, etc.”; (6) “A prominent student leader who had a very negative relationship with many senior-level administrators engaged in a moderate-level policy violation. There was a lot of pressure to issue consequences that were inconsistent with the level of violation that had occurred”; and (7) “Title IX case where the reporting party tells me she had less sexual contact with the respondent then the respondent reports to me. We came to an impasse in finding the respondent responsible or not responsible. Both the reporting party and the respondent were
credible. A comment was made that our Vice President would want us to find the respondent responsible for when in doubt be favorable to the reporting party.”

Moral distress also was identified when professional witnessed the unprofessional conduct of their supervisor or senior-level leadership: (8) “Supervisor has asked me not to hold someone accountable because of his/her relationship with my supervisor or other administrators”; (9) “Supervisor suggesting to watch various resources and copy the materials to avoid paying for the resources;” (10) “My supervisor regularly asks me to do things that are out of compliance with our policies to “help” students feel better about our institution.”; (11) “I was publically [sic] ridiculed by a Vice Chancellor for doing something that was within the scope of my position and authority”; (12) “Our President has not been here very long, but in the time he has been here he has managed to establish an environment where it is not appropriate to question decision [sic]. In some cases, it is also not appropriate to offer feedback or discussion on an issue. It is a horrible feeling to work in the environment”; and (13) “Superiors discussing their desire for sexual relations with a student(s) or younger professionals.”

**Leadership’s views differ.** Participants frequently described situations where a different view held by their supervisor or senior-level leadership contributed to their experience of moral distress: (1) “Having to agree with my supervisor on all decisions. My supervisor is pretty much a “my way or the highway” kind of person and she holds grudges”; (2) “Upper administration makes decisions that do not seem appropriate based on facts/circumstances. Acting without knowledge of the totality of
circumstances, but unwilling to see my perspective”; (3) “It came to my attention that students and others in our community did not understand our Title IX policies and procedures. I was not permitted to clarify policies and/or procedures during the time that individuals in our community were experiencing distress nor was I permitted to add a definition of incapacitate [sic] when updating our policies during the summer”; (4) “A recent case involved consulting with our general counsel, who advised that we deviate substantially from our normal investigation procedures. I disagreed, stating that this would undermine the integrity of our whole conduct system by treating these students differently than we treat others. This case also presented the problem that what the students allegedly did, did not fit with our definition in the Code. I was told it didn't matter that the conduct didn't fit the defined “Prohibited Conduct” because what the student did was wrong. My argument was that it may have been wrong, but that didn't make it a code violation. I stated that I wasn't there to account for right or wrong behavior, but for behavior that in some way violates policies or expectations that the student has consented to be held accountable to by joining our community. My supervisor sided with the office of general counsel and I was overruled”; (5) “Feeling like I can't make autonomous decisions, because everything is second guessed or scrutinized to make sure that "we are enforcing the code". It feels like we are out just to put people in trouble, instead of offering any amount of grace for what might just be mistakes without mal-intent”; and (6) “Supervising a conduct officer who has made largely impactful or potentially impactful mistakes that put them, me, my department and institution at jeopardy for liability and community safety. Upper administration
who fail to hear the liability and ethical concerns of not pursuing job action for this employee with ongoing professional issues.”

**Conflict of interest.** Student conduct administrators reported that moral distress was present in situations that involved a conflict of interest. In some instances, the respondent reported that they contributed to the conflict of interest themselves: (1) “As a new staff person, I sometimes read case files of students to better understand what I do and to gather context even though I know that I shouldn't be reading case files of students who are not assigned to me”; and (2) “I like to talk things through a lot so I have probably shared something I shouldn't at some point with someone who doesn't need to know that information.” In other instances, the respondent witnessed the conflict of interest in the workplace: (3) “Someone on my team has been told to sit on a hearing panel for a case that she feels that she is too close to, and she was told that she is the only person who can hear the case, even though we could easily train someone else instead or hire an outside hearing officer”; and (4) “Our staff is small, and I have had to, on at least two cases, act in a role that could be considered a conflict of interest (investigator and case coordinator).” Another narrative described the internal conflict present within the professional: (5) “Having to investigate sexual assault cases and then not have anyone to process them with and/or not being willing to share what is going on at work with my family due to the nature of the cases.”

**Compromised student learning.** Participants provided 160 (41.67%) workplace situations that contributed to moral distress which involved compromised student learning. Four dominant narratives emerged from the qualitative data: student
behavior, limitations or inconsistency in student conduct practices, student safety or financial situation, and student mental health.

**Student behavior.** Participants reported examples related to student behavior that contributed to presence of moral distress in their workplace: (1) “Feeling pressure and bullying from "influential" student leaders to not address student government misconduct”; (2) “A student who was found not responsible for sexual assault is now claiming the “victim” is harassing him by telling fellow students of her ordeal and creating a hostile environment for him”; (3) “student workers aiming to get their coworkers fired because of past disagreements”; (4) “Students petitioning to have other students expelled”; (5) “Student has a disciplinary hold for failing to complete educational sanctions related to alcohol use and student/parents ask for an extension on completing the sanction”; (6) “It can be frustrating that when students share a one-sided, inaccurate narrative of their conduct experience we are not able to provide clarification”; and (7) “Knowing that a student was on the right path after making a mistake and a policy violation, but having to remove the student from campus because it's what is called for in the policy.”

**Limitations or inconsistency in student conduct practices.** Participants indicated that limitations or constraints that involved the student code of conduct or the business practices for adjudicating violations of the student code have contributed to their moral distress. Participants specified that the code of conduct and policies limited their ability to help educate students: (1) “Established policies at the institution are antiquated and overly specific, often leading to the need for interpretation and
students looking for ‘loopholes’ because their behavior was not specifically addressed.
The policy language…is not accessible to students.”; (2) “Receiving late/credible
information after appeal window”; (3) “Over the summer the code of conduct was
updated based on university system guidance. Beside the dean of students, I was the
only other full-time conduct professional on-campus. I was never asked to review the
code or offer suggestions/input”; (4) “I'm currently aware that some of our policies
and procedures may not be equitable regarding Title IX investigations but don't have
the political capacity to challenge the institution to change”; and (5) “Have worked
with a current student who has faced harassment/bullying from non-student friends of
another student and have been limited in my power to respond by campus policy.”

Participants wrote about the challenges involving precedence in the conduct
process: (6) “It can be challenging to balance the needs of an individual, the needs of
the community, and the need for consistency and/or not setting an undesired
precedent”; (7) “Being constrained by precedence in not being able to assign a higher
penalty for behavior”; and (8) “Personal disagreement with what I consider to be an
overly harsh sanctioning policy for cannabis and the obligation to enforce the policy.”

Respondents indicated that the tension between balancing the needs of the
individual with the needs of the community contributed to moral distress: (9) “What is
right for the student is not always seen as the right thing to do for the institution or for
the community in which the college resides. Occasionally, I am forced to penalize
instead of educate students through the conduct process”; and (10) “Having to
adjudicate a student who came to a staff member seeking help for his legal
problems/drug dealing. He was seeking support for his habit, however because he disclosed we had to hold him accountable through the university conduct process.”

Participants felt constricted in assessing sanctions for student code violations: (11) “I feel that some of the cases I deal with do not help the students to solve their own problems. It seems enabling to be intervening all the time. How will they develop skills to problem solve, face situations assertively? Makes me question the purpose of my job”; (12) “not being able to give intention much weight when considering how to process a case. It feels unforgiving”; (13) “Having inconsistencies in sanctioning students and response to student behavior”; (14) “I'm often forced to follow “university recommended sanctions” for certain cases. Additionally, I have to comply with state mandated sanctions. Finally, I'm often forced to hand down decisions made by hearing boards when the participants were clearly biased in their decision making”; (15) “As student behavior changes and we try to address things we have not historically seen, I am often distressed by administrators and colleagues who insist on using their personal yardstick rather than some sort of pre-agreed upon matrix or rubric to respond”; and (16) “We sanction from a grid and there are times when the consequence doesn't seem to fit the scenario despite the violation of a particular policy.”

**Student safety or financial situation.** Student conduct administrators indicated that student safety in several forms, including financial, contributed toward workplace experiences of moral distress: (1) “Ongoing concerns for student safety systems were ignored”; and (2) “policies and sanctioning that I personally felt were not overly
beneficial to students, and many times hindered their ability to remain in school. These were low level cases in which the sanctioning was an extreme…financial and time burden to students, and many times stopped students from continuing at school because they could not pay for the sanctions.” A prevalent narrative described the financial costs associated with student conduct outcomes: (3) “I recently was informed that our educational sanction for second time AOD [Alcohol and Other Drug] offenses is being outsourced to another company off campus that will have a significant financial cost to the students involved”; (4) “assigning fines while knowing that students cannot afford to pay them.”

Housing security for students who lost their privilege to remain living on campus emerged as a dominate narrative within this sub-theme: (5) “Not being able to help a student out when they had no place to live after recently being suspended and kicked out of housing for selling drugs. The student had no family to go to, as they refused to pick him up or send him money, and was told by a friend he could not sleep in their apartment anymore”; (6) “There was a student who was a threat to others in one of the residence hall. The student needed to be removed, however, removing the student left him no place else to go and he did not have access to support services off campus.”

**Student mental health.** Participants wrote about how student mental health contributed to their experiences of moral distress: (1) “Increasing number of students struggling with significant mental health issues and not enough time to get to know them”; (2) “Student's exhibited behaviors were correlated with his/her mental health
diagnosis. Dilemma between being compassionate regarding mental health issues and holding student accountable to behavioral expectations of the college”; (3) “Working with students experiencing mental health related distress or illness. When the safety of the larger community is prioritized over the wellness of an individual student. For example, pushing forward with conduct charges related to behaviors that violate the student code, but stem from a mental health disorder or trauma. I am asked to push forward with charges, because that is the only “legal” way to require a student to receive treatment or be assessed”; (4) “Professor asking me to not send a student through the conduct process whose behavior was creating a disruption on campus because the student was struggling with mental health issues”; and (5) “Potentially altering a student’s disciplinary sanction based on mental health.”

**Behavior of colleagues.** Respondents described 124 (32.29%) workplace situations that contributed to moral distress which involved witnessing the behavior of colleagues which did not align with their own moral compass. The four dominate narratives that emerged from the text data included: witnessing unprofessional student contact, colleagues meddling or applying pressure, colleagues engaging in bias or favoritism, and observing victim blaming or disparate impact on marginalized groups.

**Witnessing unprofessional behavior or student contact.** Participants wrote about how the unprofessional behavior of their colleagues contributed to the presence of moral distress in their work: (1) “Not giving full attention during formal hearing. Acting as if a decision was already made and no matter what the student said, their decision would not change”; (2) “During a hearing, a student claimed that a coworker
told them they wished they were assigned their case to…make their sanctions “a living hell”; (3) “Individuals speaking negatively about students because of their behavior and portraying the student in a negative light”; (4) “Confidential employees sharing information about students when they should not”; (5) “Coworker in a high-ranking position, narcissist and sociopath, targeting individuals, arrogant, making rash decisions”; and (6) “colleague has come into my office several times after meeting with a particularly troubled student and has used derogatory words regarding their interaction.”

Participants indicated that the administrative habits and practices of their colleagues had contributed to their experience of moral distress: (7) “I felt I could not hold a student fully accountable for a violation because a member of my staff failed to follow our process”; (8) “Colleagues not fulfilling their case load responsibilities”; (9) “colleague has been blaming others for her lack of work, when it is because she has not performed, not the fault of others”; and (10) “Challenges associated with disproportionate turn around/case resolution responses between conduct advisors. There is a team member that simply does not pull their weight collectively and gets irrationally upset when asked if there's a way we can help. It effects [sic] the students.”

Student conduct administrators witnessed their colleagues acting in an unprofessional manner and mocking or belittling students: (11) “Colleague laughing or mocking students in cases”; (12) “colleagues mocking students or belittling the stress that students face through a conduct process”; and (13) “colleague of mine
would mock students with caricatured voices, and our supervisor seemed to really want this new colleague to like her, so she laughed along with her.”

**Colleagues meddling or applying pressure.** Respondents described situations where the behavior of their colleagues meddling or applying pressure contributed to their workplace experiences of moral distress: (1) “Other campus colleagues questioning conduct decisions in regards to how it relates to them or the outcome they desired. This typically occurs when someone brings a concern to our office and wants to be extremely hands on throughout the process”; (2) “Staff member relays message from Legal Counsel saying a student I will be sanctioning should remain in school. I had not yet read the findings from the other staff member nor had I asked for advice or information. Others should not be commenting on how a student should be sanctioned”; (3) “I have been approached by a faculty member as well as a member of our athletics staff in different situations who “want to talk to me off the record” about how good a student is or how bad the situation is at home and I should have some leniency in my decision”; and (4) “A colleague asks to know what a student’s disciplinary record is because they “want to know what they are getting themselves into””; and (5) “being told by other departments how to best handle situations they have incomplete information about”.

