CONSENSUS FROM MID-LEVEL PROFESSIONALS ON CAMPUS REENGAGEMENT POST-PANDEMIC

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This Delphi study collected student engagement strategies used to reengage students post-COVID in campus activities. Integral to student engagement leadership, mid-level student affairs professionals possess the skills and experience to guide entry-level staff and advise senior-level administrators in decision-making. This study sought consensus from mid-level campus activities professionals to identify recommendations for successful event planning, coordinating, and programmatic interventions needed to connect with students post-COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of higher education. In response to outbreaks of COVID, colleges and universities closed their campuses, moving operations online to protect students, staff, and faculty members. While academic courses remained in session remotely in 2020, student affairs and activities all but halted as students moved home. Mid-level professionals led engagement efforts virtually and shepherded their entry-level colleagues along in support of students. Four years later, higher education institutions have rebounded, if not returned to "normal," once again offering in-person instruction and opportunities for students to socialize at campus events and activities. Student engagement has certainly increased since pandemic lows in 2020-2021 (NSSE, 2022), yet it is seemingly still recovering from disruptions to ways students connect with each other and their campus. While the rise in student engagement and participation in campus activities is due to institutions' return to in-person classes and activities, we were interested in the role that mid-level student affairs practitioners played in reengaging students in campus life. Their ability to connect with students, manage from the middle, advocate for entry-level professionals, and influence decision-making makes mid-level professionals an ideal population to learn from, particularly for new and emerging professionals.

The purpose of this study was to gather mid-level student affairs professionals' perceptions of the strategies and approaches needed to increase student reengagement in campus activities to foster

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student learning and development following virtual-only programming due to COVID-19. Mid-level student affairs administrators with campus activities experience across the U.S. were surveyed to understand effective engagement strategies and identify the needs of these professionals to reengage students on college campuses. As Renn (2020) posited about the return from remote learning and programming during a presentation at the Association for the Study of Higher Education national conference, "as we repopulate campus in a very embodied way, and particularly identities that are embodied identities, students with disabilities, queer students, students of color, how do we re-enter our spaces in a way that is more humane and more compassionate?" Our participants' responses shed light on ways student affairs practitioners intentionally created and reestablished such inclusive and humane spaces, reengaging students and fostering their development during a time of transition. This information will equip campus leaders with valuable information to better respond to the dynamic and uncharacteristic student experiences of the last few years that continue to impact college student engagement across the country.

Theoretical Framework

The frameworks guiding this study are Kuh's (2009) student engagement theory and Strayhorn's (2018) work on students' sense of belonging. Two components are important within Kuh's discussion of student engagement: a) the time students put into their studies and activities that lead to experiences and outcomes associated with student success, and b) how higher education institutions allocate resources and provide opportunities to encourage students to participate and benefit from the activities. Strayhorn (2008, 2018) related students' engagement in purposeful activities to their sense of belonging, explaining how positive interactions and experiences foster their connectedness to their university community and lead to student success. Students' sense of belonging influences important outcomes related to success, motivates and drives student behaviors and perceptions, and can lead to positive achievement, well-being, and happiness in their environment (Strayhorn, 2018). This study seeks to explore how mid-level student affairs professionals incorporate their expertise, research, knowledge, and institutional resources to engage students and promote their sense of belonging.

Literature Review

Student Engagement Pre and Post COVID-19

According to Kuh (2009), student engagement encompasses the time and effort students spend on activities "empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). The National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) (2021) annual results data indicate that certain types of student engagement decreased for the 2020-2021 academic year. NSSE reported that "forms of student engagement that have historically relied on face-to-face interactions or accessing services and attending events, including collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others, student-faculty interaction, and supportive

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environment, declined at many institutions" (NSSE, 2021, "How Engagement Shifted During the Pandemic" section). However, higher-order learning, reflection and integrated learning, quantitative reasoning, learning strategy, effective teaching practices, and quality of interaction did not decrease substantially. Notably, collaborative learning and supportive environment declined less for seniors compared to first year students, which could demonstrate that seniors navigated the pandemic's challenges by using pre-established support networks and knowledge of campus resources (NSSE, 2021).

