Beyond Good Enough: Investigating Perceptions of Careers for Administrators in Post-Secondary

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of post-secondary administrator's experience and perceptions of their career. Administrators are vital to the smooth operations of post-secondary institutions and make up a quarter of the staff in these large organizations (Gander, 2018), but are often seen as the "invisible" workforce (Bossu, et al., 2018) and don't often have a clear career path. I conducted qualitative interviews with five Simon Fraser University (SFU) administrators. Results indicated that all administrators experienced intra-organizational and inter-organizational mobility at some point in their career journeys and reflected on the importance of supportive supervisors and an extended professional network to their career mobility. This research provides insights into how post-secondary administrators navigate their careers and offers guidance on fostering environments that support mobility and professional growth, ensuring continued engagement and commitment within the post-secondary environment.

Keywords: career mobility; administrators; post-secondary education; post-secondary institutions

Dedication

I dedicate this work and give special thanks to my supportive husband, Andrew, and my encouraging daughter, Finley. I am grateful to have your love and support throughout my Master's program.

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I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Cox and Dr. Gillian Judson for their invaluable guidance and encouragement throughout this research project. Their insights and support have been instrumental in shaping my work. I am also immensely grateful to my cohort for the fruitful discussions and the wealth of knowledge and perspectives shared throughout the program. I have learned so much from each of you and your contributions, both big and small, have greatly enriched my research.

More importantly, I respectfully acknowledge the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) nations on whose unceded territories I am so privileged to live, learn, work and play on. As a guest on these lands, I commit to honouring and respecting the ongoing presence and contributions of Indigenous peoples in this area, and to reflecting on my role in reconciliation, decolonization and fostering positive relationships with Indigenous communities.

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Introduction

My career in post-secondary institutions was unintentional. I did not have a definitive plan for what kind of job or career I wanted after I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree. I started working in the non-profit sector with various community development organizations in programming and youth engagement roles. A few years into this type of work, I was laid off due to funding cuts and got my start in post-secondary through the temporary job pool at Simon Fraser University (SFU). I worked first as a Program Assistant to support an academic unit and then as a Coordinator in Work Integrated Learning (also known as “Co-op”). After 11 years at SFU, I found myself wanting more; more opportunities to learn new skills and have new challenges. I was feeling limited in the opportunities that I saw available to me within SFU so I decided to look externally. I ended up making a career change and am now the Operations Manager at Vancouver Community College (VCC) in the Continuing Studies unit.

Thinking specifically about my SFU positions, I felt stuck for many reasons in my role as a Coordinator in Co-op. After three years in that position, it was re-evaluated, and the salary was downgraded. Although I was exempt from this decrease in salary while I was in this position as Co-op Coordinator, if I had wanted to apply to work in a different Co-op program doing the same Co-op Coordinator role, I would be forced into the lower pay grade. This limited my options for continuing to work in Work Integrated Learning. Furthermore, when I looked at other job postings within the university, many of the positions that I was qualified for had salary scales that were one to two grades lower than what I was currently making. As I reviewed job postings that were above my current role, I realized they were beyond my level of experience and qualifications. From first-hand experience witnessing how past hiring competitions unfolded, I did not feel I could compete for those positions as they typically went to candidates with PhDs and a range of other experiences. I wondered, how was I supposed to diversify my experience to make myself a competitive candidate for a different role when my options were so limited?

For the last few years, I tried to convince myself that I could stick it out at SFU for the long haul. The job was good enough and the pay was good enough and flexibility was good enough. But in the end, I knew that I did not want to settle for something that

was just good enough for the rest of my career. I still have a good 20-25 years of work ahead of me. So, I took the opportunity that presented itself to make the change I was genuinely seeking.

My decision to change careers and take a new position at Vancouver Community College was massive for me. Through discussions with my friends and colleagues and a lot of personal reflection, I have become increasingly curious to understand how others in similar positions contemplate and think about their careers. Because administrators are vital to the smooth operations of post-secondary institutions and make up a quarter of the staff in these large organizations (Gander, 2018a), it is important to better understand their career experiences. While there is research looking into the careers of academics in post-secondary, little has been studied about professional staff and administrators; this demographic is often described as the “invisible” workforce (Bossu et al., 2018).