Participants specifically described situations where faculty applied pressure in the student conduct process: (6) “Faculty contact the office asking us to "take a break" on students in their programs”; (7) “Faculty assuming they can stop a case because…student has a 3.5 GPA and is there [sic] “all-star”; and (8) “I had a student
who plagiarized an assignment. The instructor failed him in the course. The student was sincere and remorseful. I chose to allow him to stay at the university on a probation. The instructor was upset that I didn't expel him.”

Participants described situations where the athletic department staff applied pressure or attempted to meddle in student conduct functions: (9) “Athletics became involved in a case because of a student athlete, and challenged our authority to make a decision related to the student's sanctions for a particularly egregious violation”; (10) “Athletics will contact our office and tell us how much funding a certain sport is taking in, and will often encourage “easier” sanctions so not to limit an athlete's play”; and (11) “Athletics asked us to allow a student who accepted responsibility for a violation and was placed on probation to not accept his plea of responsibility and make him go through a hearing because the sanction would prevent him from playing in an upcoming game, but a hearing wouldn't occur until after the game.”

**Colleagues engaging in bias or favoritism.** Participants indicated that it contributed to their experiences of moral distress when they witnessed colleagues engaging in bias or favoritism: (1) “There are some of my colleagues that aren't held accountable for their behavior when they don't follow an administrative process or protocol because they [have] personal relationships with leadership team”; (2) “Colleagues who only dedicate time and energy on students who they have a common identity with”; (3) “supervisor has made comments regarding a particular student who has been the complainant for multiple Title IX/harassment cases. The comments are never about whether to take a particular course of action or to sway a finding, but
rather that the student has been an "issue" and will continue to be one until graduation”; (4) “Working with campus partners (police, TIX investigators, Residence staff, etc.) whose bias related to masculine stereotypes (males are perpetrators, females are victims) often make comments, recommendations, requests that are not objective or based in fact. I might worry if I miss a review meeting that actions will be taken or recommended for conduct that are baseless / informed by bias only”; (5) “Co-worker who is bias towards responding parties”; and (6) “A colleague has been investigating incidents and predetermining that witnesses are not worth the time because that colleague is too important to interview them, when they had information that could have helped the process greatly.”

**Observing victim blaming or disparate impact on marginalized groups.**

Participants described workplace situations where they observed their colleagues engaging in victim blaming or causing disparate impact on marginalized groups as contributing to moral distress. Specifically, victim blaming behavior emerged in the narratives: (1) “My supervisor and I have significantly different social and political thoughts/viewpoints on gender-based violence. I have heard complainants say that she victim blames, she has a reputation within our community victim's advocacy group for not being victim-friendly, and she oftentimes slants towards male respondents”; (2) “A higher level administrator stated that a female survivor was a “beautiful woman” and therefore was used to fending off advances and inappropriate comments in a mature fashion, and could also “take care of herself” because she is tall”; (3) “The Title IX Coordinator minimized the feelings of a complainant in a Title IX investigation I was
conducting and didn't believe the actions of the respondent were that egregious”; and
(4) “A high level administrator expresses thoughts and attitudes that victim blame
survivors of sexual assault during a presentation.”

Instances of disparate impact on marginalized groups due to reporting by
faculty or campus security/police, were described: (5) “Conduct reports coming from
faculty that are just insensitive to the varied needs of students with challenges
learning”; (6) “I worry that maybe there is a bias against students of color or
underrepresented groups in relation to reporting or suspected activity, meaning that
even if we're consistent as an office in adjudicating, the system still is not fair or
consistent because it feels students of color are targeted and reported at a higher
level”; and (7) “Working with campus security who show racism, sexism, and bias in
their handling of incidents causes me great moral distress, especially when I am asked
to adjudicate a case that I believe may have been handled differently if the accused
student's gender or race were different.”

In addition, participants described situations that involved supervisors or
senior-level leadership engaging in behavior that either implicitly or explicitly
impacted marginalized groups as contributing to moral distress: (8) “Supervisors
making sexist and racist remarks, including insinuating that they will take retaliatory
action towards others”; (9) “During a sexual assault appeal, a high-level university
administrator likened a case of digital penetration to a woman going to a
gynecologist”; (10) “Many of our black male and middle eastern students seem to
inspire lesser levels of “benefit of the doubt”, and their situations or incidents may be
discussed (again, in behavioral review meetings with colleagues from across campus) with a level of passive aggressiveness not seen in other cases”; (11) “Campus administrators insisting that conduct officers ask students for their preferred pronouns, asserting that the only means of treating students fairly is to force them into outing their gender identity”; and (12) “In general, “old school” values and leadership clashing with current best practice and student accountability. White, upperclass privilege of both students and Board members (who directly impact college decisions) contributes greatly to the issues.” The following narrative captures the issue of power and privilege identified in participant narratives: (13) “Moral distress for me is knowing that some students are benefiting from the systems of privilege set up and alive at the University, and the administration is not aware of how they are perpetuating that privilege. When those of us who see it, explain it, our feedback is dismissed.”

Public perceptions, pressures, and politics. Moral distress was present for student conduct administrators when public perceptions, pressures, and politics emerged in their work. Fifty-two (13.54%) workplace examples were described that involved a fear of litigation or pressure to mitigate risk, parent or family relations, public or internal pressures, or an inconsistency in campus culture or politics.

Fear of litigation or pressure to mitigate risk. Participants wrote about how a fear of litigation, either their own or of that of leadership within the organization, or a threat of litigation contributed to their experience of moral distress: (1) “Fear of litigation or retaliation is real. Even when we follow all applicable university
procedures, state and federal obligations—there is still a pressure to point blame on a conduct or university administrator, and we cannot share the details about a case to maintain our confidence or professional judgement”; (2) “Multiple instances of change of behavior from other staff when they think an attorney may get involved. This should not alter our processes, nor give those processes more attention or due process than other students' situations”; (3) “Moral distress is also present for me in some BITA or TIX cases where legal counsel is concerned about perception;” (4) “Fear of litigation by an overreaching counsel's office has inserted a lot of doubt into decision-making that I conduct, particularly in the highest level cases. The office over-complicates things and threatens the learning outcomes”; and (5) “I know that student conduct work is the work on campus most likely to get me or my institution sued or receiving negative press. Doing the work correctly doesn't always protect you for lawsuits, negative media attention.”

Participants wrote about how a desire to avoid litigation may compromise student accountability and learning: (6) “Student with attorney receiving lesser sanction”; (7) “Because of a threatened lawsuit, a student was able to be completely cleared of any accountability for a violation of Code”; and (8) “Writing outcome letters for Title IX cases and being unable to expound on the behavior of an accused or reporting party due to constraints by the process. Conduct offices normally consider the conduct processes as educational. In sexual misconduct cases, there is no room allowed for those educational conversations either in person or writing due to fear of
law suits and anything said or done in the process may be used against the University down the road.”

Being asked or pressured to mitigate institutional risk, which may be in conflict with articulated student learning objectives, also caused participants moral distress: (9) “Workplace moral distress comes up most often when decisions are made to mitigate perceived risk”; and (10) “Being asked to negotiate sanctions in an effort to mitigate risk or legal allegations.”

*Parent or family relations.* Participants described instances where parents inserted themselves into the student conduct process as situations that contributed to moral distress: (1) “Working with students whose parents are on the Parent's Council and wishing to receive special treatment”; (2) “Parents and students constantly threatening litigation and withdrawal of financial support of the institution”; (3) “In a very low-level case, a student threatened to leave the university, got her parent involved, and we were told by admin to put her sanctions on indefinite hold unless she violated the policy again. This practice is not part of our code”; (4) “More and more often students are appealing decisions and arguing lack of fairness or objectivity based upon something said during the meeting with the student. Parents are jumping right onboard with the students' arguments”; (5) “When parents call about a complaint in our office, upper administration asks us to write a whole memo for them to explain our actions (when we are already overworked) instead of approaching the issue with trust in the staff initially”; and (6) “Having a decision overturned because the student was
very public with their disagreement with the judicial system, and their parents had access to and met with the institution's President.”

**Public or internal pressures.** Participants wrote about how pressure from outside stakeholders that involved public perceptions contributed to their workplace experiences of moral distress: (1) “Communication from non-university stakeholders with their expectations”; (2) “Pressure from alumni preventing the institution for fully enacting change”; (3) “Making decisions about the sanctions of student organizations based on the perceived impact it could have on alumni and donations to the university”; (4) “when administrators seem to be looking out for concerns of the image of the institution than the needs of the student”; (5) “Being directed not to speak with media and having a carefully reviewed/sanitized set of talking points when speaking with student media. I value transparency and education about our process/policies and sometimes feel unable to share our policies and procedures with clarity”; and (6) “I was asked to testify at the State Legislature regarding concerns about the impact of proposed legislation on campus safety. However, the sponsor of the bill also chairs the Appropriations Committee, so I was directed to soft-peddle objections to the legislation so as not to jeopardize the state university budget allocation.”

Internal pressure from faculty, administrators, or other campus departments/partners related to perceptions of their work also contributed to experiences of moral distress: (7) “Decision being overturned, which garnered a lot of attention from faculty members who knew the student involved”; (8) “My personal morals, values, and competencies were repeatedly called into question by students,
parents, and colleagues after I made an unpopular (but correct) decision about a
student conduct case”; and (9) “There is a lack of appreciation (outside the conduct
office) for the complexity of human/student behavior which leads to either/or thinking
when it comes to motivation, sanctions, and even various process options. This can be
incompatible with student learning.”

**Inconsistency in campus culture or politics.** Respondents indicated that moral
distress occurred when they witnessed an inconsistency in campus culture or the
presence of campus politics: (1) “University culture surrounding traditions and alcohol
do not coincide with the University's expectation of behavior”; (2) “Cynicism
regarding students and process”; (3) “The lack of understanding of conduct's role even
though classroom or meeting visits have been offered”; (4) “Individuals minimizing
the behavior of a student and expressing concern for a student's reputation and ability
to complete their academic studies”; and (5) “Coaches, faculty, and other staff
member who do not think a student is doing anything that bad, and they are good kids.
Yet, the sub-culture of the university provides a very different story.”

**Resource limitations.** Participants provided 29 (7.55%) workplace examples
where resource limitations contributed to moral distress. Sub-themes in this category
included: fiscal limitations, personnel limitations or workload disparities, and
enrollment pressures.

**Fiscal limitations.** Participants described that fiscal limitations contributed to
moral distress in their work: (1) “Budget and hiring challenges”; (2) “Unable to get
training/professional development due to lack of funding/support”; (3) “Not having
the resources available on-campus or financial resources to provide to a student the support they require to be academically successful and remain enrolled”; and (4) “Often times decisions are overturned based on housing numbers rather than policy enforcement.”

**Personnel limitations or workload disparities.** Student conduct administrators indicated that personnel limitations and workload disparities within their department created an experience of moral distress: (1) “Lack of human resources which requires additional workload, stress, and expectations”; (2) “We have been short staffed for over a year, and it has led to some concerns related to responsibilities and accomplishing tasks”; (3) “student conduct responsibility for student organizations added without additional staff”; (4) “Blamed for small mistakes my supervisees make that are a direct result of being entirely overworked. Shared this concern with supervisor only to be told that we will not be hiring more people and nothing was going to change”; (5) “Colleague being overloaded and not following up with students in a timely manner”; and (6) “Receiving overdue cases from departments that are over burdened with cases and far behind. Often students are very upset at the case timeline and feel the institution does not care. I know this is not the case, but there is not much that can be said to justify extremely late cases.” Specifically, participants wrote about the added responsibilities of Title IX compliance and the subsequent pressures on staffing: (6) “TIX [Title IX] responsibilities without additional staff or other resources”; and (7) “Quickly rising number of Title IX cases with insufficient staff. When I brought this to the attention of my supervisor, told “I don't believe you.””
Enrollment pressures. Participants wrote about how enrollment pressures contributed to their experiences of moral distress: (1) “Need for higher enrollment leads to increasingly drop in conduct standards”; (2) “Trying to get approval to place holds on student accounts for overdue sanctions…administration won't approve due to…fear that students simply won't register if there is a barrier in place”; (3) “Trying to get necessary policy changes made but facing push-back from other institutional departments, out of fear of impact on application numbers and/or retention numbers”; (4) “Our enrollment has dropped and when I’ve discussed possible suspensions, I have been closely questioned about making that decision…there's been an implication that suspensions need to minimized”; (5) “Our institution is in an enrollment slump. There have been times when our Interim VPSA [Vice President for Student Affairs], and even our President, have “offered suggestions” (which are not suggestions, but are more like directives) on how to resolve a serious case in a way that would either keep our institution out of the news, or would help students and/or parents not feel bad about the institution. Often the resulting decision is one that is not consistent (or appropriate) with other, similar cases”; and (6) “Every instance of separation with a student who appealed was overturned. The appellate officer who was the VP [Vice President] for Student Affairs seemed to be making decision based on enrollment management score (retention) rather than if the appeal was acceptable, the decision was appropriate, supporting the employee, or the safety and security of the campus community.”
Within the workplace situations described by participants, who are among the individuals they identify as contributing to the experience of moral distress?

