



Advancing Women in Leadership

JOURNAL

VOLUME 44, 2025
ISSN 1093-7099

EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, NAHED ABDELRAHMAN, JULIA BALLENGER, SONIA RODRIGUEZ, AND BENJAMIN JANKENS
ASSISTANT EDITOR: JORDAN DONOP

Full Length Research Paper

"The Challenge is to Come to Work with a Smile": The Mentorship, Salary, and Relationships of Administrative Assistants in Higher Education

Kelli Listermann, Cristobal Salinas, Tamara Penna

Kelli Listermann: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Florida Atlantic University, klistermann@fau.edu

Cristobal Salinas: Professor, Florida Atlantic University, salinasc@fau.edu

Tamara Penna: Student, Florida Atlantic University, tpenna2021@fau.edu

Accepted November 5, 2025

Administrative assistants play a vital role in higher education institutions in the United States by supporting faculty, staff, and students in a variety of ways. Despite providing critical day-to-day duties, administrative assistants employed in higher education lack mentorship and are underpaid and overworked, contributing to job dissatisfaction. Counter to these demotivators, administrative assistants build and sustain rewarding relationships with students and peers. To better increase job satisfaction and retention of administrative assistants, higher education leaders should consider the following findings of this qualitative study using Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory: lack of training and mentorship, being overworked and underpaid, and building relationships, all contribute to job satisfaction for administrative assistants in higher education in the United States.

Keywords: administrative staff experiences, higher education administrative assistants, job satisfaction

Published research about higher education has been centered on the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators, often leaving out the experiences of those in other roles such as administrative assistants. In this study, the researchers aimed to bring attention to the voices and experiences of administrative assistants, who are often overlooked in higher education literature. Studies on job satisfaction in higher education outside the United States have primarily focused on faculty members and some upper-level administrators. Despite their crucial role in institutional support, administrative assistants in American higher education have not been the subject of much published research regarding their job satisfaction (Plattner & Mberengwa, 2010; Teles & Ragsdale, 1989). Additionally, over 90% of secretaries and administrative assistants identify as women in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), and due to their perceived low rank, they are frequently overlooked in research. Therefore, a research gap exists regarding the work experiences of administrative assistants in American higher education. Job satisfaction can be complex, influenced by both personal and situational factors (Hagedorn, 2000; Herzberg, 1966; Kalleberg, 1977; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003; Volkwein et al., 1998). Job satisfaction is crucial for administrative assistants due to their role in supporting higher education leaders, students, and faculty members.

Since colleges and universities use different titles for administrative support staff, the researchers use "administrative assistant" in this study to include "secretaries," "administrative

staff," "clerical support," "program assistant," or "staff professional." "Administrative assistant" is the most common or widely understood term for organizational staff support (International Association of Administrative Professionals, 2022). The following questions will be addressed:

1. What impacts job satisfaction for administrative assistants at higher education institutions?
2. How does the lack of mentorship opportunities, workplace training, and livable salary influence the roles and relationships of administrative assistants in higher education?

Literature Review

The experiences of administrative assistants in higher education have not been thoroughly examined in the current literature. To address this gap, this literature review examines themes including lack of appreciation, workplace stressors, complexities, and bullying. Additionally, Author and Author (2024) have emphasized that "future research should explore how administrative assistants in higher education experience, perceive, and engage in mentorship" (p. 23). Therefore, this study is significant as it contributes to the literature by examining how administrative assistants experience job satisfaction, mentorship, and training, and how those factors influence their rank within their institution and professional relationships.