This research focused on post-secondary mid and late-career administrators’ perceptions of their careers. By listening to and learning about others’ journeys, I shed light on the experiences that administrators have had in their careers and begin a conversation about how to best support this group of employees within the post-secondary environment.

The Literature

Diving into the existing literature on career theories and careers of post-secondary administrators, I focused my initial search using keywords such as career development, career paths, career mobility and administrators in post-secondary institutions. I discovered that there is a large body of work looking at career theory and on teaching staff and faculty members’ careers in post-secondary institutions. I did not find much research looking at the career experiences of administrative staff. I categorized the literature into two subtopics: literature specific to careers for post-secondary administrators and relevant career theories. Initially, I conducted a search using keywords that covered career theories and post-secondary institutions and administrators to get a sense of what has already been researched in these areas. This search helped to clarify how various keywords have been conceptualized and which of those terms might be applicable to my intended research area. It also revealed an

opportunity to further add a qualitative investigation into research on the experiences post-secondary administrators have when it comes to their careers.

Career Theory

Traditional understandings of a "career" have evolved to reflect the changes we see in the twenty-first century with globalization and technological advances. These new ways of making meaning of career concepts are helpful for analyzing individuals' unique career experiences in the current post-secondary education context in Canada. For example, over the last two decades, there has been a paradigm shift away from thinking of careers as "traditional" towards something more multi-faceted and complex. These different perspectives are referred to as traditional (Lochab & Mor, 2013), protean (Hall, 1996), boundaryless (Arthur, 1994), and hybrid. The traditional career is one that has been designed by the organization as opposed to self-determined by the worker for themselves (Lochab & Mor, 2013). In contrast, the protean career has been defined by many as one that emphasizes a self-directed approach to a career; how one's career takes shape is driven by one's own values (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). A boundaryless career mindset is one where an individual navigates the changing work landscape by enacting a career characterized by different levels of physical and psychological movement (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). In contrast to the traditional view in which careers are thought to evolve within the context of one or two organizations and are conceptualized to progress in linear career stage, the protean and boundaryless career constructs include multiple dimensions that are relevant in examining modern career experiences (Lochab & Mor, 2013). According to Briscoe and Hall (2006), these concepts are currently the accepted metaphors in the field of career theory and their popularity attests to the appropriateness and timeliness to be utilized to describe careers in the current context.

While these career constructs have been effective at informing career theory, Briscoe et al. (2006) claim that protean and boundaryless career constructs have "prompted limited research and application" due to the lack of operational definitions (p. 31). Designed to create operational definitions to measure protean and boundaryless careers attitudes and career mobility preferences, their research revealed that preferences of career mobility did not strongly correlate with either a protean or boundaryless mindset (Briscoe et al., 2006). In contrast, their research established that having a protean or boundaryless career attitude does not equate to also having job

mobility preferences as suggested in the literature. Akkermans & Kubasch (2017) scanned the career theory literature and highlighted that career mobility focuses on "being mobile in one's career either through transitioning into a new job or through physically changing locations" (p. 600).

Building on the concepts of protean and boundaryless career attitudes, new theories and career models have emerged to explain multiple career patterns that combine characteristics of the protean and boundaryless careers. Sullivan and Baruch (2009) refer to these as hybrid careers. They make a strong recommendation that because various studies have found many different types of careers frameworks including protean, boundaryless, and hybrid, to name a few, that future research should first aim to identify the career orientation of the individual being studied and then consider the individual's attitudes and behaviours within specific career contexts.

Administrative Careers in Post-secondary Education

As I dug into the career literature related specifically to administrators or as Gander (2018a) refers to as professional staff, it was quite clear that this is an area of interest within the existing body of literature. Utilizing career theory to look at the careers of professional staff and administrators in post-secondary institutions is important for those individuals navigating their careers and for the institutions themselves to have a better understanding of how to support their staff (Gander, 2018a, p. 23). Gander et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review focusing on the careers of university professional staff because they identified that there has been limited rigorous study in this area. They concluded that there are many enablers and barriers to careers for post-secondary administrators and that it is common for these employees to have a hybrid career mindset, meaning a reciprocal relationship between the institution and the individual. Gander (2018) takes a deeper look at the career needs, values, attitudes, and behaviours of the professional staff in universities. Using a mixed-methods approach, she indicates that there are "various psychological mechanisms acting to drive career behaviours" (Gander, 2018, p. 854). This connects with the boundaryless career orientation.

