Original Research Reports

A Narrative of Conservative Student Affairs Professionals: Silenced in an Inclusive Profession?

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Abstract

Public universities are often perceived as predominantly liberal environments where conservative voices are silenced. This stands in contrast to the idea that higher education, and student affairs in particular, should foster an environment in which multiple perspectives are valued. In this narrative study, we share the stories of ten self-identified conservative student affairs professionals and their experience at a public institution of higher education. To inform our study we used the spiral of silence theory, which suggests individuals having opinions diverging from the majority will remain silent about their beliefs rather than face negative consequences. Data analysis and findings provide an understanding of how conservative ideology influenced relationships, professional engagement and overall work environment.

Keywords: conservative, student affairs, higher education, inclusivity, spiral of silence

Public universities in the United States are often perceived as predominantly liberal environments (Najmabadi & Knott, 2016) where conservative voices may be silenced. American faculty reported feeling uncomfortable sharing conservative beliefs in this environment (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). Similarly, U.S. conservative students expressed feeling unsupported sharing their beliefs in the classroom (Fram & Miller-Cribbs, 2008). This stands in contrast to the idea that higher education, and student affairs in particular, should foster an environment in which multiple perspectives are valued (Maranto & Woessner, 2012). Student affairs is a function at a college or university in the United States providing support for students through advising, counseling, management, and administration (Nuss, 1996). Existing literature on inclusion in higher education fails to address the perceptions and experiences of conservative student affairs staff members working in higher education.

Student affairs professionals have a vital role in providing campus environments conducive to student growth and development (Long, 2012). A central pillar of the student affairs profession is inclusion of diverse perspectives and identities (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel

Administrators [NASPA], 2015). Inclusivity is rightly emphasized in a profession that values educating students about the importance of diversity (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). In this study we explore the stories of conservative student affairs professionals in the months leading up to the contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election. More specifically, we ask how conservative staff in higher education perceive and experience the campus climate.

To develop an understanding of the storied lives of those in the student affairs profession, this narrative study explored experiences of conservative student affairs professionals at a public higher education institution. We interviewed ten self-identified conservative student affairs professionals holding full-time positions at Snow Mountain University (SMU), a pseudonym for a university in the western region of the United States. The accounts shared provide insight how conservative ideology influenced relationships, professional engagement and overall experience working in higher education. To inform our study we primarily used the spiral of silence theory, which suggests individuals with divergent opinions will remain silent about their beliefs rather than face negative consequences (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Scheufle & Moy, 2000). In addition to the spiral of silence, we present stigma theory as an additional lens of analysis to understand conservative student affairs professionals.

Literature Review

We focus our literature review on four topics informing our study. First, we briefly unpack contemporary U.S. conservativism and conservative identity, and share why we intentionally sought participants who self-identified as conservative. Next, we discuss the values of the student affairs profession as presented in foundational documents. Previous studies of conservative faculty and students are synthesized to exhibit the sociopolitical climate in higher education. Finally, we conclude with an overview of the spiral of silence coupled with stigma theory, the theoretical framework guiding our study.

U.S. Conservativism and the Conservative Identity

The complexity of the conservative identity is often lost in the labels commonly used to describe political or social orientations such as conservative (Federico, Weber, Ergun, & Hunt, 2013). In a polarized political climate, identity may become distorted, intentionally oversimplified, or incorrectly portrayed for political gain. To create a serviceable definition, we examined the conservative identity in the *sociopolitical* context of the United States. For the purposes of this narrative study, sociopolitical refers to a combination of social and political factors such as political orientation, social beliefs or opinions, and morals or spiritual beliefs.

A conservative identity is often relative to the surrounding sociopolitical environment. Campbell and Horowitz (2016) acknowledge how environment can augment the meaning of a sociopolitical label. For example, a self-identified conservative in a predominantly conservative area may differ from a conservative in a more liberal state. Campbell and Horowitz (2016) explained an important element of the identity was whether an individual self-identified as conservative since self-identification confers more meaning than a supposed measurement of one's values. The importance of the environment and self-identification is especially important in the context of student affairs. Due to relativism, we purposely asked our participants to self-identify and define conservative themselves.

There is little agreement about what constitutes modern day conservatism (Ehrhardt, 2014). The rise of post-World War II conservatism was not a populist or organic response to social liberalism (Gross, Medvetz, & Russell, 2011). Instead it was born and nurtured out of a "Frankenstein-esque creation in a political laboratory" that included Ivy league philosophers and economists, elite circles in Washington D.C., think tanks, and corporate donors who co-opted populist themes and painted a picture of American exceptionalism (Deneen, 2017). Based on the literature

and our data, we found three recurring approaches to understanding conservatism's origins: social, fiscal, and Christian faith-based conservatism.

The first approach involves viewing conservativism through a countermovement lens; a reaction to the social changes prior to World War II (Gross et al., 2011). Early conservatism called for restoring a previous version of society. Gross et al. (2011) named this as an attempt to "stuff a rapidly changing American society back into the box of a white, theologically conservative, small-town vision of the good" (p. 328). Throughout this manuscript, we refer to this as *social conservatism*.