Research has been conducted to understand the pandemic's impact on student learning and student engagement in and out of the classroom (NSSE, 2021). In 2022, modes of student engagement hinging upon interpersonal interactions, including those between students and faculty, with diverse others, and through collaborative learning, significantly increased (NSSE, 2022). Furthermore, first-year students' and seniors' time spent participating in co-curricular activities climbed, nearly reaching pre-pandemic levels (NSSE, 2022). Still, little research has been conducted to understand how mid-level student affairs professionals navigated the virtual reality, especially to identify approaches designed to maintain (and potentially increase) student engagement with campus programming, student organizations, event attendance, and student leadership involvement after the pandemic.

Findings from the COVID-19 Student Survey (Blankstein, 2020) identified that students lacked a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution during the first year of the pandemic. Bernadska et al. (2024) found that when asked about the pandemic's influence on their sense of belonging, the majority of students reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their institution's community. Significantly, many students attributed their disconnectedness to missing opportunities to socialize in face-to-face interactions with peers while attending campus events, utilizing university resources, and networking inside and outside of their classes (Bernadska et al., 2024).

Perozzi et al. (2022) examined student affairs work during COVID, specifically related to decision-making, essential services, financial impacts, and specific student populations' impact and support. This global study found that 72% of student affairs service practitioners across the world were excluded from the initial institutional meetings about COVID response, except in Asia where 51% reported being included. Perozzi et al. stated "the least likely to have attended initial meetings were SAS practitioners in North America (86%) and Oceania (84%) ... most SAS staff (85%) were included in managing institutional responses" (p. 24). Further, the study found that student affairs practitioners in North America expected their work to more permanently include online services post-pandemic. This study connects the prevalence of decision-making without student affairs professionals with the reality that these practitioners were the ones leading the required changes. This highlights some complexities associated with incongruence between institutional decision-making and student affairs professionals, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Student Affairs Professionals

According to Ackerman (2007), student affairs professionals on college campuses are unusual compared to corporate professionals because they are expected to possess leadership skills before taking jobs as mid-level managers, rather than developing leadership experience as middle managers. Like corporate middle managers, however, mid-level leaders of higher education are expected to "facilitate change" (p. 56). In recent decades, the number of higher education administrators has outpaced student enrollment growth (Weise & Christensen, 2014). Student affairs professionals have experienced increased burnout and stress (Marshall et al, 2016) that has caused professionals to exit the field (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006). This leaves gaps in student services and forces the remaining professionals to practice in a perpetual state of hiring and training new staff. Bodin and colleagues (2020) encouraged additional research to better understand student affairs staff retention. McNaughtan et al. (2023) studied the relationship between empowerment and known desirable outcomes in connection with employee engagement of directors of international student centers on college campuses across the United States. Staff empowerment arose as a topic for discussion among scholars of higher education who are seeking to increase employee satisfaction and engagement (Aithal, 2016; McNaughtan et al, 2019), yet the focus of these studies included increased sense of purpose (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997), and work conditions (Al Jabri & Ghazzawi, 2019; McNaughtan et al., 2019). One important constituency group often under researched includes mid-level student affairs professionals, as these are the practitioners who often must carry the additional labor when entry level professionals depart to different careers or when other mid-level professionals accept promotions to senior level positions. Mid-level professionals will be discussed in more detail below.

Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals

Often overlooked, mid-level student affairs professionals are the "unsung professionals of the academy" (Rosser, 2004, p. 317). They carry expertise that often goes unnoticed by faculty and upper-level campus administration and experience increased turnover. This group of professionals must juggle daily operations, delegate to other departmental professionals, and implement change. They guide entry-level staff and inform senior-level staff about what occurs on the local level. Rosser (2000) identified mid-level professionals as under-researched over twenty years ago, and that remains the case today.

Further, Rosser (2004) conducted a national study on mid-level leaders in higher education and found that professional and institutional work life perceptions have an impact on their satisfaction, morale, and turnover. McNaughtan et al, (2019) recognized mid-level higher education administrators as suffering from a lack of empowerment. Bodine Al-Sharif et al., (2020) attributed part of these issues to the "middleness" (p. 3) of these positions. Often this middle position leaves mid-level professionals with high levels of responsibility and expectation for job performance, yet they find themselves "invisible" (p. 3) within the academy. McNaughtan (2023) indicated that

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these aspects contributed to a lack of satisfaction within their roles. McNaughtan et al. (2023) studied empowerment and employee engagement of mid-level international center directors in the United States and found a positive relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction.