The focus of much of this recent research has been in the UK and Australia. When I did find research on the careers of administrative staff based in the United States

or Canadian post-secondary institutions, there was not a clear delineation between the careers of administrative and academic staff in post-secondary institutions (Daddona et al., 2006) or the research was limited to careers of those working in student affairs (Marshall et al., 2016). Furthermore, my initial search revealed a lack of qualitative interviewing as a methodological approach in the existing literature about administrator's careers in post-secondary institutions. I primarily found quantitative studies. There is limited research focusing on understanding people's personal experiences with their careers.

This leaves a gap in the literature: understanding the experiences of mid-career administrators in post-secondary. Career theory may be useful in helping explain the career mobility experiences and perspectives of mid-career administrators in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Specifically, I designed this research to answer the question: how do mid-career administrators working in post-secondary institutions experience their careers?

The Study

I conducted qualitative interviews to meaningfully understand administrators' personal experiences with their careers. Qualitative interviewing for this research topic aligned with a constructivist worldview, suggesting that individuals construct meanings of the world as they engage with it and interpret their experiences. A qualitative approach allowed me to make sense of the meanings that interview participants shared by looking for the complexity in the views collected rather than simplifying and generalizing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using qualitative interviewing was appropriate for this topic as it allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a way that came naturally to them.

Researcher Positionality

I acknowledge that my personal experiences, perceptions, values, and assumptions shaped the overall approach I took with the qualitative interviews. Having experienced a career change myself, I gained a unique perspective related to being an administrator working across different institutions. This positionality influenced how I interpreted the

data, possibility leading me to lean more heavily toward certain themes that related to my own experience.

I was also aware of how my positionality shaped how I facilitated and guided the interviews. I may have picked up on certain markers more than others because of my own ideas and opinions about the research topic. However, I reflected after each interview to record thoughts, feelings, observations, etc. that came up for me and acknowledged patterns of bias or blocks. Throughout the research process, I developed partnerships with two fellow researchers also conducting qualitative interviews. This supportive, reciprocal relationship was helpful in considering different themes that did not initially come up for me, and through our debriefs and reflections, I was able to catch assumptions and biases as it is often difficult to see these objectively.

Site and Participants

The main participant group in my research consisted of mid and late-career administrators currently working at SFU. To recruit these participants, I reached out to my existing professional network at SFU and asked them to share my call for participants, included in Appendix A, via email with their SFU colleagues. I was looking for participants who were administrators, who had worked in higher education for at least 10 years, and, at the time of the research, were current SFU employees in an Administrative and Professional Staff Association (APSA) role. ASPA is an independent association that provides support and advocacy for administrators at SFU. When selecting participants, I sought out those who had spent their entire career in higher education at SFU and those who had started their careers at different institutions and had, in recent years, moved to SFU. This diversity was crucial to my study as it ensured the participants had significant time and experience as post-secondary administrators and could provide insights into their career mobility within and across institutions.

Although I wanted to hear stories from administrators at other post-secondary institutions as well, I recognized that the scope and research ethics required for this project made it unfeasible. By including participants with prior post-secondary institutional experience before coming to SFU, I aimed to gather stories that were not SFU-centric. I received six responses from the initial call for participants that my SFU colleagues shared with their network, but because they were all individuals I had worked

fairly closely with during my time at SFU, I did not confirm all participants right away to give some time to see if the call for participants would interest participants that I did not already know. Due to the time and size parameters for this study within the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program, I did not have the capacity to select all people who volunteered. Because my initial call for participants connected me with people I already knew, I sought the help of my classmates to share the call with their colleagues from their respective units. This gave me the opportunity to select one participant that I did not have a prior relationship with, and the other four participants were selected as current SFU administrators with a range of career experiences who had all been working in post-secondary for over 10 years, matching my selection criteria. Table 1 below outlines the demographics of the participants. All participants were female and had varied cultural and demographic characteristics and, coincidentally, at the time of the research project all worked in non-academic units at SFU.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Education Level	Number of years at SFU	Worked in PSI prior to SFU?
Sandra	Bachelor's Degree	29 years	No
Rebeccah	M.Ed.	22 years	No
Anita	Bachelor's Degree	16 years	No
Frances	Ph.D.	2 years	Yes
Samantha	Ph.D.	15 years	Yes