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated characteristics of social conservativism such as an adherence to traditional social norms. These norms define in-group and out-group status based on matters of sexual purity, homosexuality, immigration status, or racial identity (Hodson & Costello, 2007; Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012). When exposed to out-groups, socially conservative undergraduate students expressed emotional disgust and avoidance (Inbar et al., 2012). In another study, a similar sample of socially conservative students expressed disgust and negative views of immigrants groups (Hodson & Costello, 2007). However, these negative attitudes were not directed towards immigrant groups with a similar racial identity – suggesting these reactions might be a product of racial or ethnic bias. Even when racial bias is controlled, researchers still observed avoidance of deviants by socially conservative college students (Shook, Oosterhoff, Terrizzi, & Brady, 2017). These emotional behaviors serve to reinforce existing social norms of the socially conservative.

A second approach to understanding conservatism was found in the value of a free market economy characterized by reduced government regulation (Ehrhardt, 2014; Gross et al., 2011). The approach can be viewed as reactionary to the development of social welfare programs (Glenn, 2010). A free market economy was a counter to the burgeoning ideals of socialism (Gross et al., 2011). Included in this approach is an anticommunist philosophy and belief in a "vigorous and interventionist foreign policy aimed at American dominance in the world" (Deneen, 2017, p. 24). The emphasis on free market capitalism was found in modern-day conservatism, especially in issues of government and environmental regulation matters (Peifer, Khalsa, & Ecklund, 2016). We describe this approach as *fiscal conservatism*.

The third approach to understanding conservatism can be found in the underlying morals associated with a particular interpretation of the Christian religion. A core concept of this approach is a distinct view of human nature that benefitted from moral regulation through religious standards (Gross et al., 2011; Levin, 2015). These morals are held in place with a respect for traditional institutions and order within society (Levin, 2015). The concept originates from the belief societies gain knowledge across generations and are posited into institutions (Levin, 2015). Our interpretation of this approach was labeled as *Christian faith-based conservatism*.

In the years prior to the 1980's, U.S. conservative values were often concerned with protecting particular individual rights and limiting the power of the federal government in most areas outside of national defense (Glenn, 2010). Two events, in our opinion, helped signal a reframing of conservativism from a philosophical stance to a populist movement positioning. Instead of understanding the increasing powers of the federal government as a means to address societal program, President Reagan's inaugural address declared "government is the problem" in matters related to the economy and preserving personal freedoms (Smith, 2017). Second, the founding of Falwell's Moral Majority, intended to address a decline in U.S. morals, signaled a change to a cursory belief in the separation of church and state (Lienesch, 1982). The Republican platform, which aligned itself with several conservative values, became increasingly polarized and populist in orientation towards Christian values, pro-gun rights, anti-

choice, anti-immigration, trickle-down economics, and the concept of the self-made man (Lindaman & Haider-Markel, 2002).

Many forces shaped the U.S. 2016 presidential election, but among these were the growing fractures between the established Republican party and a set of conservative values. Conservatives viewed the party as impotent to, or complicit in, perceived failures of government (Ware, 2016). Candidate Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan and promise to have Mexico build a wall, won enough populist support to suggest the traditional Republican platform no longer advanced U.S. conservative causes. While we presented three approaches to understanding U.S. conservatism, it is not clear these captured the various elements of today's self-identified conservatives. It could be candidate Trump's repudiation of elites in both parties and self-portrait as an independent insurgent populist, as opposed to our approaches, better explains his election (Deneen, 2017).

Admittedly, defining the term *conservative* exclusively in these ways is problematic (Gross et al., 2011). Continued research on socio-political values may demonstrate greater depth to the identity. As with any multidimensional identity, there is complexity not captured in broad definitions. While these three approaches to defining conservativism are limiting, it is our hope this study can further the scholarly discussion around the conservative identity, particularly in the student affairs profession.

Student Affairs Values in U.S. Higher Education

Student Affairs exists to support students' development at U.S. institutions of higher education (Long, 2012). Historically, the functional area of student affairs has recognized the need to respect individual differences of students and educate others about the value of diversity (Evans & Reason, 2001). Professional organizations, such as Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and Association for College Personnel Association (ACPA), have developed guiding principles on inclusivity and established standards for training in these areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). In a joint publication, the two organizations outline competencies, such as skills and attitudes, expected for those in the profession. This document provides a two-page comprehensive rubric on how staff can create environments to meet diverse needs and foster equitable participation on a college campus (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Student Affairs professionals are expected to value inclusivity and incorporate it into their professional practice (Boss, Linder, Martin, Dean, & Fitzer, 2018; Shupp, Wilson, & McCallum, 2018).