As mid-level administrators, these well-educated professionals perform demanding work, but rarely do these efforts reap recognition for a job well done (Johnsrud, 1996). One important aspect pertinent to our study is Rosser's (2004) finding that mid-level professionals desire recognition and respect for their expertise, both within the institution and in their individual units. Rosser found that this professional group received constructive feedback, trust, and guidance on their performance from senior administrators. They reported feeling pressure to perform and recognize the importance of providing effective leadership in their units. Routinely, mid-level professionals must juggle institutional decision-making and policy implementation. Rosser's study found that an increased respect for the contributions of mid-level professionals increases satisfaction and minimizes the likelihood that they will leave the institution. External relations, perceptions of their career support, and the responsibility to impose federal, state, and institutional policies also contribute to job satisfaction of mid-level professionals.

Positionality

Author 1 is a faculty member of higher education and student affairs at a public regional campus and serves as the program coordinator for the master's program in college personnel. Her research focuses on campus engagement, sense of belonging, and equity issues in higher education. She has experience in campus activities, alumni affairs, and advancement. She identifies as a cisgender, queer, white womxn with (dis)abilities.

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Methodology

Higher education research has utilized the Delphi method to study strategic planning (Murray & Hammons, 1995), competencies of entry-level student affairs practitioners (Burkard et al., 2005), and helping competencies of student affairs professionals (Reynolds, 2011). The Delphi method collects anonymous judgements from experts about a complex issue without face-to-face interaction. Franklin and Hart (2007) identified how the Delphi process provides an avenue to gather informed, focused, and objective insight from experts. This study seeks to identify strategies used by campus activities professionals to reengage students following the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to gather the strategies and approaches needed to increase student reengagement in campus activities from student affairs professionals working in campus activities-

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related professional roles following virtual-only programming to foster student learning and development.

The Delphi approach relies upon multiple rounds of data collection and analysis, wherein researchers analyze and summarize participant responses following each round of data collection, share those summaries with the participants in the study, and receive feedback from participants to build consensus among the expert panel. The Delphi method is a flexible, effective, and efficient methodological approach that can be successfully used to answer research questions that seek advice and knowledge from campus activities professionals to support students.

Participants

Recruitment for participation occurred on student affairs social media platforms and email via the college student personnel listserv, CSPTalk. Four requirements to establish "expertise" of participants were met. Those requirements were: 1) knowledge and experience with the issues under investigation; 2) capacity and willingness to participate; 3) time to participate; and 4) effective communication skills (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). Eight participants responded to the call to participate in this study. Six of the participants reported having 10 or more years working as a campus activities professional on a college campus, one had 4-9 years of experience, and one had 0-3 years. We included the participant with 0-3 years of experience because the participant met the recruitment criteria as a mid-level professional. All participants currently work in the Midwestern U.S. Three participants worked in the Southern U.S. for part of their career, while the other five have worked exclusively in the Midwest. Table 1 provides participant demographic information relevant to this study, primarily years of experience, institution type(s), and functional areas represented.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years of Experience	Institution Type(s)	Functional Areas Worked In
1	10+	2 Mid-size regional publics, 1 small private	Campus activities, student organizations, fraternity and sorority life, residential life, leadership development
2	10+	1 Mid-size regional public	Dean of Students, student activities
3	10+	1 small private	programming board
4	10+	1 mid-size regional, 1 large research	Student life, student involvement and leadership

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5	0-3	1 small private	university program board
6	4-9	1 small private	student life
7	10+	2 mid-size regional publics	residential life, women's resource center, Title IX, student success office
8	10+	1 mid-size regional	campus activities, career center

Procedure

The first-round questionnaire was distributed to participants in March 2023 and consisted of an open-ended questionnaire asking participants to share observations and ideas about engaging students in campus activities. Participants were encouraged to generate as many written responses as possible to three specific questions: a) What are the most important engagement strategies you have used when working with students since returning to face-to-face campus activities?; b) What professional development opportunities, educational resources, and/or on the job experiences have enhanced your engagement skills?; and c) What knowledge and information is needed to more adequately equip you to engage students in campus activities? Participants were given the opportunity to verify first round responses or make revisions.