The previous analysis provided insight into the five emergent themes workplace situations contributing to moral distress. To provide additional insight into the narratives, this following section considered who are among the individuals contributing to the experience of moral distress. The following eight categories were identified for the 384 examples of workplace situations contributing to moral distress: 1) workplace examples that involved a supervisor or senior-level administrator, 2) workplace examples that involved a colleague or campus department (Athletics, Greek Life, Alumni), 3) workplace examples that were related to other sources, 4) workplace examples that involved students, 5) workplace examples that were related to BITA or Title IX, 6) workplace examples that were related to hearing panels or appeals boards, 7) workplace examples that involved faculty, and 8) workplace examples that involved parents or families.

The percentages of these codes, along with frequency counts, related to who is contributing to the moral distress in the workplace example are presented in Table 14. Of the 384 workplace examples provided, several of the examples were able to be assigned to multiple codes, and therefore the percentages included in Table 14 exceed 100% since they are based on total number of examples provided, not on the frequency count.
Table 14

*Sources of Moral Distress by Who is Contributing to the Moral Distress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency Count</th>
<th>%*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor or senior-level administrator</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>39.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague or campus department</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>31.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related to other sources</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>17.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITA or Title IX related</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing panels or appeals board related</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/family</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 384. Total of percentages is not 100 because it is based on N, not frequency count.*

Sources of moral distress were most frequently associated with a supervisor or senior level administrators in 155 of the narratives (39.85%). One-hundred and twenty-two (31.36%) narratives indicated that situations that involved colleagues or other departments within the organization contributed to experiences of moral distress. The frequency of these two categories, in particular, provided the majority of narratives provided by student conduct administrators providing insight as to who was contributing to their experiences of moral distress.
Research Question 3

What are the associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action?

The survey instrument prompted respondents to “share the reasons why you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action” followed by a secondary question which provided them an opportunity to offer “any additional reasons you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.” Among the 291 respondents, 239 data points were collected through the survey tool and analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis.

Inductive content analysis resulted in the construction of two themes and 17 related sub-themes from the 239 examples of associated factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action (Figure 4). The two themes included both internal constraints and external constraints.
Figure 4. Content analysis abstraction of associated factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action.

The percentages of these sub/themes, along with frequency counts, related to associated factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action are presented in Table 15. Of the 239 reasons provided, several of the examples were able to be assigned to multiple codes, and therefore the percentages
included in Table 15 exceed 100% since they are based on total number of examples provided, not on the frequency count.

Table 15

Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Associated Factors</th>
<th>Frequency Count</th>
<th>%*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal constraints</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation or job loss</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of control or power</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to avoid conflict</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization to follow orders</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of assertiveness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-doubt or inability to make decision</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived obligations to institution</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy between personal and organization values</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External constraints</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from supervisor/senior-level leadership</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>29.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies/practices that conflict with student development</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprofessional or manipulative colleagues</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints influenced by campus culture/politics</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive hierarchies/bureaucracy within the institution</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource limitations or pressures</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of power dynamics or power imbalance</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of negative publicity/litigation/OCR Investigation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 239. Total of percentages is not 100 because it is based on a total number of associated factors provided (N = 239), not frequency count.
Themes, sub-themes, and exemplar statements are provided in the following section to illustrate the internal and external associated factors constraining student conduct administrators from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action.

**Internal Constraints.** Participants indicated that internal constraints prevented them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action. One-hundred and one of the data points described internal constraints and included nine dominate narratives: (a) fear of retaliation or job loss, (b) perceived lack of control or power, (c) desire to avoid conflict, (d) socialization to follow orders, (e) lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, (f) lack of assertiveness, (g) self-doubt or inability to make decision, (h) perceived obligations to institution, and (i) discrepancy between personal and organization values. Exemplar statements from the data are provided for each of the internal factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting their moral action in Table 16.
Table 16

*Internal Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Constraint</th>
<th>Exemplar Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation or job loss.</td>
<td>“Fear of how I would be treated as a professional if I found myself advocating for a different disciplinary action than the one suggested.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of control or power.</td>
<td>“These colleagues have been employed at the institution for longer and I did not feel confident enough in my own professional experience to tell that was wrong and that I do not believe that about our students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to avoid conflict.</td>
<td>“Treading the fine line of holding our ground on an issue versus maintaining relationship with critical campus/office partners. Basically, deciding if an issue is the hill we're going to die on.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization to follow orders.</td>
<td>“We were instructed not to explain the rationale for our decision.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation.</td>
<td>“With the cases related to mental health, there are potential risks to the community that I understand and believe need to be addressed, but there is also significant dissonance and discomfort on my part when doing so. It never feels &quot;right&quot; in the moral sense.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of assertiveness.</td>
<td>“Not wanting to &quot;make a big deal&quot; of a minor moral distress.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-doubt or inability to make decision.</td>
<td>“Usually, I hesitate in action when a supervisor’s supervisor is wanting us to hesitate.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived obligations to institution.</td>
<td>“In my position I also have to make decisions that are sometimes better for the university rather than the student.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy between personal and organization values.</td>
<td>“The college has instituted minimum sanctions for certain behaviors. As a college employee, I have to set aside my personal beliefs and follow the proscribed conduct and minimum sanctions.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As outlined in Table 15, three of the nine internal constraints identified appeared more frequently in the data. Additional exemplar narratives are provided below for each of those three more frequently occurring internal constraints: (a) fear of retaliation or job loss, (b) perceived lack of control or power, and (c) desire to avoid conflict.

**Fear of retaliation or job loss.** Participants most frequently (14.23%) described situations where a fear of retaliation or job loss constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “Fear of how I would be treated as a professional if I found myself advocating for a different disciplinary action than the one suggested”; (2) “I'm told to “stay in my lane” and decisions are made “in my best interest.” I'm also reminded I work in an at-will state and my employment can be terminated at any time. I'm told I should appreciate where I am”; (3) “I know that if I “rock the boat,” I will not be able to advance in my career, and would definitely be at risk of losing my job”; and (4) “Other people who have disagreed with my supervisor have been let go - supervisor wants a team player who will agree with them - I can't afford to lose my position.”

**Perceived lack of control or power.** Respondents wrote about how a perceived lack of control or power over a situation or decision constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “These colleagues have been employed at the institution for longer and I did not feel confident enough in my own professional experience to tell that was wrong and that I do not believe that about our students”; (2) “In my position I do not have the power to change the sanction outcomes for either of
the distressing situations so I must act against what I may feel is morally the right response to given situations because of University or campus partner decisions”; (3) “I am new at this institution and am trying to limit the amounts of times I say "at my former institution we do..." This is tough when I know that we are not following best practices and our current practices are limiting or perhaps illegal (regarding Title IX)”; and (4) “Conduct officers do not have the luxury of having an opinion that they may offer for either the public square or private, internal discussions.”

**Desire to avoid conflict.** Participants identified a desire to avoid conflict as what constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “Treading the fine line of holding our ground on an issue versus maintaining relationship with critical campus/office partners. Basically, deciding if an issue is the hill we're going to die on”; (2) “Is it worth it? Sometimes in employment you have to pick your battles and in conduct you deal with several moral obligations. You can't fight them all, or at least I can't”; (3) “cases weren't severe or dealing with deep seated principles within me...in other words not worth fighting over there wasn't deep harm going on toward any one student, just meddling where it shouldn't have been...I'll fight on more important battles”; and (4) “Deciding how far to push what I believe is right versus committing professional suicide.”

**External Constraints.** Participants indicated that external constraints prevented them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action. In numerous instances, several of the 239 data points collected were able to be assigned to multiple sub-themes, which included eight dominant narratives related to external constraints:
(a) lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership, (b) policies or practices that conflict with student development, (c) unprofessional or manipulative colleagues, (d) constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics, (e) oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution, (f) resource limitations or pressures, (g) presence of power dynamics or power imbalance, and (h) fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation. Exemplar statements from the data are provided for each of the eight external factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting their moral action in Table 17.
Table 17

_External Associated Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Constraint</th>
<th>Exemplar Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership.</td>
<td>“I feel discouraged by the level of inaction and/or willful blindness I observe once an issue is communicated and brought to my leadership's attention.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies or practices that conflict with student development.</td>
<td>“Lack of support for necessary policy or internal procedure change prohibits from me doing [what] is a best practice and what is right to ensure a consistent, fair process is applied to all students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprofessional or manipulative colleagues.</td>
<td>“Passive aggressiveness from other staff who hold on to issues and carry out ill feelings in negative and unrelated ways. Having to be careful about what I say to who so it does not come back unfairly later.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics.</td>
<td>“Campus politics are the number one reason I feel constraint when enacting ethical or moral action. My morals are not always in line with campus direction or culture.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution.</td>
<td>“For the most part, I am too low on the reporting line to affect change. I am a hearing officer and there are two or three levels above me who can step in and overturn my decision. I am often told that decisions have been made without my input, when the decisions often most affect me and my work directly and I have no space to make a change.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource limitations or pressures.</td>
<td>“Personnel shortage within the conduct office led to the need to process cases quickly and efficiently reducing the amount of time one could spend on each case.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of power dynamics or power imbalance.</td>
<td>“I am reacting to a power differential between myself and the person in campus leadership taking or directing the action (or inaction).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation.</td>
<td>“Leadership/management style of executive administrators on campus, which are based in concern for liability rather than student development. The fear of legal action drives many decisions related to conduct and Title IX.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As outlined in Table 15, five of the eight external constraints were identified more frequently in the data. Additional exemplar narratives are provided below for each of those five external constraints: (a) lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership, (b) policies or practices that conflict with student development, (c) unprofessional or manipulative colleagues, (d) constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics, and (e) oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution.

**Lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership.** Participants most frequently (29.29%) described situations where a lack of support from a supervisor or a member of senior-level leadership constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “I feel discouraged by the level of inaction and/or willful blindness I observe once an issue is communicated and brought to my leadership's attention”; (2) “I feel that most of administration is unethical. They would not support me should I step forward. My job would definitely be at risk”; (3) “I was overridden by my boss with no justification other than the student's status. He does not do this type of thing for everyone. He should not be picking and choosing where to interfere with the process”; (4) “I had a tire slashed and almost caused an accident. I worry about my safety when I impose tough sanctions on some students. I really have no protection if a student wished to attack me or my family.”

**Policies or practices that conflict with student development.** Participants identified that student conduct policies or business practices that conflict with student development (e.g., unethical conduct process, procedures; unclear or inadequate
student code; student behavior/actions; lack of consistency or equity in case reviews/appeals) as what constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “Lack of support for necessary policy or internal procedure change prohibits from me doing [what] is a best practice and what is right to ensure a consistent, fair process is applied to all students”; (2) “While I disagree with how the policy is written I am professionally obligated to abide by the policy…I have been working towards changing the policy, the process of getting changes approved has been ongoing, with uncertain results, for months”; (3) Policy is such that we intervene on the student behalf, instead of teaching communication skills”; (4) “While [I] knew the alleged student had conducted themselves in a bad manner (inappropriate behavior) the conduct code's process did not permit for a finding of responsible. The complainant felt unsupported by the University.”