Data Collection

As researcher, I ensured that all participants understood the purpose of the research. Therefore, before the interviews, I made multiple touchpoints to secure their informed consent. From the initial contact, I engaged in ongoing email conversations with potential participants to address any questions or concerns they had before we scheduled the interview. This approach helped to build rapport, so when the formal qualitative interviews took place, all participants were prepared and knew what to expect. The participants signed and sent me the consent form (included in Appendix A) prior to the interviews, demonstrating that they understood the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, and that all responses would be kept confidential. I asked each participant to choose their own pseudonym. I use these in this final report.

Initially, I planned to schedule in-person interviews. However, all five interviews ended up taking place over Zoom because it was more convenient to schedule and eliminated the need for travel and securing a quiet, private space to conduct the interviews. These semi-structured interviews followed a list of questions detailed in Appendix B that aimed to explore participants' values and motivations for pursuing a career in post-secondary education. I did not ask all interview participants the exact same questions in the same order. Instead, I allowed participants to tell their stories and followed up on relevant points they mentioned, an approach outlined by Weiss (1995). I recorded all interviews and saved the AI generated transcripts on SFU OneDrive. Each interview lasted between 45-60 mins. During the interviews, I jotted down key words and brief notes but refrained from taking extensive notes to stay focused on the conversation.

I started each interview reviewing the purpose of my research and asking each participant the same question: asking them to tell me how they got started working in the post-secondary education sector. Qualitative interviewing was emergent in that, as a researcher, what I learned about my research topic was informed by the research participants. Moreover, there were shifts throughout the research process that changed the interview questions; participants' responses informed the direction of the interview through stories they shared (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I gifted participants with a Starbucks card as a sign of appreciation for sharing their stories with me.

Data Analysis

Once I had completed the five interviews, I started analyzing the data by reading through each interview transcript one time before making any edits for grammar or spelling. I approached the data analysis both with an inductive and deductive approach as outlined by Saldaña (2016). I used the deductive approach because I expected to see some specific themes related to mobility and career theory within the data. This helped to give structure to the analysis by allowing me to categorize the data with these pre-determined themes that were based on my interview questions and literature (Saldaña, 2016).

Before separating the data into themes, I read through the data looking for codes that fit within my preconceived notions of what themes I was looking for. My coding process involved grouping the data into categories on relevant topics, repeated words,

similar feelings, and similar responses to similar questions. I also looked for differences in the responses, as well as unexpected responses (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once the data was coded, I then began to cut and sort the data by “identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important” and then arranged those quotes into piles of things that I felt went together (Ryan & Bernard, 2023, p. 94). Following the method of clustering outlined by Miles et al. (2014), I was better able to understand how these themes and ideas grouped together and then started to conceptualize the data. Using an inductive approach, I began to look for new or unexpected themes that were missing or differed from my preconceived themes. This helped to deepen my analysis and discover ways that the data helped tell the story of the research participants in an interesting way.

Trustworthiness

As outlined by Roulston (2010), I recognize my role as the interviewer in the research and see how this process can be viewed as the “romantic approach” to interviewing whereby “genuine rapport and trust [are] established” by the interviewer in order to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing (Roulston, 20210, p. 217). In addition to building a strong connection with each participant to encourage them to speak openly and honestly, I was also honest with my own subjective position in relation to the research question by sharing with them the motivation for the research topic was based on my personal experience.

To maintain trustworthiness in my interview procedure, I made sure that the questions I asked participants were clear and easy to understand and I was willing to clarify when needed. This ensured that the responses to the interview questions varied based on their own thoughts and experiences and not because of their differing understanding of the questions.