Ongoing verification throughout the Delphi process is essential to improve reliability (Adler & Ziglio, 1996), which is why this verification loop is part of the research protocol. The results from round one were analyzed and used to develop a second-round questionnaire. Core themes were identified based on first-round tallies. An external auditor reviewed original data to ensure that each core idea was fairly represented. The result of this exercise was to provide a second survey where participants were asked to rank the importance of the items using a Likert- type scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (extremely important). Participants were given the opportunity to verify first-round responses or make revisions at the conclusion of each round, and the results for the preceding round moved the consensus-building process forward. Additionally, we established that interquartile 1 needed to be 2.6 or higher to be considered consensus for this study. This, coupled with the mean scores, helped us establish which strategies in the second round came to consensus.

During round three, participants were asked to respond to two rankings from the second round: median and interquartile range. The median divided the responses from participants into two equal halves: the point below which 50% of the respondents fell. The interquartile range provided a range for how much consensus participants had built around a certain item. The score was determined by subtracting the 25^{th} percentile from the 75^{th} percentile. Scores closer to 0 represented high consensus among respondents about an item, and scores closer to 7 represented limited consensus about an item. The results provided insights from experts and are discussed in the findings section.

Findings

The data collection process stretched over March and April 2023. In the first round of the survey, participants identified 41 engagement strategies to encourage student participation in face-to-face activities. Many of these strategies included ways to promote campus events (e.g. creative promotion, email, newsletters), different event types and ways to connect with students (e.g. quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please, hybrid options, teambuilding activities, formal and informal one-on-one meetings with students), and personal and professional elements that student affairs practitioners can employ (e.g. being authentic, showing up and being visible in student spaces, having activities "with" them rather than "for" them).

In round two, we shared those engagement strategies with the expert panel and asked them to rank the importance of utilizing each strategy. Following our analysis of their rankings and measurement of consensus levels for each engagement strategy, we found that our participants had come to consensus on 18 out of 41 total strategies. These 18 engagement strategies and their consensus levels are shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

In round three, we asked our expert panel to rank the importance of the 23 strategies about which they did not come to consensus during round two, shown below in Table 2. These strategies included: phone calls, collaboration with faculty, craft related activities, emails, game nights, grab & go events, hybrid option for attendance, newsletters, one-on-one meetings, restorative justice-based community building, team building activities, to name a few. Of the 23 other strategies, the panel came to consensus around one additional strategy in round three: knowing what other events are happening on campus, shown in Table 6.

Table 2. *Student Engagement Strategies that Did Not Reach Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	**Mean**	**Quartile 1**	**Consensus Level**
One-on-one meetings with students (informal)	3.71	2.14	1.86
Installation pieces (passive programming)	3.4	1.5	1.75
Hybrid option for attendance	3.33	2.5	1.5
Knowing what other events are happening on campus (for scheduling purposes)	3.25	3	0.75

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Partnering with academic departments	3.25	3	0.75
Craft related activities	3.17	2.4	1.43
Restorative justice-based community building strategies	3.17	2.4	1.43
Using student engagement platform computer software (Presence, Classdojo, etc.)	3.17	2.4	1.43
Collaborate with faculty in classrooms	3.14	2.5	1.21
Small group meetings	3.14	2.5	1.21
Team building activities	3.14	2.5	1.21
One-on-one meetings with students (formal)	3.13	2.5	1.5
Game nights	3	2.2	1.47
Grab-and-go events (take materials, etc.)	3	2.33	1.34
Seek out teaching assistants and graduate assistants for assistance with advertising	3	2.2	1.6
Pop-up events	2.86	2.29	1.21
Surveys/feedback	2.83	2.17	1.43
Emails	2.63	2.13	0.87
Overlapping options/choose your own adventure type of programming	2.6	1.83	1.55
Practical training workshops	2.5	2	1.17
Promoting on campus intranet (listservs, campus updates, etc.)	2.43	1.75	1.25
Phone calls	2.38	2	1

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Newsletter	2.3	1.4	1.6

Student Activities

All engagement strategies participants identified in the student activities category related to connections professionals can make with students and programming that directly address the students' interests and needs. These strategies and their consensus levels are shown in Table 3 and included: connecting with students and their friends, in-person event attendance, designing around students' interests, creating gathering opportunities, quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please, skill development with an emphasis on socialization skills, and word-of-mouth promotion among students. Participants ranked these six engagement strategies the highest in the second survey when asked to rate the importance of each strategy for campus activities professionals to reach positive student reengagement on college campuses.