Unprofessional or manipulative colleagues. Respondents wrote about how unprofessional colleagues who engaged in manipulative, passive aggressive, or bullying behaviors, including violating the rights of those with protected status, among factors that significantly constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “Passive aggressiveness from other staff who hold on to issues and carry out ill feelings in negative and unrelated ways. Having to be careful about what I say to who so it does not come back unfairly later”; (2) “It is difficult to watch a group take a side based on biased information and stand on the other side with facts. People often are compelled more by emotion than facts”; (3) “My supervisor in the colleague-mocking incident favored the other colleague, and as juvenile as it sounds, they all
probably would have been upset with me for being too sensitive and not wanting to play along”; and (4) “Getting caught in the "gossip" when colleagues share stories of their meetings with students.”

**Constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics.**

Participants described situations where campus culture or politics constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “Campus politics are the number one reason I feel constraint when enacting ethical or moral action. My morals are not always in line with campus direction or culture”; (2) “I think recognition of the political climate made me constrained with action”; (3) “The University was not in a place to consider progressive changes to our sanctioning policy…I cannot enact my own moral actions, I have to follow precedent and University guidelines regarding sanctions”; and (4) “Strong political tension between my supervisor and the Title IX office. I was new in the job, so I didn't have any political capital to be able to push back more strongly.”

**Oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution.** Respondents wrote about how oppressive hierarchies or organizational bureaucracy constrained them from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action: (1) “For the most part, I am too low on the reporting line to affect change. I am a hearing officer and there are two or three levels above me who can step in and overturn my decision. I am often told that decisions have been made without my input, when the decisions often most affect me and my work directly and I have no space to make a change”; (2) “I have shared my concerns with supervisors and legal counsel, however reporting structures
with campus security keep them completely removed from the purview of these folks. There seems to be a pattern of creating workarounds instead of requiring training or taking personnel action”; (3) “Due to the pressure from higher leveled staff members asking you to do something”; (4) “It's upper administration who hold the technical power to do something. I speak up and do what I can to be fair, consistent, document issues. But I cannot physically do what is needed and/or I do not hold the authority to carry it out.”

Summary

This chapter presented the data analysis from a national study that aimed to identify the extent of moral distress among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education. This study also provided qualitative narrative about workplace situations contributing to moral distress and reasons participants felt constrained from taking action amidst ethical dilemmas.

Chapter 4 presented the descriptive statistics for participant demographics from the survey instrument. The mean moral distress rating reported on the Moral Distress Thermometer was 4.39 (n = 291), which was associated with a verbal anchor of uncomfortable (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). Mean scores and standard deviation were calculated for each demographic category: (a) institution type, (b) position type, (c) years of service, (d) gender, (e) age, (f) ethnicity, and (g) region. Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted for each demographic category. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant effect of institution type on moral distress ratings among respondents [F(6, 284) = 2.16, p < .05] among three of the groups: community
colleges, faith-based institutions, and among those who declined to reply. However, once adjusted for small sample size, a Bonferroni post hoc test did not indicate statistical significance.

The workplace examples provided by participants revealed, through qualitative inductive content analysis, that the sources of moral distress among student conduct administrators include: (a) lack of agency or control; (b) compromised student learning; (c) behavior of colleagues; (d) public perceptions, pressures, and politics; and (e) resource limitations.

To provide an additional lens through which to view this research question, a separate round of qualitative inductive content analysis was conducted. The following themes emerged as indicators as to who were among the individuals contributing to the experience of moral distress in the workplace situations described by the participants: (a) supervisor or senior-level administrator; (b) colleague or campus department (e.g., Athletics, Greek Life, Alumni); (c) other sources; (d) students; (e) BITA or Title IX; (f) hearing panels or appeals boards; (g) faculty; and (h) parents or families.

The examples of associated factors constraining participants from engaging in ethical action revealed through qualitative inductive content analysis that both internal and external factors were present for student conduct administrators. The internal constraints that emerged from the data included nine dominant narratives: (a) fear of retaliation or job loss; (b) perceived lack of control or power; (c) desire to avoid conflict; (d) socialization to follow orders; (e) lack of knowledge or alternatives to the
full situation; (f) lack of assertiveness; (g) self-doubt or inability to make decision; (h) perceived obligations to institution; and (i) discrepancy between personal and organization values.

The external constraints that emerged from the data included eight dominant narratives: (a) lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership; (b) policies or practices that conflict with student development; (c) unprofessional or manipulative colleagues; (d) constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics; (e) oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution; (f) resource limitations or pressures; (g) presence of power dynamics or power imbalance; and (h) fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation.

A discussion and interpretation of the findings, along with recommendations and implications for practice are presented in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Implications

This mixed-methods study revealed the extent student affairs professionals in higher education identified moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators. In addition, this study identified the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. A survey instrument created by the researcher utilized the previously tested and validated Moral Distress Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). It was administered among student conduct administrators who were members of the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA). The resulting responses from 291 participants were analyzed according to the following three aims: (a) to quantitatively report the extent of moral distress among student conduct administrators, (b) to qualitatively report lived-experience sources of moral distress among the participants, and (c) to qualitatively describe constraining factors that inhibit ethical action among the participants. The key findings outlined in the previous chapter include the following:

1. The mean moral distress rating reported on the 11-point Moral Distress Thermometer was 4.39 ($n = 291$), which was associated with the verbal anchor of uncomfortable (Wocial & Weaver, 2013).

2. The results suggest moral distress is highest among the following groups:
   a. SCAs who work at 2-year public institutions ($x = 5.14$) and four-year public institutions ($x = 4.58$);
b. SCAs who serve in student conduct director positions ($x = 4.68$);

c. SCAs who have 6 to 11 years of service in the profession ($x = 4.79$);

d. SCAs who identified as female ($x = 4.50$);

e. SCAs who were 25 to 34 years of age ($x = 5.33$);

f. SCAs who were Black or African American ($x = 4.46$); and among

g. SCAs who worked in the southern region of the United States ($x = 4.76$).

3. Sources of moral distress for student conduct administrators included:

   a. Lack of agency or control;

   b. Compromised student learning;

   c. Behavior of colleagues;

   d. Public perceptions, pressures, and politics; and

   e. Resource limitations.

4. Behavior of supervisors, senior-level administrators, colleagues, and campus

   departments (e.g., Athletics, Greek Life, Alumni), emerged as the most

   frequent contributors involving experiences of moral distress for student

   conduct administrators.

5. Internal constraints preventing student conduct administrators from enacting

   moral action included:

   a. Fear of retaliation or job loss;

   b. Perceived lack of control or power;

   c. Desire to avoid conflict;
d. Socialization to follow orders;

e. Lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation;

f. Lack of assertiveness;

g. Self-doubt or inability to make decision;

h. Perceived obligations to institution; and,

i. Discrepancy between personal and organization values.

6. External constraints preventing student conduct administrators from enacting moral action included:

a. Lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership;

b. Policies or practices that conflict with student development;

c. Unprofessional or manipulative colleagues;

d. Constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics;

e. Oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution;

f. Resource limitations or pressures;

g. Presence of power dynamics or power imbalance; and

h. Fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation.

The following chapter presents an interpretation of the key findings organized by research question. The chapter also includes a description of the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, implications for the field of higher education and student affairs administration, and a conclusion.
Interpretation of Findings

The following section presents an interpretation of the findings and is organized by research question. In addition, when relevant, this section includes where the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline by comparing them with what has been found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2.

Research Question 1a

To what extent does moral distress exist among college and university student conduct administrators within higher education?

The previous chapter established that the mean moral distress rating reported on the Moral Distress Thermometer was 4.39 (n = 291). This MDT rating was associated with a verbal anchor of uncomfortable (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) among student conduct administrators. This study was the first of its kind to document that moral distress does exist among student conduct administrators.

Of the 291 participants in this study, only five participants (1.72%) indicated they experienced no MD. This is an important finding because it suggests that MD is widely present in the lived workplace experiences of student conduct administrators. With a mean of 4.39 (n = 291) on the MDT, a mode of 2.00 (18.21%), and a median of 4.00 (11.68%), it was observed that 135 participants (46%) in this study reported their MD was over a five on the MDT. Verbal anchors of distressing, intense, and worst possible (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) were used to describe their level of MD in the workplace. With 46% of the participants in this study reporting higher levels of moral
distress than their SCA colleagues (\(x = 4.39\)), this group is at an increased risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and attrition.

**Research Question 1b**

*Do levels of moral distress differ by demographics (e.g., institution type, position type, years of service, gender, age, ethnicity, and region)?*

Based on the demographic survey findings and mean moral distress ratings as presented in the previous chapter, the results suggest moral distress is highest among participants who work at 2-year public institutions (\(x = 5.14\)) and four-year public institutions (\(x = 4.58\)), in student conduct director positions (\(x = 4.68\)), and among participants who have six to eleven years of service in the profession (\(x = 4.79\)). In addition, higher moral distress ratings were noted among females (\(x = 4.50\)), participants 25 to 34 years of age (\(x = 5.33\)), among Black or African American participants (\(x = 4.46\)), and among participants in the southern region of the United States (\(x = 4.76\)).

For all demographic areas collected, aside from institution type, ANOVA findings indicated that levels of moral distress do not appear to differ by demographic category. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant effect of institution type on moral distress ratings among respondents \([F(6, 284) = 2.16, p < .05]\) between three of the groups: community colleges, faith-based institutions, and among those who declined to reply. However, the data were adjusted for a small sample size by using a Bonferroni post-hoc analysis which indicated no statistical significance between groups.
The discovery that levels of moral distress do not differ significantly by demographic category suggests that student conduct administrators, regardless of institution type, position type, years of service, gender, age, ethnicity, or region, are likely to incur moral distress in workplace situations. Professionals who experience moral distress may experience an increased likelihood to burnout, turnover, or compassion fatigue associated with the crescendo effect (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). This is an important finding for senior-level leaders in higher education because it exposes a potential threat to retaining highly trained and qualified student conduct administrators.

**Institution type.** While the mean moral distress rating on the MDT was 4.39 among all participants in this study, it was highest among participants who identified working at a public 2-year institution (x = 5.14) followed by participants who worked at a public 4-year institution (x = 4.58). It was lowest among participants who identified working at community colleges (x = 3.00) followed by faith-based institutions (x = 3.37).

With experiences of MD lower among SCAs working at faith-based institutions, this finding seems to support previous research on job fit among student affairs staff being higher for those employed at faith-based institutions, versus secular institutions (Jackson, 2014). In addition, Dowd (2012) reported that SCAs at faith-based institutions and those working at smaller institutions were most frequently influenced by institutional mission. With MD reported lowest among SCAs employed at community colleges and faith-based institutions, this finding seems to support the
existing literature on the topic of institution type influencing how SCAs resolve ethical dilemmas. With moral distress highest among SCAs who work at public institutions, this finding may suggest that without an explicit connection of student conduct administration work to a common institutional mission, there exists an increased likelihood that moral distress may be present among SCAs. Since community colleagues and faith-based institutions generally emphasize a greater ethos around institutional mission (Dowd, 2012), this may be an indication as to why moral distress is lower in those professional environments.

**Position type.** Although one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of position type on moral distress ratings among respondents \( F = (7, 283) = 1.08, p > .05 \), it is noted that the respondents who reported the highest moral distress were those who indicated they served in the role of Director of student conduct \( x = 4.68 \) as well as those who indicated they served in the role of Associate/assistant director of student conduct \( x = 4.17 \), while those who indicated Senior student affairs officer ranked among the lowest MD on the MDT \( x = 3.80 \). Mean MD ratings for participants who indicated they served as Director of student conduct \( x = 4.68 \) and for those who declined to reply \( x = 4.62 \) were higher than the mean \( x = 4.39 \).

Bernstein Cernoff (2016) found that although SCAs experienced average levels of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress, those professionals managing Title IX adjudication experienced the highest levels of burnout. The findings of this study on MD among SCAs who served in Title IX roles found no statistical significance between the positions of the participants. Although
these findings do not explicitly support the findings of Bernstein Chernoff (2016), they do suggest that regardless of position, all SCAs experience MD to some degree.