Higher education institutions employ more qualified administrative assistants compared to other industries (Newman, 2008), yet these administrative assistants often lack appreciation (Plattner & Mberengwa, 2010) and receive low pay despite increased tasks and responsibilities (Listermann & Salinas, 2024). Administrative assistants play a crucial role in supporting upper-level administrators and faculty members, thereby helping to fulfill institutional missions involving education, research, and service. Thus, their essential responsibilities must be cultivated and supported (Kuo, 2009). Research indicates that administrative assistants continue to be underpaid and undervalued when they assume new roles and responsibilities (Listermann & Salinas, 2024). Moreover, when they take on more significant tasks and responsibilities, they seldom receive mentorship or training (Sorcinelli et al., 2006; Ponjuan et al., 2011). These negative experiences impact job satisfaction, salary, appreciation, academic relationships, rank, and both professional and personal growth (Othman et al., 2017; Osakwe, 2014).

Professional rank is one characteristic that can influence job satisfaction (Volkwein & Parmley, 2000; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). In higher education, professionals with a higher rank report more satisfaction with both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of their position (Volkwein & Parmley, 2000). Administrative assistants do not share the same rank as faculty members or upper-level administrators, which contributes to a lack of job satisfaction (Listermann & Salinas, 2024; Newman, 2018). Rank significantly influences the institutional mission of fostering relationships between faculty members and staff (Provost, 2005). According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, job satisfaction is impacted by factors such as salary, mentorship, and positive work relationships. Therefore, mentorship and relationships are essential for administrative assistants to experience positive job satisfaction. For administrative assistants, a lack of job satisfaction may influence their productivity and effectiveness (Issah, 2021). Additionally, researchers have shown that administrative assistants without a terminal degree may receive less respect than their academic peers (Newman, 2018). Lower-rank positions, including administrative assistant roles, experience stress due to increased demands, which can negatively impact mental health (Ablanedo-Rosas et al., 2011). Psychosomatic stressors, such as feeling disrespected and disrespected by colleagues, increase stress and further influence feelings of dissatisfaction (Plattner & Mberengwa, 2010).

Academic Bullying

Administrative assistants may face bullying from co-workers who have a higher position, such as professors and senior administrators, often due to a power imbalance (Prevost & Hunt, 2018). According to Lampman (2012), the likelihood of being targeted for bullying is higher for women, members of a minoritized racial group, or those without a terminal degree. Some reasons for non-physical bullying in academic settings include personal deficiencies or personal benefits (Raineri et al., 2011). Prevost and Hunt (2018) found that psychological and

emotional attacks were the more common forms of bullying in academic environments. Other forms of academic bullying include escalating administrative responsibilities (Faria et al., 2012; Frazier, 2011; Prevost & Hunt, 2018), undermining professional competency (Ahmad et al., 2017; Fogg, 2008; Prevost & Hunt, 2018), and isolating the target from social interactions or activities (Fogg, 2008), which administrative assistants experience from faculty members.

Furthermore, academic bullying targeting administrative assistants can lead to "physical, emotional, and psychological impairments, as well as different work-related and institutional implications" (Prevost & Hunt, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, staff members such as administrative assistants who experience workplace bullying may suffer in silence, believing it is better to manage the issues privately rather than confront it (Fogg, 2008; Lewis, 2004). Researchers have shown a "significant increase in the prevalence of bullying tendencies with rank" (Raineri et al., 2011, p. 28). Compared to administrative assistants and junior professors, upper-level administration and senior academics are reported to engage in bullying more frequently (Raineri et al., 2011). Thus, it is necessary to critically analyze and reflect on the impact of bullying on the careers, development, and academic freedom of administrative assistants in university settings (Dentith et al., 2015). Promoting a culture of respect can help foster healthier working relationships between administrative assistants, administrators, and faculty members (Prevost & Hunt, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The experiences of administrative assistants at higher education institutions are closely linked to job satisfaction and growth, with pay and status being influential factors (Othman et al., 2017). Several elements affect job satisfaction for administrative assistants, including training, mentorship, appreciation, academic relationships, salary, and other workplace stressors. Examining these factors provides insight into how administrative assistants experience job satisfaction. Both academic and non-academic staff members who are satisfied with their role contribute positively to institutional goals in higher education (Othman et al., 2017; Osakwe, 2014). Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory has been applied to assess employee satisfaction both outside and inside higher education institutions. This theory distinguishes between hygiene factors, such as salary, mentorship, and positive relationships with colleagues, and motivators, such as appreciation, recognition, and opportunity for advancement (Herzberg, 1966; Ghazi et al., 2013). Hygiene factors relate to basic job necessities and their absence can lead to dissatisfaction, while motivator factors are associated with job satisfaction and enhance overall fulfillment. Herzberg (1966) suggested that job satisfaction is influenced by the interaction of these two sets of factors. Understanding and addressing these needs can improve work conditions and enhance job satisfaction. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory is appropriate for this study because it highlights how elements such as recognition and personal growth can impact job satisfaction. The theory makes