However, fostering diversity of political views may not be a priority at public higher education institutions. Klein and Stern (2005) found liberal faculty in the social sciences and humanities outnumber their conservative counterparts 15:1. In one instance, conservative professors felt strongly enough about being in the minority they created the Heterodox Academy, an organization highlighting the lack of political diversity among faculty by promoting free speech and academic diversity on campus (Jacoby, 2016). The liberal environment of public institutions and values of Student Affairs may present challenges for those who are conservative.

Conservative Faculty and Students

In studies on faculty who identify as conservative, participants expressed experiencing challenges as a result of working in higher education (Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Maranto & Woessner, 2012). For example, faculty with conservative viewpoints were encouraged to disclose their viewpoints strategically, ideally after securing tenure, and "to do things a little differently to fit in while remaining true to their values" (Maranto & Woessner, 2012, p. 471). Conservative faculty sometimes felt they had to remain silent due to the campus climate (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). Some described the campus as hostile, particularly when compared to the experiences of their non-con-

servative colleagues (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). As a result, conservative faculty choose to navigate this space carefully and often keep beliefs to themselves (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). For these reasons, the sociopolitical environment of higher education may influence how much conservative faculty are willing to share their beliefs or values.

Conservative students also endured challenges, particularly when their discipline espoused liberal views. Social work graduate students were found to perceive the climate of their academic program differently based on their sociopolitical identity (Fram & Miller-Cribbs, 2008). For instance, a deeply religious and conservative student reported feeling uncomfortable sharing their beliefs and questioned whether the profession accepted all views (Fram & Miller-Cribbs, 2008). This discomfort was particularly salient as the researchers did not ask about sociopolitical beliefs (Fram & Miller-Cribbs, 2008).

A narrative study used the spiral of silence to understand conservative student experiences in a teacher education program (Journell, 2017). Findings revealed conservative students would spiral into silence after they observed their classmates' words and actions (Journell, 2017). The author also explained how conservative students "perceived hostility" and experienced "backlash" from their liberal peers (p. 120), and how a double standard existed in the social justice focused program. A sociopolitical identity is an important factor in how one evaluates and experiences their environment.

Assumptions are also made about students who have a conservative sociopolitical identity based on faith (Cook & Callister, 2010; Modica, 2012). In a study of Christian and Mormon undergraduate students, assumptions were made about conservative social views, particularly in regard to issues of diversity such as gender roles and homosexuality (Cook & Callister, 2010). Unexpectedly, these students were found to be receptive to diversity education, challenging some of the assumptions about the mindset of the religiously conservative. Although religious and conservative views may have been linked in the past, Broido (2004) argued "definitions of what it means to be politically conservative seem to be shifting, particularly around attitudes related to social justice issues; conservative political beliefs can no longer be considered a proxy for racial intolerance" (p. 80). These studies suggest conservative students may be subject to stereotyping based on their sociopolitical identity. The values held by student affairs professionals may conflict with values traditionally held by those who identify as conservative.

Conservative Staff in Student Affairs

While it is possible to find literature about the challenges among conservative faculty and students in public institutions, a gap in the literature remains when examining sociopolitical diversity of student affairs staff. A recent survey of 900 student affairs professionals found only about six percent identify as conservative (Bauer-Wolf, 2018), yet there is very little published scholarly work on the topic. Kendrick and Damasco (2015) conducted a phenomenological study about the experiences of conservative librarians. Interviews showed colleagues had several misperceptions about conservatives and participants felt the need to hide their conservative identity. Participants chose to remain silent to avoid negative consequences, such as alienation, because their colleagues were so vocal about their viewpoints.

In a phenomenological study, Fisher (2011) found conservatives in student affairs experienced consequences in the hegemonic dynamic of the profession. Some participants were committed to social justice issues, but they avoided engagement in diversity work because of rejection from colleagues who were social justice advocates. Both studies suggest conservative staff experienced the landscape differently than liberal colleagues. Our study

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explores the stories of conservative student affairs professionals and how they experience a campus climate using the spiral of silence as a guiding theoretical framework.

Spiral of Silence

People evaluate their environment by observing social interactions to determine what viewpoints are considered acceptable (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The spiral of silence theory suggests people tend to remain silent when they perceive their views are in opposition to the majority (Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). There may be fear of negative consequences, such as isolation or loss of job, which prevent individuals from being open or honest with opinions (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). When the majority becomes more vocal and confident in their beliefs, those who share viewpoints against the majority can feel increasingly uncomfortable voicing their opinion, creating a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

There are mitigating factors which might diminish the effects of the spiral of silence. In the decades after the theory was proposed, researchers tested the concept in a variety of settings. Psychological studies found, if a minority viewpoint has support, it may not always be repressed by a majority (Salmon & Kline, 1983). Additionally, support does not need to reach a critical mass; it could be provided by one individual (Salmon & Kline, 1983). While these findings offer possible coping strategies for those within spiral of silence, recent research has suggested the silencing effect is also magnified by relationships (Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018).