Table 3. *Student Activities Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	**Mean**	**Quartile 1**	**Consensus Level**
Connecting with students and their friends	3.71	3.14	0.75
In-person event attendance	3.38	3	0.88
Designing around students' interests	3.88	3.38	1
Creating gathering opportunities	3.29	2.6	1.26
Quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please	3.43	2.75	1.25
Skill development with an emphasis on socialization skills	3.43	2.75	1.25
Word-of-mouth promotion among students	3.43	2.75	1.25

Institutional Allocation

Engagement strategies identified as extremely important in the institutional allocation of resources category were those that cost time, money, or resources. These suggestions and their consensus

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levels are shown in Table 4 and included: creative promotion, enhancing and adding resources to student-planned events, partnering across campus by joining in on events that are already happening on campus and planned by other areas, and utilizing social media to reach students.

Table 4. *Institutional Allocation Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Enhancing and adding resources to student-planned events	3.5	3.14	0.5
Creative promotion	3.5	3	1
Partnering across campus by joining in on events that are already happening on campus and planned by other areas	3.0	3.25	1
Utilizing social media to reach students.	3.71	3.14	0.86

Professional Elements

Finally, strategies in the professional elements category were those that aligned with professionals' training and experience as student affairs practitioners. These strategies are shown below in Tables 5 and 6 and included: being authentic, accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID, making it fun for students and different from coursework, making individual connections with students at large campus events, rebuilding community, showing up and being visible in student spaces, and knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes. Interestingly, knowing the campus calendar was not originally selected in the second round of the survey, yet all but one participant qualified it as "extremely important" in the third round.

Table 5. *Professional Elements Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Being authentic	4	4	0
Accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID	3.5	3	1

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Making it fun for students and different from coursework	3.63	3.13	1
Making individual connections with students at large campus events	3.5	3	1
Rebuilding community	3.88	3.38	0.62
Showing up and being visible in student spaces	3.63	3.13	0.87

Table 6. *Professional Elements Response that Reached Consensus in Survey 3*

Engagement Strategy	**Mean**	**Quartile 1**	**Consensus Level**
Knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes	3.86	4	0

Implications

Understanding how mid-level campus activities professionals engage students on college campuses following the pandemic is essential to provide robust educational and programmatic approaches to engagement on college campuses. The findings above indicated the importance of Kuh's (2009) understanding of student engagement and Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging. Throughout this section we articulate the ways that student engagement hinges on time and resources to promote student success. This study could assist professionals with decision-making approaches and developing beyond-the-classroom skills in students. Furthermore, it may provide insights for new professionals about how mid-level professionals prioritize their student engagement work. Many studies (e.g. Blankstein, 2020; Bernadska et al., 2024; Perozzi et al., 2022) that have occurred regarding campus engagement post-COVID have not included the perspectives of trained student affairs professionals, thus this study brings necessary considerations for practice.

Regarding engagement strategies for student activities, our panelists' responses reflect that student affairs professionals should be fostering connections with and among students, creating gathering opportunities, and designing programming around student interests. Panelists reached the highest consensus around professionals connecting with students and their friends, and emphasized that intentional programming should bring students together, cater to their interests, and help them

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socialize. Simultaneously, however, our expert panel came to consensus around planning quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please. Taken together, these responses indicate that while students are looking for individual connections with each other and student affairs professionals, they are also looking for events in which they can get the information or interactions they seek and leave. This poses a challenge for current student affairs administrators related to relationship building and fostering student leadership capacity. For example, these large-scale events often help professionals identify student interest and build rapport for future engagement opportunities, specifically in terms of recruiting student leaders to champion certain student-led events. This shift toward grab-and-go events may pose future challenges for student affairs professionals who rely on student leaders and student interest to shepherd programs.