SCAs in the director role reported the highest levels of MD and this could be an indication of the positionality of these professionals. This research seems to support previous research on hierarchies and that there can be unintended consequences of such structures (Mann, 2008; Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012). Directors are uniquely situated to carry out the daily operating functions for the unit, but also responsible to answering to the greater university leadership. As such, directors may find themselves in a position where it is not in the best interest of the institution to carry out a particular decision or sanction, although it indeed may be the most appropriate decision from a student development lens. While many times directors may be able to successful navigate these competing factors, this research suggests that when colleagues in positions of power dictate how or what decisions must be made, it may foster an environment of increased MD. Generally, it is the directors who have the highest level of education, training, and professional preparation to carry out their roles as SCAs. Since directors are the professionals reporting the greatest levels of MD, this finding is important for higher education leaders because it exposes a major threat to retaining these highly qualified SCAs. As a result, this finding suggests higher education leaders consider how hierarchy and power differentials present within their organizations are fostering MD and as a result they can work to reduce the associated factors contributing to the presence of MD among SCAs.
Years of service in the field and participant age. Participants who indicated they have served in the field for six to 11 years reported the highest MD (x = 4.79) which was higher than the mean (x = 4.39). However, those who served in the field for 12 to 20 years (x = 4.06) and over 21 years (x = 4.00) reported among the lowest MD. Participants who reported their age as 25 to 34 years old reported a mean MD rating of 5.33 on the MDT, followed by participants ages 35 to 44 (x = 4.57), 45 to 54 years of age (x = 4.42), 55 to 64 years of age (x = 4.00), and over 65 years of age (x = 3.44). The age categories of 25 to 34 years old (x = 5.33), 35 to 44 (x = 4.57), and 45 to 54 years of age (x = 4.42) where all above the mean (x = 4.39).

These findings suggest that MD may reduce with length of service in the field and may decrease with age. As previously established in the literature, burnout decreased with age and years in the profession for SCAs (Murphy, 2001). There was not a statistically significant difference in MD reported between the age groups in this study on MD among SCAs. However, the trend for MD to decrease with age was observed, even if by chance, which may support previous literature. Moeder (2012) established that age was the significant factor in impacting moral decision making. As the previous research on burnout decreasing with age indicated, this finding suggests that it may continue to be important for senior-level leaders to take proactive steps to address contributing risk factors exposed for younger student conduct professionals who may be most at-risk for experiencing MD and burnout. Younger or more novice SCAs may find themselves in situations where they are being instructed to carry out a specific decision, but they may not feel as if they possess a knowledge of the full
situation or awareness of alternatives and this may foster the presence of MD in their lived experiences. Creating opportunities for younger SCAs to train alongside experienced SCAs in an environment rich in support and open-dialogue may help minimize MD among this demographic. Research indicates that the ability to construct sound moral decisions increases with age (Moeder, 2012), so creating opportunities for novice staff to practice decision making in a safe environment free of associated or perceived risk factors may serve the field of student conduct administration well in that it may create an ethos of mentorship in both decision making and ability for staff at all levels to enact their moral agency.

**Gender.** Although an ANOVA revealed that there was no significant effect of gender on moral distress ratings among respondents \( F(3, 287) = 1.19, p > .05 \), females reported higher levels of MD \( (x = 4.50) \) than males \( (x = 4.16) \) in this study. The level of MD that females \( (x = 4.50) \) reported was also higher than the mean \( (x = 4.39) \).

The literature revealed that women reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and had lower salaries and fewer colleagues available to help them during the workday than their male counterparts (Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998). Nagle-Bennett (2010) uncovered male SCAs were significantly more satisfied in in their role than women. As such, the finding in this study where women reported higher levels of MD than men may indicate that women are at greater risk for experiences of MD which supports the previous research. This finding is important for higher education leaders to consider when designing mentorship
opportunities for women student affairs professionals. Blackhurst (2000) asserted that women with a mentor experience reduced role conflict and ambiguity. The evidence of emotional exhaustion, role conflict, and ambiguity in previous literature, supports this finding that the presence of MD in the lived experiences of female SCAs may indicate that this key demographic of SCA professionals may be at increased risk of departing the field due to compassion fatigue or burnout. As a result, a loss of highly skilled women from the field of SCA due to these associated factors may have significant unintended consequences for higher education leaders on how institutions serve their students through the student conduct process.

**Ethnicity.** Participants who identified as Black or African American reported the highest levels of MD on the MDT ($x = 4.46$), while participants who identified as White reported among the lowest MD on the MDT ($x = 4.29$), in comparison to a MD mean rating of 4.39 on the MDT for all groups combined. This finding was not explicitly tied to existing student affairs literature on staff burnout and attrition and should be further explored in future research. Mean MD ratings for participants who identified as Black or African American ($x = 4.46$), identified as other ($x = 5.33$), and for those who declined to reply ($x = 4.60$) were higher than the mean ($x = 4.39$).

The study of attrition in student affairs has been present in the literature since the 1970s (Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). However, it is unfortunate that there is not a more concerted effort to address the issue of attrition as it is related to race and ethnicity in the literature. A recent study addressed student affairs attrition among Asian Pacific Islanders (Nguyen, 2017), but
no literature beyond that explicitly attempts to answer attrition among student affairs professionals for other racial or ethnic demographics, such as Black or African American. This study uncovered that Black and African Americans reported the highest levels of MD. However, due to the lack of student affairs literature on this topic, it is unclear why. Future research could explore how increased experiences of MD among SCAs could be related to race and ethnicity.

**Region.** Moral distress was reported highest among participants who identified as working in the south region of the United States ($x = 4.76$), while respondents who identified as working in the Midwest region of the United States reported among the lowest MD ($x = 3.83$) on the MDT. Similar to the demographic category of ethnicity, this finding was not explicitly tied to existing student affairs literature on staff burnout and attrition and should be further explored in future research to determine if targeted interventions might be designed and offered to minimize MD for professionals in particular ethnicity or region categories.

**Summary.** Levels of moral distress for student conduct administrators do not differ significantly by demographic category. This finding suggests that student conduct administrators are likely to incur moral distress in workplace situations, regardless of institution type, position type, years of service, gender, age, ethnicity, or region. Previous literature indicates that professionals who experience moral distress may experience an increased likelihood to burnout, turnover, or compassion fatigue associated with the crescendo effect as a result of the accumulation of moral distress
Research Question 2

What are sources of moral distress, according to their lived experiences?

Through qualitative inductive content analysis of the 384 examples collected, the resulting analysis, as outlined in Chapter 4, revealed that sources of moral distress for student conduct administrators most frequently include sources related to the following five workplace situations: (a) lack of agency or control; (b) compromised student learning; (c) behavior of colleagues; (d) public perceptions, pressures, and politics; and (e) resource limitations.

Lack of agency or control. Four dominant narratives emerged from the data which indicated that (a) when a decision made by the student conduct administrator is overturned by an appeal board or senior-level leadership without rationale or explanation, (b) when the SCA experienced pressure or were negatively influenced by the behavior of leadership in the organization, (c) when a supervisor or senior-level leader has a different view and fails to provide context, or (c) when the SCA experiences a conflict of interest are all workplace situations that point to a lack of agency or control held by the SCA.

Compromised student learning. The findings indicated that when SCAs were concerned with compromising student learning due to (a) the student’s behavior, (b) limitations or inconsistency in the student code of conduct or student conduct practices, (c) when a student’s safety or their financial situation was impacted, or (d)
when student mental health concerns emerged, all contributed to workplace situations where the SCA experienced subsequent moral distress. Hoekema’s (1994) model of student discipline, which is grounded in moral formation, incorporates the following aims: (a) prevent harm to students, (b) prevent an atmosphere that undermines free discussion and learning, and (c) promote moral responsibility and community among students. The emergence of a theme surrounding compromised student learning in this study among SCAs who work to create, maintain, and uphold a student conduct process supports Hoekema’s (1998) three goals for student conduct administration. As such, moral distress can manifest in situations where the SCA encounters a workplace experience that may threaten these goals outlined by Hoekema (1998).

Participants wrote about experiences where the limitations or inconsistency in the student code of conduct or student conduct practices contributed to experiences of MD for SCAs. Scholarly literature by Hudson and Swinton (2013) and Lake (2013) identified that many institutions have adopted processes that resemble the judicial system, complete with legalistic terms to describe the conduct process. Lancaster and Cooper (1998) pointed out that when colleges and universities reflect the litigious and legalistic reality of American society, their organizations are often in direct contradiction with the student development aims of student affairs administration. The findings from this study on MD among SCAs suggests that it is in this threshold between the legalistic and developmental approaches of higher education administration that moral distress is present among SCAs. Participants identified that moral distress occurs in moments where they feel as if their work is compromising
student learning, which supports previous scholarly research that identified it was
more effective for SCAs to incorporate a student development approach with a
balance of justice and care in their work (Fitch & Murray, 2001; Lancaster & Cooper,
1998; Waller, 2013). Donald Gehring (2001), founder of the Association for Student
Conduct Administration, believed that “professionals should avoid focusing on the
legal and procedural necessities, because it is easy to overlook the learning that can be
gained from the process” (p. 466) and the findings of this study appear to support his
belief. In addition, the findings of this study further highlight the threat MD has to the
profession when SCAs are forced to place legal or procedural protocol before
addressing the student learning aims that ground the profession.

Prior research had established that management of student issues and student
mental health concerns were contributing factors related to vicarious trauma,
compassion fatigue, burnout, and staff departures (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Berwick,
1992; Brown et al., 1986; Cloud, 1991; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, &
Kicklighter, 1998; LaVant, 1988; Stoves, 2014). The findings from this study related
to student mental health, student safety and financial situations, and navigating student
behavior and issues add to the body of literature on the topic. The research seems to
suggest that the accumulation of moral distress over time, otherwise known as moral
residue (Webster & Bayliss, 2000), may have similar effects on burnout and staff
departures among SCAs.

Behavior of colleagues. The data indicated that moral distress was present in
situations described by participants when SCAs (a) witnessed colleagues engaging in
unprofessional behavior or inappropriate contact with students, (b) experienced colleagues from their own department or across the institution meddling or applying pressure in particular student conduct decisions, (c) observed colleagues implicitly or explicitly engaging in bias or favoritism, (d) or overheard colleagues using victim blaming language or causing disparate impact upon marginalized groups. Previous research among behaviors of student affairs professionals had not been identified in the scholarly literature. This finding may add to the body of literature on this topic and should be explored further in future research.

**Public perceptions, pressures, and politics.** Among the public perceptions, pressures, and politics present in the data, the workplace situations involving experiences of moral distress for SCAs included (a) when they had a fear of litigation or experienced pressure to mitigate institutional risk, (b) when parents or family members attempted to intervene or apply pressure in a situation, (c) when they faced public relations pressures or internal organizational pressures, and (d) when they perceived inconsistency in campus culture or unhealthy workplace politics at play.

Previous research had established the changing landscape of parental involvement in both involvement and advocacy of student discipline matters (Hudson & Swinton, 2013; Lake, 2013). Findings from this study seem to support that research, in that SCAs had identified the over-involvement of parents and the resulting added pressures they have imposed as root causes to situations involving the occurrence of MD in their work.
Resource limitations. Participants wrote about situations involving resource limitations as the source of moral distress in their workplace experiences, which included (a) fiscal or budgetary limitations, (b) personnel limitations or workload disparities, as well as (c) situations where declining or weak enrollment projections forced SCAs to refrain from suspending students when institutional precedent would have warranted such an outcome.

Participants wrote about personnel limitations and workload disparities as contributing situations involving the presence of moral distress. Previous research on staff attrition among student affairs professionals identified that as a result of staff departures, the resulting workload on the remaining employees in the department or unit was a significant factor related to the intent of those remaining staff to leave their current position (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Although this study did not seek to uncover the intent of SCAs to leave their position, previous research suggests that the presence of MD in their work may lead to staff attrition over time as a result of these factors.

Resulting impact from others upon experiences of MD. The data analysis also revealed that in workplace situations described by participants, most frequently, the behavior of the following groups of people contributed to experiences of moral distress for the student conduct administrator: supervisors, senior-level administrators, colleagues, and campus departments (e.g., Athletics, Greek Life, Alumni). Although not a research question at the outset of this study, the resulting impact from others upon the experiences of MD in workplace situations provided by participants emerged as an unexpected finding.
Summary. The workplace situations identified in this study that most frequently contributed to experiences of moral distress among student conduct administrators included (a) lack of agency or control over a decision or situation, (b) witnessing the compromise of student learning, (c) observing the unprofessional behavior of colleagues, (d) experiencing public perceptions, pressures, and politics, and (e) being restricted by resource limitations of the institution.

Research Question 3

What are the associated factors contributing to why practitioners felt constrained from engaging in ethical action?

Qualitative inductive content analysis of the 239 data points revealed both internal and external factors that constrain student conduct administrators from engaging ethical action or enacting moral action. While several of the factors align with the nursing literature, additional factors had been identified which may more closely relate to higher education administration. The following section provides a discussion of the findings for both the internal and external factors constraining practitioners from engaging ethical action or enacting their moral action.