The environmental context, or reference group, in which individuals experience the spiral of silence is significant (Scheufle & Moy, 2000). An opinion might not be considered as counter to "public opinion," but in a particular reference group, the opinion is considered divergent (Scheufle & Moy, 2000). For example, the predominant opinion in a family, neighborhood, or work environment may have a profound silencing effect on an individual with a divergent opinion. In a meta-analysis of 66 studies on spiral of silence, the largest silencing effect was determined to come from relationships of significance (Matthes et al., 2018). In these environments, deviant individuals experience a "quasi-statistical sense" due to constantly monitoring reference groups to assess the majority opinion (Scheufle & Moy, 2000). The heightened focus on monitoring reinforces perceptions of consequences and maintains the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Scheufle & Moy, 2000).

Parallels can be found between the spiral of silence and stigma theory; both concepts emphasize the importance of the reference group. Stigma requires a reference group of *normals* who, if they are aware of those who are divergent, can discredit those who do not conform. While there may not be an actual group of normals, fear of stigma may still be relevant if there is a perception the group exists (Goffman, 1963). Similar to the spiral of silence, there are consequences when diverging from the majority. Coupled with the spiral of silence, stigma theory may further our understanding of conservatives in student affairs.

Previous studies have used the spiral of silence to understand and predict behaviors. Hayes (2007) observed how college students would avoid conversations if they perceived their opinion to differ from the majority. These strategies included evading questions, walking away, or refusing to participate. A similar study examined interactions in social media spaces frequented by students, faculty, and staff (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Given the prevalent climate on many campuses, and the frequency with which previous studies noted 'silence' as a strategy, we believe spiral of silence is ideal for understanding our participants' stories.

Research Design and Method

We designed our research as a narrative study to appropriately describe the stories of conservative staff. Narrative inquiry is a three-dimensional examination of the individual and social context, situated in time and place (Clandinin, 2006, 2013). In consideration of this three-dimensional approach, we intentionally explored the experiences of conservative staff during a heightened time of socio-political identity. Data collection occurred in the last three months leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. We also chose to study SMU; a mid-sized, 4-year, rural public institution in a politically contested state. Within the U.S. Electoral College, this location is considered a battleground state for presidential elections.

SMU often features elected statewide officials from both Republican and Democratic Parties. Candidate Clinton won the majority of votes in the 2016 election, but the majority of non-urban counties, including the one in which SMU is located, voted overwhelmingly for candidate Trump. We began data collection as it became apparent Trump would secure the Republican nomination and a few students started wearing red, Make America Great Again hats around campus. This act was generally tolerated by fellow students, but raised enough questions among student groups to generate several student newspaper articles and editorials. The polarization of the national political landscape including the SMU campus, presented a unique opportunity to study the conservative identity and may have intensified the saliency of the sociopolitical identities of participants.

Recruitment Effort

After receiving Institutional Research Board approval, we contacted colleagues via email and asked for them to share our call for participants. Many of these individuals questioned why they were receiving the solicitation email and, in some ways, appeared offended. They expressed sincere concern we assumed they were conservative and quickly proclaimed this was incorrect. It was evident recruiting self-identified conservatives was going to be a challenge in the student affairs profession.

Many of the recipients of our initial solicitations were well-connected professionals with prominent leadership roles, but could not think of a single person who identified as conservative. One of these recipients proclaimed finding conservatives in student affairs was "like trying to find a needle in a haystack." Despite these discouraging responses to recruitment efforts, we were able to recruit participants by asking initial contacts to reach out within their networks. By snowball sampling method, we relied on the professional and social relationships of our initial contacts.

Some participants expressed gratitude for our research topic, but were worried about confidentiality in the study. The fear our participants expressed became a topic of on-going discussion among the research team. We tried to make sense of this early in data collection and wondered if this fear was warranted. Could someone who is conservative in higher education, and especially student affairs, face severe negative consequences for holding this identity? Our research provided us the opportunity to understand the root of this perspective.

Prior to the interview, we provided participants with a post we found on social media from the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook Forum. The post featured a personal story from a conservative professional working at a public institution. The conservative individual ultimately chose to leave the profession because of the perceived intolerance towards conservatives. We hoped this social media post would provide a starting place for a conversation and encourage our participants to share their own personal stories. We used semi-structured interviews

to elicit their stories and asked them to share their own conservative identity. For example, we asked participants how they defined conservative and to share a time they felt uncomfortable expressing conservative views on a campus. Our research team used multiple interviewers to collect and analyze the data. Denzin (2001) refers to this strategy as investigator triangulation, which increases trustworthiness by providing multiple perspectives during data collection and analysis. Each researcher brought different identities and political beliefs including conservative, moderate, or liberal views on a variety of issues. However, we did not reveal our political perspectives to participants.

We used purposeful sampling to focus on individuals with specific characteristics who would be most appropriate for the study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Our criteria for participants were individuals who self-identified as conservative and held a full-time professional staff position at SMU. We sent a standard recruitment email designed to invite individuals to participate or share with others who might identify as conservative to various colleagues around campus. After recruitment, we asked where each participant would prefer to have the interview conducted. Only one chose to have the interview in their office.