Findings

Initially, I aimed through this research to broadly investigate the career trajectories of post-secondary administrators. However, the interviews revealed intriguing and valuable insights into the diverse natures of their career experiences, which I believe offers a nuanced understanding of career mobility in this sector.

As defined in the career theory literature, mobility focuses on being mobile in terms of career transitions either into a new job or physically changing locations (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Patterns of career mobility emerged in the data in different shapes and forms within the data and the career experiences of my research participants. For some, their career mobility looked like physical or locational mobility where they had multiple roles that built on each other, leveraging work experience and skill development to move into more senior roles, either within or across institutions. For others, their career paths were less about physical or locational mobility and had more to do with the movement and progress they experienced in their professional selves because of learning and educational opportunities.

I identified three patterns of mobility that all participants experienced at different points in their careers: intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and educational mobility. Intra-organizational mobility is seen as movement into distinct roles or departments within the same institution. Inter-organizational mobility is movement across and between different organizations. Educational mobility refers to attaining higher levels of education and skill development through varied work experiences. In addition to the three types of mobility that present in the data, participants also shared stories about how the nature of relationships that they experienced throughout have influenced their career mobility.

Intra-organizational Mobility

Two of the five participants started their careers at SFU as undergraduate students and at the time of the interview, had been with the organization for over 20 years. Both described that they never intended to work in post-secondary education and that they “just meandered through” their careers and had primarily experienced intra-organizational mobility. Rebeccah explained that although she felt stuck in a Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) role for a long time, she was able to “accumulate a lot of different and varied experiences within that level that were able to come together” and position her well for an administrative role later in their career. Sandra shared that she “needed to be curious, take initiative, kind of be willing to work hard, be willing to do more and maybe put [her] toe over the line a little bit in order to gain that extra experience”, along with being in the right place at the right time, to progress into higher

positions within SFU. The varied work experiences and skills they acquired within the institution positioned both participants well to advance in their administrative careers.

Two other participants explained that they had been in their current position since coming to SFU, implying they have not experienced intra-organizational mobility during their career at the institution which, for both participants, had been for over a decade. Anita describes that since she has had stability for the last 16 years, her work has been about “making more meaning in the work that [she does], but also making meaning with the people that [she] works with that has gotten deeper”. At the time of the interview, the fifth participant not yet mentioned, was the only participant that was new to SFU, having only secured a permanent role within the last two years.

Inter-organizational Mobility

Inter-organizational mobility showed up in the career stories for the three participants that had not experience intra-organizational mobility at SFU. They had similar experiences with a lot of inter-organizational mobility earlier on in their careers, moving between multiple organizations before getting a permanent position at SFU. This early mobility was primarily due to positions being “based on budget and limited resources at the time, making many work opportunities contractual” (Anita). They offered unique insights into their career paths, expressing satisfaction with the stability they found after securing permanent positions at SFU and no longer needing to pursue opportunities at other organizations.

When asked if they ever considered applying for jobs outside of SFU, many participants reported that it is not worth it for them to give up the stability that they finally have. It would be a huge risk. Because Samantha had not experienced movement within SFU, she contemplated that “moving outside the institution might be easier” but that “politics are everywhere and issues [she] encounter can appear in other jobs too”. Once participants got further along in their careers and had an established role at SFU, they were less likely to consider moving beyond SFU, even if they were not experiencing mobility within the institution. This seemed to lead some research participants to seek professional development opportunities and higher levels of education to lay the path for intra-organizational movement.

Educational Mobility

Educational mobility, which includes both the attainment of higher levels of credentials (Masters and PhDs) and skill development gained on the job, was experienced throughout participants' career. For those participants who experienced primarily intra-organizational mobility, they shared different ways they took opportunities to expand their experience. Sandra said that "in [her] time at SFU, [she] had taken every single opportunity that [she] could to grow in areas that [she] was interested in, even if that meant taking on extra work" and maybe doing things that were not in her job description.

Participants saw the accumulation of education and skills as a strategy to position themselves for movement within the institution and into higher positions later in their careers. Rebeccah shared that they were always looking to go back to school, wanting to keep their mind stimulated and completed a master's degree during their tenure at SFU, and felt that it was because of this education mobility that she was offered an administrative management position even before she completed her program. Further education also helped participants understand the language and join the conversation that happen at higher leadership levels within the institution.