Internal factors. As outlined in the previous chapter, among the internal factors identified in the participant’s narratives, the following nine constraints emerged from the data: (a) fear of retaliation or job loss, (b) perceived lack of control or power, (c) desire to avoid conflict, (d) socialization to follow orders, (e) lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, (f) lack of assertiveness, (g) self-doubt or inability to make decision, (h) perceived obligations to institution, and (i)
discrepancy between personal and organization values. The following were previously established in the nursing literature as commonly accepted root causes of moral distress due to internal constraints: lack of assertiveness, lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, lack of personal fortitude or character, perceived obligations, perceived powerlessness by a professional, self-doubt, or a socialization to follow orders (Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012).

While several of the internal factors that emerged from this study align with those identified in the nursing literature, there is some slight variation reflecting the nuance in the two disciplines. Table 18 provides a comparison of two bodies of research. What was most notably absent in the nursing literature was a fear or retaliation or job loss, desire to avoid conflict, and a discrepancy between personal and organization values. Uncovering these additional constraints supports Holzweiss and Walker (2016) research which identified self-management as a new type of ethical dilemma facing higher education administrators.
Table 18

Comparison of Internal Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As Established in this Study Among Student Conduct Administrators</th>
<th>Previously Established in the Nursing Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation or job loss.</td>
<td><em>Not specifically identified in the nursing literature.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of control or power.</td>
<td>Perceived powerlessness by a professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to avoid conflict.</td>
<td><em>Not specifically identified in the nursing literature.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization to follow orders.</td>
<td>Socialization to follow orders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation.</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge or alternatives to the full situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of assertiveness.</td>
<td>Lack of assertiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-doubt or inability to make decision.</td>
<td>Self-doubt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived obligations to institution.</td>
<td>Perceived obligations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy between personal and organization values.</td>
<td><em>Not specifically identified in the nursing literature.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not specifically identified in this study.*

Lack of personal fortitude or character.

These internal factors, together with those previously established in the scholarly literature from the field of nursing (Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012), provide higher education and student affairs administrators with new language to identify internal constraints which may be constraining them from engaging ethical
action or enacting moral action. Identifying these constraints may be among the first steps needed to begin taking steps to reduce MD among SCAs.

**External factors.** Among the external factors identified in the previous chapter, the following eight constraints emerged from the narrative data: (a) lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership, (b) policies or practices that conflict with student development, (c) unprofessional or manipulative colleagues, (d) constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics, (e) oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution, (f) resource limitations or pressures, (g) presence of power dynamics or power imbalance, and (h) fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation. The following factors were established in the nursing literature for why individuals felt constrained from engaging their moral action: fear of litigation, hierarchies or bureaucracy within the organization, inadequate department staffing, incompetent colleagues, institutional constraints or demands, interdisciplinary disputes, lack of administrative support, lack of collegial relationships, policies or priorities that conflict with care needs, power imbalance, pressure to reduce costs, or team conflicts (Austin et al., 2005; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012).

Generally only nuance in terminology was observed between how participants described the external constraints between the two groups of professionals, as illustrated in Table 19. However, what was absent from the nursing literature was what student conduct administrators in this study described as a lack of support from their supervisor or senior-level leadership. 29.29% of the participant narratives collected in
this study indicated a lack of support from their supervisor or senior-level leadership as a factor in constraining them from engaging their ethical action. This lack of support that SCAs identified is concerning. Lombardi (2013) reported that student affairs professionals indicated low levels of satisfaction with the supervision they receive. In fact, it may be a contributing factor in a variety of the other external constraints that SCAs identified, such as the behavior of their colleagues, institutional politics, oppressive hierarchies, or power dynamics. For instance, Nagle-Bennett (2010) found that institutional politics were a major factor in job dissatisfaction among SCAs. Research on hierarchy uncovered that it can have unintended consequences for an organization at any level (Mann, 2008; Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2012).
Table 19

*Comparison of External Factors Constraining Practitioners from Engaging Ethical Action or Enacting Moral Action*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As Established in this Study Among Student Conduct Administrators</th>
<th>Previously Established in the Nursing Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from supervisor or senior-level leadership.</td>
<td><em>Not specifically identified in the nursing literature.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies or practices that conflict with student development.</td>
<td>Policies or priorities that conflict with care needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprofessional or manipulative colleagues.</td>
<td>Incompetent colleagues, lack of collegial relationships, team conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints or demands influenced by campus culture and politics.</td>
<td>Institutional constraints or demands, Interdisciplinary disputes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive hierarchies or bureaucracy within the institution.</td>
<td>Hierarchies or bureaucracy within the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource limitations or pressures.</td>
<td>Inadequate department staffing, pressure to reduce costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of power dynamics or power imbalance.</td>
<td>Power imbalance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of negative publicity, litigation, or OCR Investigation.</td>
<td>Fear of litigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not specifically identified in this study.</em></td>
<td>Lack of administrative support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the external factors that emerged from this study, the most concerning may be the discovery that over 29% of the qualitative narratives that participants provided indicated that a lack of support from their supervisor or senior-level leadership as an associated factor in what constrained them from engaging in ethical action or enacting their moral action. The data suggest that is a significant finding and
should be addressed by higher education and student affairs leaders in an effort to minimize future experiences of moral distress for student conduct administrators.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations involving access to participants, instrumentation and survey design, demographic characteristics of participants, and the role of the researcher are outlined in the following section as considerations that presented the greatest compromise to the fidelity and trustworthiness of this study.

Providing participants with the ability to self-select participation in this study presented a limitation. Although the entire ASCA membership was invited to participate, any number of factors (e.g., work load, email or survey fatigue, or disinterest in the subject matter) could cause participants to not access and complete the survey. In contrast, any number of factors (e.g., negative experiences with campus colleagues, a poor relationship with their supervisor, or fatigue or burnout caused by other factors) could cause participants to opt-in and participate, particularly if they had a dramatic narrative and viewed the survey instrument as a way to vent or express their negative experience with anonymity. The workplace experiences of student conduct administrators who did not complete this survey were not represented in this study and the absence of their narrative also presented a limitation since their experience was not able to be documented in the findings.

An additional limitation is that the data collected was self-reported, which added subjectivity. The nature of self-reported data may have also created a situation where participants offered a specific narrative due to a desire for particular results. For
many respondents, participating in this survey may have been the first time they had ever considered the presence of moral distress in their work. They may have not had enough time to reflect on workplace situations where they experienced moral distress when prompted in the survey instrument. The instrument only captured their narrative at one particular moment in time. Depending on other factors, they may not have accurately or fully provided a complete example of the presence of moral distress in their workplace experience.

Another limitation existed in the use of the Moral Distress Thermometer. The MDT was tested for validity and reliability among nurses in a clinical setting. The use of this instrument in this study, without testing for validity or reliability among this specific population, may decrease its trustworthiness. However, it should be noted that the instrument was selected for this study because of its ease of use and design as a screening tool for acute moral distress. In the absence of other instrumentation that have been tested widely for validity and reliability among other occupation groups, the MDT presented the best option available to the researcher for the purpose of this study.

Since the researcher utilized a web-based survey instrument, rather than face-to-face interviews for example, there was no opportunity for the participants to ask clarifying questions about moral distress to the researcher before responding. The inclusion of an operational definition of MD along with examples from practice at the start of the survey was designed with the intention to help address some of those issues. However, it could be plausible that it would not have been enough context for
all respondents, therefore distorting the narrative they provided when completing the instrument.

The use of both the ASCA membership list serve and an on-line survey instrument was both purposeful and convenient, which contributed to the limitations of this study. However, frequently throughout the qualitative content analysis process, the researcher returned to the narrative data to check text segments against category definitions to enhance the reliability of the findings. Qualitative data were double coded by fellow researchers to check for reliability and increase dependability.

The timing of this survey administered in September 2017 presented a limitation. For institutions on the semester-schedule, September annually marks a period for student affairs professionals after a very busy month of activities related to the launch of the academic year. This includes a potential increase of conduct-related meetings and workload due to students violating the student code at the beginning of the semester. For institutions on the trimester-schedule, September annually marks a very busy month in preparation for the launch of a new academic year. This includes additional meetings and trainings for new staff. In both cases, September can be a very busy time for student conduct administrators. A survey offered during this time may have been overlooked by the recipients’ due to other pressing agenda items that needed to be accomplished, which may have resulted in a lower response rate compared to if the survey was administered during a different time of the year.

Completing the demographic questions in the survey instrument was not required. As a result, a group of respondents declined to reply (n = 82) to the
demographic questions. While the reason is unknown for why some participants elected to not provide demographic information, one possible reason could be that doing so could further protect their anonymity. However, doing so prevented the researcher from fully analyzing the presence of moral distress in each particular demographic category. In addition, a low response rate from participants age 25 to 34 years old ($n = 3$), American Indian or Alaska Native ($n = 1$), Asian ($n = 4$), and Black or African American ($n = 24$), in contrast to an overrepresentation of whites (59.11%) also presented a limitation in this study.

The demographic categories for institution type were used in this study to be consistent with the ASCA-defined categories. However, since multiple selection options were provided for participants to choose, it is unclear if participants accurately described themselves in this category. For instance, a participant who worked at a Jesuit institution would have to select both *four-year institution* and *faith-based institution* in the demographic category. In this example, if the participant only selected one or the other, the full representation of their institution type would not have been captured in the results and analysis. This presented a limitation in that the extent to which institution type was accurately reported by participants is unknown.

The researcher is a current higher education and student affairs administrator and has supervisory responsibility for the student conduct functions at his institution. In addition, previously he had worked as a student conduct administrator in a variety of roles at several institutions, both in public and private higher education. To minimize researcher bias in this study, the researcher incorporated several measures
such as utilizing an anonymous survey instrument, as well as using three fellow researchers to serve as triangulating analysts during the coding phase of this study. Regardless of the measures put in place, the researcher’s personal lived experiences and positionality as a student conduct administrator present possible biases, and therefore are a limitation to this study.

As in any study, limitations are inevitable. Limitations were minimized to the greatest extent possible in an effort to address the research questions outlined in this study with fidelity and trustworthiness. Among the limitations outlined previously, they can be summarized in the following two questions: (a) whose workplace experiences are not captured in the data and results, and (b) is a particular participant narrative over-represented in the data and results due to the opt-in nature of the instrument?

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to report the extent student affairs professionals in higher education identified moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and to identify the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals. Now that a moral distress mean rating of 4.39 ($n = 291$) was reported on the Moral Distress Thermometer with a verbal anchor of uncomfortable (Wocial & Weaver, 2013) among student conduct administrators, future research is necessary to explore the results of moral residue and the effects of the crescendo effect upon this population. While this study documented initial distress (moral distress), gaining a deeper understanding of the resulting
reactive distress (moral residue) may provide additional insight into (a) how SCAs respond to moral distress, (b) the short- and long-term effects of moral distress among SCAs, as well as (c) how the workplace culture influences the experience of moral distress among SCAs. Utilizing the model of the crescendo effect (Epstein & Hamric, 2009) as a framework for future research, will provide insight into how burnout, compassion fatigue, and turnover may impact the field of student conduct administration in higher education.

It would provide an additional level of insight for future research to investigate how acute moral distress impacts student conduct administrators. Well established in the nursing literature is the study of acute moral distress (Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984; Jameton, 1993; Marshall, & Epstein, 2016). Designing future research in this field to measure the presence of acute moral distress among student conduct administrators will allow researchers to explore the degree to which this population compares to other occupations, such as nurses. The results may provide insight into useful interventions, training, or education that may benefit the field of higher education and student affairs administration. Specifically, training in the area of moral resiliency and agency has been met with success in nursing and may have applications for the work of the SCA in developing their moral resiliency.

An additional recommendation for future research would be to understand how university leadership can adjust their leadership style, shape institutional culture, or design organizational structures to reduce or minimize the likelihood for student
conduct administrators to experience moral distress in the workplace. Investigating how positional power, institutional hierarchy, and power imbalance may create an environment conducive for experiencing moral distress may be useful in understanding what interventions could be made to reduce the occurrence for moral distress for the student conduct administrator.

**Implications for Practice**

As a result of this study, the field of higher education and student affairs administration now has new language to describe workplace situations where student conduct administrators may be unable to enact their moral action due to internal or external constraints. Quiles (1998) reported that “personal, structural, and environmental factors are important predictors of burnout symptomatology” (p. 129). As such, appropriate management of work-related factors within student affairs is key for reducing the risk of burnout (Quiles, 1998).