We made the decision to only ask participants about their sociopolitical identities and not ask questions about their demographics or plans to vote in the presidential elections. This decision was the result of numerous conversations about the ways in which participants might view us having an existing anti-conservative bias, a concern we heard often from participants. Some did self-disclose identities, such as being white or male, but we did not include this in our analysis for two reasons: at the time it did not seem relevant to our research questions, and some participants expressed strong concern about the possibility of being recognized by their colleagues. They were adamant about not being described with such identifiers as a particular church, gender, or age. For these purposes, all pseudonyms and pronouns provided do not suggest a gender. Table 1, provides a review of each participant at SMU and their defining beliefs.

Table 1

Participants Most Salient Characteristics of Conservative Identity

Name	Most salient characteristics of U.S. conservative identity
Colby	Christian faith, socially moderate, support for military
Dakota	Socially conservative, self-reliance over government assistance
Avery	Christian faith, Republican party affiliation
Skyler	Christian faith, socially conservative, tolerant of difference
Taylor	Fiscally conservative, socially moderate, support for national defense
Ellis	Christian faith, formerly socially conservative, now socially liberal
Rory	Christian faith, respect for traditions, socially conservative
Quinn	Christian faith, socially conservative, tolerant of difference
Andi	Fiscally conservative, Republican party affiliation, self-reliance over government assistance
Riley	Socially conservative, tolerant of difference

Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted by members of the team, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. To code the data, we utilized Saldaña's (2009) first and second-cycle coding methods. During the first round of coding, we individually developed overarching themes from each transcript relying on Saldaña's (2009) seven types of first-cycle

codes. After coding each interview individually, we discussed commonalities to refine coding. During the second round, we identified second-cycle codes to further investigate - mainly concerned with developing pattern, focused, and/or axial codes. We combined and separated our first round codes using the second-cycle codes as our general themes.

With a refined set of second-cycle codes, we began the process of selective coding to ensure codes were necessary and sufficient. As a research team, we collaboratively analyzed one transcript using our refined second cycle codes. After establishing our coding process among the team, we proceeded to separately code the nine remaining interviews. After coding transcripts individually, we exchanged interviews to review coding from each team member and discuss themes. Through our coding process, thematic narratives emerged from the interviews with conservative student affairs professionals.

Our analysis process was designed to increase the rigor and trustworthiness in the study. Use of iterative individual and group coding established investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978). As a narrative study, rigor was important to provide consistent findings which could be interpreted similarly outside of our research team. To strengthen the narrative component of our study, we heavily rely on participant quotations to evince our interpretations of the major themes.

In addition to using participant's quotes, the research team offered a thick description of the sociopolitical context found in this study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) method of thick description provides detailed background of data collection experiences, including setting and participants. It also expands on the cultural and social contexts of data collection, offering connections between those areas and the data itself. In these ways, the reader is provided a richer understanding of how conservatives experience the student affairs workplace.

Results

We begin by examining how participants defined their own conservative identity. Next, we proceed to share stories about how individuals evaluated their work environment. As the spiral of silence theory suggests, there were perceived consequences of sharing among liberal colleagues. Participants expressed how they self-censored to avoid stigma such as stereotyping and isolation. These findings are not intended for generalization, but rather to illuminate the narratives of conservative student affairs professionals. In this regard, discussion of these findings will be provided with implications for student affairs.

Conservatism Examined

One immediate theme we identified was how conservative staff defined their sociopolitical orientation. Most participants were reluctant to identify or describe their conservative identity. When asked to define conservative and liberal thinking, Colby stated, "Those terms are so loaded." Yet, attempts to clarify participant views fit neatly into the three definitions; social conservatism, fiscal conservatism, or Christian faith-based conservatism. Not all participants defined their identity in all three ways, but nearly all linked their Christian faith with their conservative identity.

Christianity was one of the most prominent themes in our study, and for some participants, it directly influenced their practitioner work. As a result of religion, Ellis described how compassion and empathy influenced every-day

interactions. Ellis shared, "no matter who walks into my office I'm going to treat them the way they deserve to be treated and they need to be treated." However, participants like Ellis, were reluctant to outwardly share their faith or conservative values on campus. This apprehension was not limited to just Ellis, several participants expressed fear about being labeled in a certain way, especially regarding social beliefs associated with the Christian religion.

Other participants did not want coworkers or supervisors making assumptions about how their faith may impact their ability to perform. Quinn was explicitly concerned because their supervisor was not Christian and felt intentional efforts were necessary to conceal their identity. While Quinn wanted to display items of faith in their office, they decided against it due to a fear of losing their job. Quinn also described feeling restricted about what conversations they could have with coworkers. Our participants used words such as "stigma" or "outcast" to articulate the feeling of openly identifying as a conservative or Christian.