Professional relationships and career mobility

The nature of relationships with students, supervisors and colleagues significantly impacts career mobility, both within and across institutions as well as mobility in pursing further education and skill development. Participants highlighted that relationships with colleagues and supervisors were crucial for mobility, particularly for intra-organizational mobility. Rebeccah emphasized how a strong reputation within the institution has been vital to their career progression, recognizing that knowing people in different departments and maintaining those relationships over time has been key to their ability to move from a CUPE role to an administrative one.

All participants shared perspectives of the impact their direct supervisor had on their career mobility, for better or worse. Leadership style influenced this mobility by either encouraging professional development opportunities, allowing space for creativity and innovation, or recommending alternative positions or temporary promotions. Sandra shared that "having a supervisor that didn't put [them] in a little box and go, this is your

job, but instead, this work needs to be done so why don't you give it a try". In contrast, others experienced micro-managers or self-serving supervisors who only supported them if it also benefited the supervisor. Samantha noted a "significant impact depending on the leader's style" and found herself in situations where they felt punished for disagreeing with their leader or having different ideas. Such situations seemed to impede the development of positive relationships essential for professional growth.

Participants with encouraging and supportive supervisors experienced both intra- and inter-organizational mobility. For instance, Samantha reported that her supervisor at a previous organization "took a chance" on her to try out a temporary role, which ultimately helped her secure her current role at SFU. Conversely, participants who had not experienced intra-organizational mobility within SFU reported having supportive supervisors but limited connections to other departments across the institution. This highlights that, in additional to supportive supervision, an extended professional network within the institution is essential for intra-organization mobility. Interestingly, some participants reported feeling so connected to their current teams, that they have not considered switching jobs or institutions as they are highly invested in their relationships with their colleagues.

Relationships not only seemed to impact career mobility directly but were a motivating factor for working in post-secondary. All participants indicated how their desire to help others in a learning environment was the reason they pursued a career in post-secondary education. Samatha described that helping others is one of her core values. It had been what has kept them working in education. The two interview participants currently working in student-facing positions described the satisfaction they found in building connections with students through engagement opportunities and programs as administrators. They highlighted that maintaining these connections even after the students had graduated was one of the most rewarding aspects of working in post-secondary education.

Discussion

I sought to understand the career journeys of mid to late-career administrators in post-secondary education in this research project and uncovered common themes and

unique perspectives in the participants' narratives. I have compared these against my own experience and the career theory literature.

All research participants demonstrated both a focus on mobility and stability in their career journeys. Even when participants were experiencing mobility, whether it was between organizations or in temporary roles at SFU, they were always in pursuit of securing a permanent position within the institution. While all participants experienced some form of career mobility at some point of their lives, with the inter-organizational mobility occurring earlier in their career, it seemed that since all participants had permanent, stable employment at SFU, intra-organizational mobility was the goal – they wanted to continue moving into higher positions. And for those who had not yet experienced intra-organizational mobility at SFU, they were still progressing in their careers by seeking higher levels of education and skill development.

Only one participant was nearing retirement, and she expressed that, regardless of how challenging the work environment became, she had no intention of seeking employment outside the institution. In contrast, all other participants clearly intended to keep pursuing opportunities to engage and develop themselves by completing a master's degree, continuing to do research, teaching, presenting at conferences and engaging in other personal and professional development activities to advance their careers. The stability of the permanent positions at the institutions has provided them with benefits, a reliable salary, and the opportunity to engage more meaningfully with their work.

Interestingly, participants who had remained in the same position for over a decade at SFU tended to have high levels of education but lacked an extensive professional network within the institution. It was unclear if this lack of network was due to the type of position they held or the unit they worked in. Within a large organization like SFU, some units tend to be very siloed in their work, where staff may not have the opportunity to intersect with staff from other departments to establish that professional network. The limited networking may be the factor hindering their intra-organizational mobility.