Results of this study point to several local and national implications for practice. At the local or internal level, the data in this research suggest that some slight changes could be enacted immediately that may relieve experiences of moral distress for student conduct administrators. The local or internal recommendations outlined in this section may provide the greatest potential for impact to occur. While, in other cases, moral distress is the result of greater systemic issues within higher education and student affairs administration. At the national or external level, these recommendations may require additional study or greater adjustment to organizational
culture in order to minimize the likelihood for student conduct administrators to experience moral distress.

**Recommendations for Local Action.** According to the findings in this study, the following are among the implications for practice that may be considered by higher education and student affairs leaders at the local or internal level in order to begin to address ways in which experiences of moral distress may be minimized or reduced for student conduct administrators:

1. Based on the findings of this study, institutions could take this as an opportunity to conduct an analysis on how sanctioning guidelines are communicated or prescribed for the various levels of student conduct administrators. For institutions with highly-scripted or rigid sanctioning rubrics, relaxing the expectation for student conduct administrators in having to follow the rubric in all instances may reduce the likelihood of SCAs experiencing constraints in enacting their moral action. Participants wrote about how rigid sanctioning guidelines compromised student learning and resulted in workplace experiences of moral distress. For instance, allowing SCAs to permit students to pay for fines with community service hours was mentioned in the data as a way to minimize experiences for moral distress for SCAs due to the belief that a student’s financial situation had the potential of compromising their learning. Allowing the SCA to use an established rubric as a guide but not a mandate may allow for them to enact their moral action to a greater degree as a
skilled and highly trained professional and would support Hoekema’s (1994) model of student discipline grounded in moral formation. In addition, doing so may create latitude for SCAs to have more professional judgment in their decision making around student conduct outcomes and sanctioning and may address Donald Gehring’s (2001) cautionary assertion he made to SCAs when he wrote “professionals should avoid focusing on the legal and procedural necessities, because it is easy to overlook the learning that can be gained from the process” (p. 466).

2. Create opportunities for student conduct administrators to consult with one another to discuss sanctioning options that could be tailored to an individual student. Tseng (2002) recommended providing staff with ways to navigate stressful or demanding job conditions is a key component in cultivating higher job satisfaction among student affairs professionals. The aim of these discussions would be to allow the SCA the opportunity to consult with colleagues or a supervisor, but care should be made to ensure that positional power remains in check to prevent from the SCA feeling pressured to make a particular decision or assign a specific sanction. The data suggest that the addition of weekly deliberation meetings for SCA staff may suffice. However, in smaller organizations, a special meeting format with other individuals responsible for the oversight of university conduct could be explored. Due to power dynamics that were described in the participant narratives, it may be helpful for this meeting format to be
separate and distinct from the regularly scheduled supervision meeting with
the SCA to assist in setting clear parameters around the unique decision-
making role the SCA plays in the student conduct process.

3. Create training resources, documents, or manuals for orientation and
training new student conduct staff. The data suggest that doing so would
provide SCAs the opportunities to learn about institutional precedent
without needing to review actual case files from previous students.
Providing case studies for new staff to practice, would allow for
supervisors to check for understanding and assist in the calibration and
formation of new staff within institutional mission, culture, and
expectations early on in their orientation and training experience at the
institution. In addition, it would provide SCAs with the opportunity to
rehearse ethically challenging situations in a low-stakes environment with
positive outcomes. Holzweiss and Walker (2016) identified the top five
ethical dilemmas faced by higher education administrators as (a) justice,
(b) beneficence, (c) fidelity, (d) autonomy, and (e) nonmaleficence, which
could serve as a foundational point for the creation of specific case studies
for SCAs. The data indicated that among the associated factors
constraining practitioners, a lack of support from supervisors or senior-
level leadership, self-doubt or inability to make a decision, or lack of
knowledge or alternatives to the full situation, are what prevented them
from engaging their ethical action. Professionals in the field for less than
five years reported a mean MD rating on the MDT of 4.06, while a mean MD rating of 4.79 on the MDT was reported for professionals in the field for six to 11 years, which may indicate that professionals serving less than 11 years may be at an increased risk of experiencing MD. Specific training materials and intentional supervision early on in the orientation and training process may assist in minimizing these associated factors.

4. Student conduct administrators can engage in self-directed activities which promote resilience protective factors and moral agency. Holzweiss and Walker (2016) identified self-management as a new type of ethical dilemma facing higher education administrators. Research indicates that when resilience is low, moral distress is high (Rushton, Caldwell, & Kurtz, 2016; Rushton, Schoonover-Shoffner, & Kennedy, 2017). Therefore, as established in the nursing literature, increasing resilience for the professional has shown to decrease in moral distress (Rushton, Caldwell, & Kurtz, 2016; Rushton, Schoonover-Shoffner, & Kennedy, 2017). If student affairs were to adapt these existing recommendations, then engaging in regular self-reflection and values clarification may assist the SCA in developing resilience protective factors as well. In addition, further development of interpersonal communication techniques may provide the practitioner with a greater ability to enact their moral agency in ethically challenging situations. Engaging in self-reflection, values clarification, and developing communication strategies will promote resilience protective
factors among SCAs may decrease experiences of moral distress in the workplace. These implications outlined above support the professional standards on personal and ethical foundations which identify that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary as markers of advanced professional dispositions include: (a) model adherence to ethical guidelines and mediate disparities, (b) consult with colleagues and students to provide ethical guidance, (c) develop and support an ethical workplace culture, and (d) dialogue with others concerning the ethical statements of professional associations (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

5. Participants in this study shared personal examples which indicated that some campuses have developed a culture where colleagues outside of the student conduct office have been observed meddling or applying pressure upon the work of the SCA. Specifically, the data suggest that senior-leadership and colleagues in other campus departments were among contributing factors within the workplace situations contributing toward moral distress for SCAs. Senior-level administrators may consider conducting an audit on their campus to see if these experiences are also present within their student conduct office and potentially contributing to experiences of MD among their SCAs. Brown and Gillespie (1999) suggest that moral distress may be present in the university, and the findings of this study seem support that conclusion. Within institutions where a culture of unclear parameters around the scope and purpose of the student conduct
office exists, senior level administrators who desire to change that culture in an effort to maintain fidelity in the student conduct process, could consider clearly articulating in both words and example to the campus community that it is inappropriate for colleagues or departments outside of the student conduct office to intervene or apply pressure upon professionals responsible for administrating the university’s student conduct process. Senior-level leadership setting the tone for what level of involvement is appropriate or allowed within an institution, especially among Athletics, Greek Life, or Alumni affairs, may assist in minimizing experiences of moral distress for SCAs.

6. As the data seemed to indicate, due to the high level of scrutiny and professional risk assumed by SCAs by the nature of their role, SCAs require additional support from their supervisor and senior-level leadership. Supervisors of SCAs are encouraged to find opportunities to offer affirmation and support for the work and contributions of these professionals. In many instances, SCAs reported that a fear of retaliation or job loss was what prevented them from engaging their moral action. In addition, SCAs reported that when their conduct decisions were overturned or when they felt pressure from leadership were among the factors that contributed to their experience of moral distress in the workplace. Buchannan (2001) reported that supervision was a significant factor to why new student affairs professionals depart the field. Supervisors can do a
great deal in creating a healthy workplace environment that fosters the ability for SCAs to engage in ethical action. Waller (2013) asserted that supervisors should begin asking how a decision was made, rather than asking why a decision was made. The data suggest that this change of approach may reduce experiences of moral distress. The data seemed to indicate that ensuring SCA staff feel supported in their role, empowered to have control over the student conduct process, and provided the necessary resources to do their job may have a positive impact in reducing opportunities for moral distress to occur.

**Recommendations for National Action.** As a result of the findings from this study, the following are among the implications for practice that may be considered by higher education and student affairs leaders at the national level in order to begin to address ways in which experiences of moral distress may be minimized or reduced for student conduct administrators:

7. Explore how industry-wide credentialing or standardized training may benefit new and experienced student conduct administrators, as it has other disciplines, such as nursing. Glick (2016) established that student conduct administration meets the established criteria as a profession. The timing may be right for leaders to now begin taking steps to offer credentialing for SCAs. The Association for Student Conduct Administration has much of the necessary foundation in place to begin this process, such as the ASCA Sexual Misconduct Title IX Institute
and the Donald D. Gehring Academy (http://ascagehring.com). Offering credentialing in the field of student conduct administration may create a new level of professional training and preparation for SCAs that could be specifically designed to minimize the constraints they experience in engaging their moral action.

With this new language to describe workplace situations where student conduct administrators may be unable to enact their moral action due to internal or external constraints, student affairs senior-level leaders can now work to address moral distress within the field of student affairs. In addition, future research will assist student affairs leaders in further understanding this problem of practice. The implications outlined above are a result of the data collected in this study. In several cases, small changes can be implemented immediately which may relieve experiences of moral distress for SCAs. However, in other cases, more significant shifts in institutional culture and workplace environments for SCA will be required in order to mitigate systemic root causes for moral distress among this population. While moral distress cannot be eliminated, working toward minimizing experiences of moral distress should be the aim (Epstein & Delgado, 2010; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Hamric, 2012; Jameton, 1984; Jameton, 1993). In addition, as evident in the nursing and healthcare literature, creating an organizational culture that is aware of the presence of moral distress and works actively to diminish it is indeed achievable and not insurmountable (Austin et al., 2005; Marshall, & Epstein, 2016; McCarthy, &
Deady, 2008; Oh, & Gastmans, 2015). Higher education and student affairs can now work toward a similar aim.

**Conclusion**

This study documented unique information that has not been previously reported in other moral distress literature. It presented a new foundational understanding of the lived experiences of student conduct administrators. The data indicated that moral distress is present among the student conduct administrators in higher education who responded to this survey. The results of this study assist higher education leaders with recommendations for how to promote healthy workplaces and where to target specific educational needs for student conduct administrators. This study identified several potential threats to retaining highly trained and qualified student conduct administrators’ due to the presence of moral distress in the workplace. By minimizing or reducing experiences of moral distress for this key group of student affairs professionals, higher education leaders can work to ensure that their college or university not only meets the legal and legislative obligations for student conduct best practices, but also offers a workplace environment where student conduct administrators can flourish, and potential experiences that could lead to burn-out and compassion fatigue are diminished.
References


Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education, 294 F.2d 150 (5th Cir. 1961).


*OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 15*(3), Manuscript 1. Retrieved from


Esteban v. Central Missouri State College, 415 F.2d 1077 (8th Cir. 1969).


*Nursing Forum, 23*, 16-29.


Appendix A

Permission to use Moral Distress Thermometer

---

**Haug, Christopher**

**From:** Wocial, Lucia D. <lwocial@LIUHealth.org>

**Sent:** Tuesday, June 27, 2017 12:10 PM

**To:** Haug, Christopher

**Cc:** Krautschaid, Loretta

**Subject:** RE: Permission to use MDT in dissertation study

Chris,

You are welcome to use the instrument for your project. I wish you the best of luck with it and will be eager to learn about your results.

Dr. Wocial

---

**From:** Haug, Christopher [mailto:haug@up.edu]

**Sent:** Friday, June 23, 2017 7:37 PM

**To:** Wocial, Lucia D.

**Cc:** Krautschaid, Loretta

**Subject:** Permission to use MDT in dissertation study

**** EXTERNAL Message From haug@up.edu. DO NOT open attachments or click links from unknown senders or unexpected emails. ****

Dr. Wocial,

Greetings! I'm a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Portland. A member of my dissertation committee, Dr. Loretta Krautschaid, who has used the MDT in her research in nursing, provided me with your contact information. I am writing today to seek your permission to use the Moral Distress Thermometer in my dissertation study.

Through my review of the literature, I have uncovered that a great deal of interdisciplinary application of moral distress in the field of education may exist. To discover if this is true, I plan to conduct a mixed methods study to explore to what extent student affairs professionals in higher education identify moral distress and associated factors in their roles as college or university student conduct administrators and identity the sources of this distress according to the lived experiences of these professionals.

By designing a Qualtrics survey as part of my study, the use of the MDT will allow me the opportunity to capture a reading of the participant's perceived moral distress, followed by an opportunity for the participant to provide a narrative of a lived experience where they recognized the presence of moral distress in their work.

I would be grateful if you would be willing to grant me permission to use the MDT as part of this groundbreaking interdisciplinary application of moral distress research within higher education/student affairs administration. If I can provide any additional information, please let me know. Thank you for your consideration and I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Chris
Appendix B

Qualtrics Survey Developed for this Study

Default Question Block

Participant Information Sheet
Identifying moral distress within student affairs administration:
Its sources and lived experiences among student conduct administrators

You are invited to participate in a research study which seeks to understand moral distress among student conduct administrators within student affairs administration, workplace situations contributing to moral distress, and reasons that administrators do not take action during distressing ethical situations. Findings from this study will help senior student affairs leaders prioritize and implement educational strategies to prevent the accumulation of moral distress and support student conduct administrators who are currently experiencing moral distress.