Dakota, Skyler, and Rory fit our definition of social conservatism and were less accepting of individuals who did not conform to their social norms. For example, Rory expressed interest in returning to the values of their grandparents, calling it the "greatest generation." Skyler and Rory shared a lukewarm tolerance, if not a masked opposition, towards varying gender and sexual identities. This was evident in Skyler's response to defining conservativism, "My views are not necessarily strong in some of the realms of you know, you know equality for gay/lesbians, things like that… I am not, I am definitely not liberal in that area." The narrative shared by many participants seemed congruent with the literature review on social conservativism; narrowly defining American society especially in terms of sexuality, faith, and race.

Dakota was unabashed in expressing social conservatism. In the interview, Dakota shared a conversation with a liberal friend regarding immigration. Dakota complained, "her views would open up, let everyone come in from any country they want. And I said we can't do that. There's gotta be a stopping point where we're going to end up like one of those countries." Dakota's perspectives centered on anti-immigrant policy, such as building a wall on the southern border of the United States. Many of Dakota's beliefs were blatantly racist such as expressing disapproval of mixed-race marriages. These political stances mirror the literature regarding how social conservatives experience emotional disgust and avoid those who are different.

Dakota also admitted to purposely avoiding interactions with Arab students. These behaviors were concerning since SMU has a sizable international student population from the Middle East. Not only would Dakota's racial bias adversely impact these students, but it also limited how Dakota could complete required responsibilities of the role. Surprisingly, Dakota acknowledged how the racial bias impacted Arab students. It was evident Dakota knew these were unacceptable behaviors for the profession, possibly leading to corrective action.

Dakota was recalcitrant and unapologetic. Changing these behaviors would mean compromising personal conservative beliefs. Rather than change, Dakota found discrete workarounds. Dakota worked in a front-line service office with two other coworkers. According to Dakota, one of these individuals was a liberal. To ensure these students received the assistance (more likely to avoid interactions), Dakota would appear too busy to help. These avoidance behaviors would effectively delegate Arab students to other professionals. Dakota was able to rationalize these racist behaviors because students still received help from other professionals. Yet, it was likely a pattern of these behaviors were noticeable. More about Dakota will be provided in the discussion section.

Not all participants held conservative social views like Dakota. Colby and Ellis shared stories about how they integrated their Christian faith with socially progressive concepts, such as addressing social inequities. Colby ex-

pressed surprise in realizing social justice was absent from traditional teachings of the Bible, visibly frustrated "social justice was not mentioned once" during study of the Bible. After some poignant experiences, Colby now believes social justice is embedded throughout the text, "now [I] view scriptures or what I consider the bible, reading it with that social justice lens, now I go, how did we not see that?" While stories shared by Skyler and Rory suggested they were less than thrilled to work with particular student populations due to their religious beliefs, others such as Colby and Ellis linked social justice issues with their religious beliefs.

The timing of this study is especially relevant when examining social conservatism. Ironically, despite the intolerant social views held by some participants, most expressed fear of being associated with candidate Trump. Taylor shared, "in this political landscape right now, when Hillary Clinton… called them Trump supporters deplorable…that is what I'm afraid of. People, people are going to jump to that assumption." Taylor believed this association would result in being stigmatized by the campus community. It was especially noticeable for those who identified as fiscally conservative. Taylor feared coworkers and colleagues would be unable to separate views on fiscal and social matters.

Evaluating the Environment

As the spiral of silence suggests, our participants were careful among other student affairs professionals. They did not experience campus spaces as open and welcoming; contrary to student affairs philosophy. Some of our participants would observe group dynamics to gauge their comfort. Andi shared a story about listening to a joke aimed at conservatives and described feeling incredibly alone, "it kind of hit me when I saw everyone laughing". Through observation of language in the workplace, our participants evaluated if they could authentically interact with liberal colleagues.

Many participants were not comfortable sharing a different perspective with their colleagues, even when it may help in making administrative decisions. Taylor shared a story about keeping quiet in groups when talking about the stewardship of budgets. Taylor felt a fiscally conservative view would "completely put me out there," despite feeling resources were not maximized for students' benefit. Avery shared, "we try not to say or do anything that would expose ourselves." Taylor also shared "I can't even point to somebody else that I would say also identified as conservative." These consequences led to fear among participants when they had difficulty evaluating the environment.

Other participants found subtle ways to determine who might also deviate in a liberal campus environment. Andi explained a strategy to "...test the water and see where we were" with colleagues. Participants paid close attention to language; seeking key words to identify a conservative colleague. This included "have a blessed day" or "I am praying for you." Other clues might be dropped, such as being busy during times traditionally associated with Christian church-going. These messages did not necessarily expose a participant's conservative identity, but instead, hinted at their Christian faith. Since concepts of faith and conservative identity are related, although not exclusively, the messages indicated an open door for conversation.

After our participants connected with another conservative colleague, they provided assistance when navigating the campus environment. Avery shared how they would provide feedback to approach workplace situations, "You better not say that… (their supervisor) will get mad, you better not." While literature indicates the spiral of silence can be countered by connecting with other conservatives, the stories shared by our participants suggest these

like-minded connections only served to mitigate the consequences of speaking out. These behaviors likely reinforced the spiral of silence among conservative staff.