Personal Reflection

I noticed that some of the factors that motivated my own career mobility were not mentioned by the participants in their stories. I wanted to shift the type of work I was doing from student advising to more of a strategic planning and operations type role but was unsure that there was a path for me in that direction at SFU. Participants spoke generally about helping people and problem solving as motivating factors for them staying in their roles, but no one really shared anything specific about the nature of their work that kept them in their roles or caused them to seek opportunities elsewhere. There was also no mention of the pursuit of a higher salary that influenced their career mobility, whereas I was seeking a position that was higher paying.

Looking back to the year or so leading up to my departure from SFU, I knew I wanted to change the type of role I was in, recognized my boredom advising students and at the same time, my excitement in strategic planning and systems thinking projects I sometimes got to participate in. Hearing how critical a strong professional network is to intra-organizational mobility, I could have made the effort to conduct informational interviews with others across the institution doing that type of work. Additionally, I had a supportive supervisor who was responsive and encouraging of my desire to build my skills in a new direction. Maybe there was a path forward for me at SFU had I leveraged the support from my supervisor and took the initiative to make connections outside of my immediate team.

Now that I am in a strategic planning and operations type position at VCC, a much smaller organization compared to SFU, I wonder how the size of the organization makes a difference in career mobility for administrators. It the short time I have been at VCC, I have noticed that the organization is committed to succession planning and has multiple mentorship and leadership development programs. Additionally, I have had several opportunities to interact with others across the organization, from different units and already have a sense of future opportunities that I may be interested in pursuing down the road. I feel well supported to continue developing my leadership skills and professional network and see a future path for me at VCC.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study paint an interesting story of career mobility for post-secondary administrators and the implications for the institutions in which they work. If post-secondary institutions are committed to building a culture that supports career development for their staff, it is important to invest in mentorship programs, leadership development, and opportunities for cross-departmental engagement. These initiatives should provide administrators with opportunities to articulate their career aspirations and collaborate with mentors and other colleagues to come up with plans and explore strategies to advance in their desired career direction. By investing in these areas, institutions can better support their administrative staff, helping them to build and expand their professional networks and acquire the skills required for career advancement. This does not only benefit the individuals but also strengthens overall organizational capacity by retaining motivated and skilled administrators.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the diverse and multifaceted career experiences of mid to late-career administrators in post-secondary institutions, particularly focusing on mobility and stability within their roles. By conducting qualitative interviews, I captured the intricacies of career mobility experienced by these participants, revealing key themes of intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and educational mobility. Additionally, the importance of relationships in career progression became apparent, underscoring the role of supportive supervisors and extensive professional networks.

The findings suggest that while stability is a significant factor for post-secondary administrators, many still strive for professional growth and development within their institutions. The desire for mobility often manifests through seeking higher education and professional development opportunities, despite the potential barriers within large, siloed organizations like SFU. In conclusion, understanding the career experiences of post-secondary administrators provides valuable insights into how these professionals navigate their careers. It also offers guidance on how institutions can create environments that support career mobility and professional growth, ensuring that administrators remain engaged and committed to their roles within the educational landscape as they are seeking careers that are beyond just good enough.

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Appendix A.

Call for Participants email template

EMAIL TO EXISTING SFU NETWORK

Dear [colleague's name],

As you may be aware, I am currently completing a research project for the Masters in Educational Leadership at SFU. The focus of my research is to explore the career experiences and perspectives of administrators working at SFU. I am hoping you can help me recruit interview participants by forwarding the "Call for participants" script below to your network of SFU administrators. I greatly appreciate your support.

Call for Interview Participants:
I am a graduate student in the Masters of Education in Educational Leadership program here at SFU, and I am undertaking research to investigate the career experiences of administrators working at SFU. Specifically, I want to hear your insights about your professional journey in higher education. If you are interested in participating in this study, it will involve an interview that will be approximately 45-60 minutes long. This interview can take place in-person or virtually – whatever is most convenient.
If you would like to learn more about this research, I would be happy to connect further to provide more details of this study and answer any questions you may have. Please reach out anytime by email.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Chelsea Hunter

FOLLOW UP SCRIPT FOR POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for reaching out to learn more about my research. I am very interested in hearing your story about how you came to work as an administrator at SFU and my intention for the interview is that we have a conversation about your career path and experience. I have some initial questions that ask what you value in your career and about your career mobility but I am open to see where your story takes us. Please review the consent form and ask any questions you may have. When you feel comfortable with the consent form, please sign it and I will schedule the interview.