While participants indicated that both are true, this contrasts with how large-scale campus events are often designed and managed, leaving students who seek community unable to find it. Such events are often an opportunity for professionals to create touchpoints with many students with the intent to establish a relationship later, yet our panelists' responses suggested that students may seek a deeper connection and one-on-one attention despite the event's scale. Considering the panel did not come to consensus around reengaging students in formal and informal one-on-one meetings, their responses show that student affairs professionals should be prepared to make individual connections with students during large, ongoing campus events. Consequently, building relationships with students and catering to their individual needs should be incorporated into large-scale campus event design. One way to respond to student needs could include mid-level professionals' intentional overstaffing of events, regardless of size, to allow a space for students to engage in private, meaningful interactions in public spaces when they pursue that deeper connection. We recognize the staffing challenge this poses for an already understaffed profession. Imagining a way to centralize distribution of materials for large-scale events could maximize the student affairs professionals' availability during the event to engage with students rather than performing some of the manual tasks associated with setup or teardown. Considering ways to use existing technology provided by third-party vendors could also be a vital mechanism to promote engagement between professionals and students.

Our expert panel's responses regarding event planning and marketing showed that student affairs practitioners should take steps to maximize resources and connections in order to reach students. Panelists' consensus around creative promotion, using social media, and relying on word-of-mouth promotion among students shows that the ways we reach students are evolving and that professionals should appropriately market events through channels students actively use. The panel also shared that professionals should find ways to join events that are already happening, either by partnering across campus to join events planned by other areas or working with student groups to add resources to student-planned events. These findings reflect that student affairs practitioners now rely heavily on collaboration to connect with students, which responds to Ackerman's (2007) call for increased collaboration between student affairs units and between

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student affairs and faculty departments. Doing so maximizes efficiency, time, costs, and resources, as professionals can promote their area's goals and mission at existing programming. While partnering in this way ensures the visibility of professionals' offices at larger events, we recognize that it can be difficult to influence the shape of a program to create space for meaningful interactions with students when other organizers have all but solidified its design. Professionals should thus consider how impactful joining already-planned events may be for their offices, recognizing there may be a tradeoff for unequal event contribution among campus partners and student groups.

Establishing a relationship with other offices, departments, and student groups proves vital, as does the knowledge and access to the larger campus calendar. Most often, joining preplanned programming requires an invitation to contribute from the organizers before the event is marketed to the rest of campus. Thus, professionals must know other areas well enough to receive an invitation to collaborate or must know which annual events are upcoming to initiate a partnership with organizers. This creates a barrier for student affairs practitioners who are new to their role or institution and have not yet built rapport or established a network with key campus allies. New professionals may similarly be unfamiliar with the campus events calendar to know what annual events and existing programs are upcoming that would be beneficial for their office to join.

Panelists emphasized the importance of knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes in round three. Awareness of other campus events may not have been selected in the second round because for some professionals their institution's campus calendar may be inaccessible or underutilized. We recognize that at some institutions the presumably accessible campus calendar serves as an institutional bureaucratic measure that may not wholly portray engaging opportunities across campus for a variety of reasons and therefore may not have been at the forefront of participants' thinking when they responded. Still, panelist responses demonstrated that knowing the calendar is not only essential for scheduling events at times when students are available and to avoid overlapping with other programs and events, but also important for initiating collaboration with campus partners.

Though participants were asked to identify engagement strategies, they also identified values and personal characteristics such as being authentic and accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID as key professional elements to help reengage students. Significantly, panelists reached the highest consensus around being authentic. Maintaining authenticity is crucial to professionals' interactions with students, especially as students connect differently post-pandemic. Indeed, it is a learning process for practitioners to adapt to new ways students establish relationships, not only with offices and campus activities, but with each other. Doing so requires that professionals share their authentic selves and embodied identities (Renn, 2020) in their work to create spaces of trust where students can feel supported enough to do the same. We believe that being authentic with students is an important part of fostering meaningful and rich interactions, yet we recognize that authenticity can and should mean different things for individuals who work

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within a variety of spaces and for those with marginalized identities. Authenticity is about being candid and sincere, remaining true to oneself, and critically reflecting on one's social identities (Sergev et al., 2024). However, candidness and sincerity do not equate with full transparency with students and colleagues. While we encourage professionals to be authentic with students and remain true to themselves in their work, we are sensitive to how mentally and emotionally draining it can feel for one to bring one's full self to student affairs work. Through an examination of Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs professionals, Martinez-Benyarko et al. (2023) re commended increasing administrators' mentoring experiences to promote upward mobility for Latinx/a/o representation within the higher education leadership hierarchy. These types of mentorship opportunities for minoritized and underrepresented mid-level student affairs professionals may alleviate some of pressure to conform and promote authenticity within the workplace.