Moral distress is described as a phenomenon when you know the right action to take but feel constrained from taking it.

You are invited to participate in this study if you are currently a student affairs administrator. You will be asked to voluntarily complete a web-based survey. The survey is organized into three brief sections and will take approximately 8 to 10 minutes to complete.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study was obtained from the University of Portland. Completion of the survey constitutes consent. Study findings will be disseminated at conference presentations and publications in professional journals. No personally identifying information will be asked and anonymity will be protected. No one will be able to connect your name with study findings. You may exit the survey and end your participation in this study at any time. Participation as well as non-participation will have no influence on your employment or membership with ASCA. If you have questions or want to speak with the primary investigator, please contact Christopher Haug at haug@up.edu or dissertation advisor John Watzke, PhD, at watzke@up.edu.

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following survey. Survey completion implies consent to participate in the research. Please feel free to download and print a copy of this participant information sheet prior to beginning the survey.

Thank you for contributing to our understanding of moral distress among student conduct administrators.

In your current role, do you serve as a student conduct administrator?

- Yes
- No

Operational Definition of Moral Distress
Please read before beginning this study.

Moral distress is described as a phenomenon in which one knows the right action to take but is constrained from taking it (Jameton, 1984).

Moral distress, as discovered in other groups of professionals, can take various forms. In other words, moral distress in practice may not always look like a major ethical dilemma, but may present itself as rather smaller seemingly benign instances of ethical decisions which we make in our daily work.

Previous research on moral distress indicates you may feel constrained from taking what you know to be the correct action because of any number of reasons. These reasons may be either internal (perceived obligations, self-doubt over the decision, or lack of knowledge) or external (institutional constraints such as inadequate staffing in your department, hierarchy, power imbalance, or fear of litigation).

Please click the forward icon below to advance to the next page.
Examples of Moral Distress in Daily Work

Since you may not be familiar with moral distress, this summary is intended to help you understand what Moral Distress may look like in practice.

The following examples from practice are provided to help illustrate the various forms moral distress may take in our lives as student conduct administrators:

- A colleague comes into your office after a particularly challenging student meeting and shares with you a narrative of the student that both mocks and belittles the student.
- A coach calls you in your office after their student-athlete receives a charge-letter from you in response to a recent incident off-campus. The coach urges you to keep the student’s behavior in context because “they are a good kid and just made one small mistake.”
- A member of your institution’s fundraising/development office shares with you that a student currently scheduled for a conduct hearing is the son of a major donor prospect. She shares that this student comes from a good family that has the capacity to contribute generously to the institution if their student remains in good standing.
- You are aware that a colleague who has been particularly overworked in recent weeks has not updated their case notes or conduct letters in the student conduct database. Students have been calling the office to inquire as to why they haven’t heard anything about their conduct case.
- Your supervisor overturned your decision for a case you adjudicated.

Please click the forward icon below to advance to the next page.

The next portion of this study will ask you to consider how you may or may not have experienced moral distress in your own professional life.

Please click the forward icon below to advance to the next page.

By sliding the marker below, please select the number (0-10) on the Moral Distress Thermometer that best describes how much moral distress you have been experiencing related to work in the past academic year (Fall 2016-Fall 2017), including today (0 = no moral distress, 10 = worst possible moral distress).

Moral Distress Thermometer (Wocial & Weaver, 2013). Used with permission.
By sliding the marker below, please select the number (0-10) on the Moral Distress Thermometer that best describes how much moral distress you have been experiencing related to work in the past academic year (Fall 2016-Fall 2017), including today (0 = no moral distress, 10 = worst possible moral distress).

Please provide a brief description about a workplace example associated with your moral distress rating.

Please provide a brief description about any additional workplace examples associated with your moral distress rating.

Please share the reasons why you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.

Please provide a brief description of any additional reasons you felt constrained from engaging in ethical action or enacting your moral action.
Demographic Information:
This final section of the survey will ask you to share your demographic information.

Please select your current ASCA member region from the dropdown options below the map.

ASCA United States Regions
- West Region
- Midwest Region
- South Region
- East Region

Which category best describes your institution type? (please check all that apply)
- Private, 2 year
- Private, 4 year
- Public, 2 year
- Public, 4 year
- Community College
- Faith-based Institution
- Other

Which title best describes your position?
- Senior student affairs officer (VP, AVP) with conduct administration oversight
- Director of student conduct (chief student conduct administrator)
- Associate/assistant director of student conduct
- Student conduct coordinator/administrator
- Hall director, student affairs professional with conduct responsibilities
- Title IX coordinator or administrator
- Graduate student
- Other

How many years have you served in the student affairs/student conduct field?
- 0-5 years
What is your age?
- 6-11 years
- 12-20 years
- 21 or more years

To which gender do you most identify?

What is your ethnicity?
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other
Appendix C
First Invitation Email to Participants

Dear ASCA Member,

My name is Christopher Haug and I am conducting research as a part of my doctoral dissertation under the direction of Dr. John Watzke in the School of Education at the University of Portland. I am studying moral distress and its presence among student conduct administrators.

What is Moral Distress? Moral distress is described as a phenomenon in which one knows the right action to take but is constrained from taking it (Jameton, 1984). It has been shown to have emotional, psychological, occupational, and relational effects which can trigger, frustration, guilt, lowered self-esteem, and self-criticism in professionals. In addition, previous research has identified that it can fuel distrust in workplace relationships and compromise employee retention.

Why does it matter to our field? Given the limited empirical data on moral distress in student affairs administration, I am seeking a better understanding to what extent student conduct administrators identify moral distress in their roles and the sources of this distress according to lived experiences. Building upon previous research on burnout and compassion fatigue in our field, this research has the potential to help senior student affairs officers understand the unique challenges and distress that may be faced by student conduct administrators.

How to participate? Participating in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. Participation involves completion of an online survey. The survey should take approximately 8-10 minutes to complete. There are no known risks for participating in this study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but the researcher will not identify you or your institution.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. If you have any other questions, please contact me at 503-943-8113 or e-mail me at haug@up.edu. You may also contact Dr. John Watzke at 503-943-7135 or email at watzke@up.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the University of Portland Institutional Review Board, via e-mail at irb@up.edu. The study has received approval through the UP IRB process.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study. To take the survey, click on the following link: [MORAL DISTRESS](#).

Sincerely,
Christopher Haug
Doctoral Candidate, University of Portland
Appendix D

Second Invitation Email to Participants

Dear ASCA Member,

Two weeks ago, you were invited to participate in a research study that will examine how moral distress impacts student conduct administrators. If you have already completed the online survey, thank you for your participation. If you have not completed the survey, you are invited to complete the survey at this time by visiting the following link: MORAL DISTRESS.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous and simply involves completion of an online survey. The survey should take approximately 8-10 minutes to complete. There are no known risks for participating in this study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but the researcher will not identify you or your institution.

There are no known risks for participating in this study, and by participating you will support furthering the research about student conduct administration.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. If you have any other questions, please contact me at 503-943-8113 or e-mail me at haug@up.edu. You may also contact Dr. John Watzke at 503-943-7135 or email at watzke@up.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the University of Portland Institutional Review Board, via e-mail at irb@up.edu. The study has received approval through the UP IRB process.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study. To take the survey, click on the following link: MORAL DISTRESS.

Sincerely,

Christopher Haug
Doctoral Candidate
University of Portland
Appendix E

Final Invitation Email to Participants

Dear ASCA Member,

Earlier this month, you were invited to participate in a research study that will examine how moral distress impacts student conduct administrators. Moral distress is described as a phenomenon in which one knows the right action to take but is constrained from taking it (Jameton, 1984). Prior research has indicated that moral distress can have emotional, psychological, occupational, and relational effects which can trigger, among other things, frustration, guilt, lowered self-esteem, self-criticism, and self-blame. It can fuel distrust in workplace relationships and compromise employee retention.

It’s not too late to participate! This survey will close on October 1. Your participation is valued in this study. If you have already completed the online survey, thank you for your participation. If you have not completed the survey, you are invited to complete the survey at this time by visiting the following link: MORAL DISTRESS.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous and simply involves completion of an online survey. The survey should take approximately 8-10 minutes to complete. There are no known risks for participating in this study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but the researcher will not identify you or your institution.

There are no known risks for participating in this study. By participating, you will support furthering the research about student conduct administration.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. If you have any other questions, please contact me at 503-943-8113 or e-mail me at haug@up.edu. You may also contact Dr. John Watzke at 503-943-7135 or email at watzke@up.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the University of Portland Institutional Review Board, via e-mail at irb@up.edu. The study has received approval through the UP IRB process.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study. To take the survey, click on the following link: MORAL DISTRESS.

Sincerely,

Christopher Haug
Doctoral Candidate, University of Portland
Appendix F

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to participate in a research study which seeks to understand moral distress among student conduct administrators within student affairs administration, workplace situations contributing to moral distress, and reasons that administrators do not take action during distressing ethical situations. Findings from this study will help senior student affairs leaders prioritize and implement educational strategies to prevent the accumulation of moral distress and support student conduct administrators who are currently experiencing moral distress.

Moral distress is described as a phenomenon when you know the right action to take but you feel constrained from taking it.

You are invited to participate in this study if you are currently a student affairs administrator. You will be asked to voluntarily complete a web-based survey. The survey is organized into three brief sections and will take approximately 8 to 10 minutes to complete.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study was obtained from the University of Portland. Completion of the survey constitutes consent. Study findings will be disseminated at conference presentations and publications in professional journals. No personally identifying information will be asked and anonymity will be protected. No one will be able to connect your name with study findings. You may exit the survey and end your participation in this study at any time. Participation as well as non-participation will have no influence on your employment or membership with ASCA. If you have questions or want to speak with the primary investigator, please contact Christopher Haug at haug@up.edu or dissertation advisor John Watzke, PhD, at watzke@up.edu.

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following survey. Survey completion implies consent to participate in the research. Please feel free to download and print a copy of this participant information sheet prior to beginning the survey.

Thank you for contributing to our understanding of moral distress among student conduct administrators.
Appendix G

ASCA Research Committee Approval

Dear Christopher Haug,

The research committee has reviewed and recommended your study move forward for approval.

I have included Dr. Sarah Minnis from the ASCA central office to assist you with scheduling your study as she will be a primary point of contact for communication with the membership.

Congratulations and best of luck with your study moving forward.

Sincerely,

Adam Ross Nelson, JD PhD
Twitter @adamrossnelson
Mobile 608 770 9477
Appendix H
Institutional Review Board Protocol & Approval

Memorandum
To: Christopher Haug
From: Lauretta Frederking, Ph.D.
Date: August 8, 2017
RE: IRB Approval of University of Portland Project #2017088

Dear Christopher Haug:

On behalf of the University of Portland’s federally registered Institutional Review Board (IRB00006544), a member of the Board has reviewed your research proposal, titled “Measuring moral distress among student conduct administrators.” The IRB concludes that the project satisfies all IRB-related issues involving human subjects research under the “Exempt” classification. A printout of this memorandum should serve as written authorization from IRB to proceed with your research.

Projects classified as exempt based on Title 45, Part 46.101(b) of the Code of Federal Regulations do not require further review by University of Portland’s Institutional Review Board unless you modify some portion of your project. If the study is modified, you must submit a Continued Review Form (located on the IRB website) for continuing review before continuing with your project.

Please note that you are required to abide by all requirements as outlined by the Institutional Review Board.

A copy of this memorandum, along with your Request for Review and its documentation, will be stored in the IRB Committee files for three years from the completion of your project, as mandated by federal law. Thank you, and good luck with your project.

Yours truly,

Lauretta Frederking, Ph.D.
Associate Provost
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Political Science
Appendix I

Permission to use Crescendo Effect Model

Good morning Christopher and thank you for your email.
You can use the graph requested at no cost but you must credit the journal appropriately.
If you have any questions, please let me know.
Take care,
Mary Gesford

Hello,

I’m working on my doctoral dissertation and am writing today to inquire about how I could receive permission to include a figure in my dissertation that was originally published in the Journal of Clinical Ethics.

Specifically, I’m hoping to receive permission to use the Model of the Crescendo Effect (figure #1 included in the article). I’ve included the citation below:


If you are able to assist me, or able to point me in the right direction to make this request, I’d be very grateful. Thank you so much for your consideration!

Kind regards,
Chris

Christopher Haug