Thank you for your time and consideration
Chelsea Hunter

Appendix B.

Consent Form

Study Number: 30002105

Thank you for considering participating in an interview about the career experiences of administrators working in post-secondary institutions. Before you decide whether to participate, please take time to review the following information. If you have any questions or need additional information, please ask! If, after reviewing this information, you are still interested in participating, then we will go forward with the interview.

I, Chelsea Hunter, am conducting this interview as part of a research project exploring post-secondary administrators' careers experiences. I work in an administrator position as an Operations Manager at Vancouver Community College, and this project is a requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership Program at SFU. This research is being supervised by Dr. Gillian Judson in the Faculty of Education. I will write up the results of this research in the form of a research report, and I will present share them in the form of a public presentation at SFU during the summer of 2024.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences administrators have had with their careers in post-secondary institutions. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a 45-60 minute interview to explore your perspective on your career experiences. We will abide by the latest provincial health guidelines in relation to the COVID19 pandemic, and we can meet in person at my office or virtually via Zoom. As a participant, you will receive a gift card as a token of appreciation for your participation in the study.

During this interview, I will ask you to talk about your career as an administrator working in post-secondary education. You may choose not to answer any of my questions, and you may also end the interview at any point during the scheduled time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone. There are no negative consequences for withdrawing your participation, and I will erase/destroy any information already collected from you.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you by participating in this research.

The interview will be recorded. Any information you share during your interview **will remain confidential**. I will ask you to choose a pseudonym for use in the research study. I will ensure that the confidentiality of all participants will be preserved by not revealing their names and identity in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. I will transcribe the interview myself, using that pseudonym, and the resulting transcript will not include any information that could be traced back to you. Audio-recordings, transcripts will be stored on SFU OneDrive, a secure password protected file hosting program, and the written consent forms will be stored in a locked drawer in my home office. The list matching participant information and pseudonyms will be stored separately on SFU OneDrive. Upon completion of the project, the list will be destroyed. If the interview is conducted via Zoom, any data you provide may be

transmitted and stored in countries outside of Canada, as well as in Canada. It is important to remember that privacy laws vary in different countries and may not be the same as in Canada.

In reporting on my findings from this project, I will continue to keep your identity and participation confidential. I will be using the interview data to write a report for my MEd program. I will also share findings at a public presentation at SFU in July 2024. In addition to producing the final report and presentation required of my M.Ed. program, I may share findings with my current employer, Vancouver Community College. The report will be made available upon request to those participants who would like to read it. I can provide an electronic copy via email or a paper copy to those who like one.

Once I complete all of my MEd degree requirements, I will destroy the audio recordings, and I will keep the anonymized transcripts for no more than five years after the completion of the project.

I can be reached by email or phone. If you would like to talk to my faculty supervisor, you can reach Dr. Gillian Judson by email.

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, please contact the Director, SFU Office of Research Ethics.

Signing this consent form indicates that:

- You agree to participate in this research and to have the interview audio-recorded.
- You understand that you are free to stop participating in this research project at any time.
- You have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Please check Yes/No if you consent for the interview to be audio recorded.

Yes ☐

No ☐

_____

Signature of Participant Date (MM/DD/YYYY)

_____

Printed Name of Participant

Appendix C.

Interview Guide

- Tell me about your path to working as an administrator in post-secondary education.
- How did your previous experiences help prepare you for an administrative role in post-secondary education?
- What is most important to you when thinking about your career? Have those things changed over time?
- What is it that you like about your career / job / role?
- What is the motivation for staying in your current role or seeking a change?
- What qualities in leaders have you found most influential in your career?
- What do you perceive or have experienced as a barrier to mobility with your career?
- What do you perceive or experienced as opportunities for mobility in your career?
- Have you considered a career change? What perceptions do you have about moving to another institution?
- Have you experienced external factors or pressures that have impacted your career experience?