Other professional elements that panelists agreed upon included rebuilding the community, showing up and being visible in student spaces, making connections at large events, and making events fun and different from students' coursework. Their responses demonstrate that as students spend less time seeking out student affairs offices, activities, and one-on-one meetings, professionals should meet students where they are—literally and figuratively. Practitioners should meet and connect with students in spaces where students frequent and feel comfortable, recognizing that they can share meaningful interactions with students outside of their office space and regular hours. We also mean to reiterate that meeting students where they are translates to accepting that students will engage in campus life and experience belonging differently than alumni did before the pandemic. Among many other disruptions, COVID altered students' personal lives, their means of communication, and ways of socialization. For professionals to create engaging and fun environments where students can be themselves, connect with peers and staff, and bond with their community requires that we listen to their needs, respect their experiences, and engage authentically with them.

Finally, and not to be overlooked, student affairs practitioners are suffering from burnout (De Sawal et al., 2022), fatigue, and are continuing to exit the field (Marshall et al., 2016) at high rates. The developmental focus of student affairs has not adequately prepared practitioners to address the unique concerns of students and adapt to barriers to engagement that are specific to our post-COVID reality. As Ackerman (2007) acknowledged, the mid-level professional finds themselves in an invisible space, often left to enforce others' decisions through supervision of entry-level professionals. This occurred during institutional responses to COVID-19 for mid-level professionals, just as it has occurred for many years before within the academy. Perhaps through this consensus-building activity focused on the professionals independently responding to these important inquiries, professionals will themselves feel reinvigorated and encouraged to continue doing the work to support campus engagement.

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Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations exist within this study that should be noted. First, the professionals within this study self-identified as being mid-level professionals. This participant pool for this study was small, but not uncharacteristic for a Delphi study of this type. That said, we would have appreciated a higher participation rate. Not all participants answered every round of the study, but we did not collect data to understand why those specific questions/rounds went unanswered. The findings from this study are not intended to be generalized for all mid-level student affairs professionals, yet the findings do elucidate some intriguing components that benefit students through potentially increased student and mid-level employee engagement. Additional information will need to be collected to better understand how institutional bureaucracy, budgets, and leadership contribute to mid-level professionals' ability to develop engaging programming for campus activities. Studies focused on mid-level student affairs professionals warrant more attention, as literature is scarce. Specifically, more data should be collected to learn what mid-level student affairs professionals require to be more effective, such as resources, professional development, training, supervision, and other forms of support. Some of the findings leave more questions than answers and extrapolating what these findings mean for student affairs professionals post-COVID could benefit campuses across the country.

Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed around what it means for mid-level professionals to be authentic in their work. Our expert panel came to 100% consensus on how important it is for practitioners in their roles to be authentic, yet authenticity can be hard to define for professionals who balance student-facing responsibilities, supervisory duties, and administrative reporting. Mid-level professionals traverse a variety of spaces and structural layers of their organization in which they interact with students, oversee operations in their office or department, and report to high-level administrators at their institution. Balancing authenticity with professionalism in each of these spaces assuredly looks different depending on with whom they are working and in what context. We believe their relationships with authenticity, especially considering their proximity to leadership and community building with students, is an area that deserves further exploration.

Collaboration on already-planned events with student groups and areas across campus is another promising area for further research. While our expert panel came to consensus around the value of contributing to these events, it raises questions about whether this effort aligns with the goals of the event, and if contributing to the event in a limited capacity gives professionals the space they need to meet their area's objectives. Though we view these opportunities for collaboration as important for increasing student engagement and enhancing visibility, we believe that exploring these questions further could provide insight into how means of collaboration with students, offices, and departments are shifting post-COVID.

Conclusion

Understanding the strategies and approaches perceived to be useful for mid-level student affairs professionals to increase student reengagement in campus activities to foster student learning and

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development following virtual-only programming due to COVID-19 serves a vital role in supporting student success and demonstrating confidence in the expertise of this group of esteemed professionals. Equipping campus activities units with appropriate tactics and strategies to reengage students may empower mid-level professionals to continue their efforts to support students, target specific approaches, and collaborate more readily and intentionally with other campus partners. Students connect differently now, not just with offices and activities, but with each other. The critical role that authenticity plays reifies Renn's (2020) notion of the "embodied self" both for professionals and students alike. If student affairs professionals expect students to trust us to shepherd and guide them, we must also be trusting and comfortable enough to do the same for one another.

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