Our participants also did not expect to meet more conservatives during their time working for SMU. For example, Rory confidently shared "as far as this topic, it's going to be just the one person," who also identifies as a conservative. There was a perception very few conservatives were on campus. As a result participants were extremely cautious, if not reluctant, to find additional colleagues they could trust.

Perceived Consequences

Conservative student affairs staff expressed perceived consequences for sharing their conservative identity. Taylor expressed concern when a trusted colleague happened to mention Taylor's political viewpoints during a conversation at a convention. Taylor believed it compromised chances of obtaining a job through networking. Avery expressed caution with supervisors, explaining "I definitely don't want to say anything because I don't want to get on the wrong side of them." Participants rarely expressed their conservative viewpoints with colleagues unless they knew, without a doubt, they had similar beliefs.

A primary concern for participants was stigma or isolation for disclosing their conservative identity. Ellis avoided the label of being a Christian because "what people think as a Christian in today's world is not who I am and what I believe." Due to the assumed link between Christianity and social conservatism, some participants did not want to be labeled as either. Colby shared the preference not to express any opinions, even in meetings or group interactions. When asked why, Colby admitted "for fear of backlash. For fear of the… confrontation. Or being seen as narrow-minded. And ignorant." Certainly, these perceptions would limit their leadership or ability to perform duties of a job.

Disengagement

Once participants evaluated the environment and perceived negative consequences, they often chose to disengage. Quinn offered an explanation for conservatives disengaging since "it's not worth the political capital." Colby flatly said, "you do your job, you be a good employee, but maybe you don't get involved in a lot of things." Meetings seemed precarious for conservatives. Taylor described a time when they disagreed with a group decision, "I'm not going to say anything. I wasn't going to speak up. But I felt strongly in a different direction about that. But I knew if I did, it was going to completely put me out there and then just a bunch of other stupid assumptions of other stuff." Consequently, several participants refused to share their perceptions in groups. As a coping strategy, most would walk away from conversations or just laugh it off when they disagreed.

Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes influenced how participants engaged with colleagues. Stereotypes described during the interviews included being racist, a bigot, narrow-minded, or homophobic. Taylor identified the misconception, "If you are a republican or conservative, you are these things." Avery further clarified, "That's not what we are. So, that's another reason I think why I try not to reveal… Because I don't want to be stereotyped…" Some of our participants were hyperconscious about how their other social identities, combined with their conservative perspective, made them appear to be the epitome of a negative stereotype. For example, Colby felt unfairly characterized based off the sum of privileged identities.

Double Standard

Student affairs emphasizes inclusivity and open-mindedness, but our participants disagreed. Quinn shared "For everything they say, we need to be open-minded, I think they are not open-minded when you are a conservative. I think they kind of shut you out." Ellis also expressed some frustration by explaining "I'm supposed to value your perspective, but you can't value my perspective?" In a space where everyone's opinion matters, it was apparent our participants felt they could not disclose personal beliefs or even disagree in a meeting. Other participants shared "it's almost like we are the forgotten group" and "I feel like there's not a place for conservatives to be comfortable." What we understood from these statements is many of our participants felt their political opinions did not have a home in the general inclusiveness student affairs claims.

Choosing Silence

After evaluating the environment, our participants chose to be silent. When sharing a story, Avery shared "I didn't say a word. I just held my tongue… I couldn't figure out what to say that would be true to myself…" In this instance, Avery experienced conflict between authentically sharing beliefs and choosing to remain silent to spare an uncomfortable situation. One participant who did speak out, found the campus community began to shun them. For example, Quinn said "I felt like people have shut me off, like you are not worth listening to or given a chance to speak."

For many of our participants, faith-based conservatism is a huge part of who they are. They actively participated in their churches and community, but felt the need to conceal their identity at work. Rory struggled to separate themselves from their conservative values, "It's my identity...I want to honor myself and then honor those by being authentic." Colby explained "I find myself more and more not voicing my concerns and being aware of my space." The spiral of silence suggests people become less open to sharing when they observe their views are in opposition to the majority (Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Our participants chose to remain silent.

Discussion

Supporting different perspectives is purportedly a cornerstone of student affairs values (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Evans & Reason, 2001). Conversely, our participants described a work environment where they choose to disengage and retreat to silence because of perceived negative consequences. The findings suggest our participants perceived a double standard in student affairs, especially regarding inclusivity of sociopolitical identity. These narratives are concerning if our participants feel they cannot disagree with their colleagues or share divergent opinions. When values of a profession are applied inconsistently to different viewpoints, there is risk of compromising the integrity of those values.

Stigma

An additional application to understand the spiral of silence framework is stigma. From the imagined perspective of their coworkers, our participants' narratives often presented their conservative identities as blemishes or stigmas of character (Goffman, 1963). Our participants held a genuine, almost palpable, fear of being exposed and possibly discredited by peers. Student affairs is a highly networked profession and an actual blemish of character may have negative consequences for future advancement.

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Stigma requires a reference group of normals who, if they are aware of the blemish, can discredit those who possess it. In our study, it was not clear if an actual group of normals existed so much as participants believed they existed. The student affairs profession maintains an ethos of progressive ideologies. These include acceptance the U.S. has a tradition of systematic oppression, double-standards with regards to the civil rights of marginalized populations, and mechanisms to make campuses hostile to minoritized individuals. Conservatives might disagree with this thinking, or at least hold different beliefs about how to remedy these social ills. Participants worried SMU student affairs professionals would associate their conservative values with being anti-inclusive, lacking reflection, and ignorant to issues of systemic oppression. Additional scholarship is needed to more fully understand if a normative view of individuals who hold conservative views actually exists among student affairs professionals.

Stigmatized people may pass as a "normal" in social settings, but to do so often requires they make efforts to manage the information they give others, constantly be alert and checking their surroundings and bodies for signs of stigmatization, and perhaps minimize close relationships in these environments. Our participants approach to managing workplace discussions about sensitive issues was primarily to either avoid them or not share their beliefs. Few shared stories about making efforts to minimize relationships at work. If holding conservative values is indeed a stigma among student affairs professions, our participants approach to managing a social interaction seemed to be successful.

Complexity of Conservative Identity

Findings also highlight the great diversity among our conservative participants, aligning with prior research indicating a single conservative definition cannot fully describe all self-identified conservatives (Gross et al., 2011). The majority of participants never expressed their perspective as somehow denying rights to others or questioning their humanity. Socially conservative participants were less inclined to engage with colleagues outside of work and attend student events to support a particular population of students. Although socially conservative participants did not support varying gender or sexuality identities, they did not perceive it as being an issue in supporting students. Alternatively, many participants were fully invested in their students and passionate about their success, acknowledging and supporting their identities.

There was one outlier narrative, Dakota, who expressed explicit racist and xenophobic beliefs. As a research team we struggled with how to reconcile this narrative among the others or provide it justice. We determined a narrative study does not preclude a critical discernment to explore stories of participants. When critically examining the exclusionary behaviors, and the impacts of these actions in an educational environment, we felt it was problematic for this participant to be working with students. It is worth noting, in the year following this study Dakota left SMU.

Limitations

Our findings should be considered in the context of the study's number of participants at a single data collection site. Our purpose was to better understand how some conservatives are experiencing the liberal workplace of student affairs, without generalizing beyond the study site. As with any qualitative study, the views of the researcher can influence findings. Our use of multiple researchers with varied political and social identities helped partially mitigate this concern.

Another limitation was the decision not to ask our participants for their social identities including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. We chose not to ask our participants about their identities because we were concerned

participants anticipated assumptions would be made and they would not be willing to share their experiences. Although this is a limitation, we tried to alleviate this by asking participants how to define their political identity themselves. We also wanted to note how two of our participants identified a process of "coming out" as conservative. While we acknowledge the fear our participants shared, we are choosing not to use this language because of other associations with coming out.

Implications and Conclusions

Supervisors and administrators may hold responsibility to ensure conservatives feel able to express divergent viewpoints in the workplace. The participants in our study rarely felt comfortable disagreeing with a liberal majority and often disengaged in meetings. In decision-making, administrators could ask their team to think about matters from another perspective and encourage different viewpoints. Administrators could also make efforts to curb homogenous thinking, check assumptions of sociopolitical identities, and refocus meetings if participants digress on political conversation.

We need to be especially conscious of stereotypes made about conservatives and work together to challenge assumptions. Our analysis demonstrates how diverse our participants were within this sociopolitical identity. Each of them were aware of the stereotypes and expressed concern about unfairly being grouped together. Discourse and training around varying belief systems may help challenge stereotypical assumptions of conservatives. Open and honest conversations to understand divergent values can support diversity of thought. However, dialog cannot happen if individuals do not feel comfortable sharing. Facilitators of dialog must implement guidelines for discussion and support sharing among sociopolitical diverse staff.

Similar implications for practice also exist when serving conservative students. If student affairs professionals are excluding conservative professionals in the workplace, conservative students may feel equally excluded. It must be acknowledged, we encountered openly racist, homophobic, or otherwise intolerant beliefs from one participant. It is imperative for colleagues and supervisors to challenge intolerant perspectives because these exclusionary beliefs adversely impact educational environments. We also acknowledge these beliefs were not held by most participants. and it would be unfair to label all conservatives as such. We encountered just as many perspectives that integrated concepts of social justice into their sociopolitical identity. The diversity within an identity is an implication for engaging in dialog around values.

Self-identified conservatives in student affairs experienced the many characteristics of the spiral of silence. Our participants feared being stereotyped and experiencing negative consequences, and kept silent in many scenarios. As a result, they disengaged during meetings and social interactions. The student affairs profession places significant value on respecting individual differences. Understanding sociopolitical conservatives outside of the polarized political assumptions may help dismantle the perceived double standard in the profession and welcome the conservative perspective in higher education.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

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