clear distinctions between preventing dissatisfaction and promoting satisfaction. In the case of administrative assistants in higher education, the complexity of job satisfaction can be understood through this framework by integrating the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. Thus, the researchers used Herzberg’s Motivator-Hygiene Theory to explore how administrative assistants in higher education experience job satisfaction and how these experiences affect their roles and relationships.

Methods

Research Approach

Qualitative research focuses on (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their world, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” to understand how they interpret a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Furthermore, the objective of qualitative research “is to know more about a phenomenon” that “may eventually inform practice” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, a basic qualitative research study is used to investigate the job satisfaction of administrative assistants in American higher education. Basic qualitative methods facilitate an in-depth exploration of these experiences through interviews, allowing the researchers to make meaning of individuals’ perspectives within the specific context of job satisfaction and work environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A goal of basic qualitative research is to inform policy and practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); thus, the findings from this study aim to assist college and university administrators in developing and implementing policies that enhance job satisfaction of administrative assistants. This qualitative research study is part of a large study (Listermann & Salinas, 2024); therefore, similar research methods were employed.

Context of the Study

The researchers recruited participants for this study from across the United States. During the course of the study, the researchers learned that potential participants were interested in participating in the study. Even though some participants from outside of the Southeast and Midwest scheduled to interview, there were some reasons they were unable to participate. For example, some had work responsibilities that limited their availability and others felt they would be unable to share their experiences because their position involves knowing a lot of sensitive information about their institutions. While participants were notified the interviews and data would be anonymous and confidential, they declined to interview. Additionally, four participants agreed to join the interviews on their lunch breaks and two agreed to interview after 5:00 p.m. outside of their office. Therefore, the six participants who ended up participating in the study were located in the Southeast and Midwest.

Participants

Snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants for this study. Researchers reached out via e-mails to college and

university faculty, staff, and administrators, asking them to recommend potential participants. Over a six-month period (January to June of 2022), efforts were made to recruit administrative assistants, resulting in only six participants agreeing to participate. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All six participants completed an online consent form through Qualtrics, which was password-protected, and had the opportunity to ask questions. Most participants inquired about who would have access to the interview data, expressing concern about confidentiality with faculty members, administrators, or colleagues. All participants were assured that only researchers would have access to the data, and any self-identification would be replaced with a pseudonym. To help with trustworthiness and validity, the researchers conducted a member check (Creswell & Poth, 2024) in which the researchers shared the findings with all participants and requested feedback to ensure their thoughts were appropriately captured. Only one participant provided a minor change from secretaries to administrative assistants. The small sample size and demographic similarity of participants may limit the transferability of the findings to a larger population, including those employed at private universities and community colleges.

To participate in this study, participants must be 18 years or older and employed as administrative assistants in higher education at the time of the interview. The population of this study consists of six women administrative assistants in higher education institutions across the United States. Although the research aimed to recruit a diverse group in terms of job titles, genders, ages, types of institutions, and geographic locations, all participants self-identify as women. Of these, five identify as White and one as Latina, with ages ranging from 53 to 67 years. The participants hold various job titles and work at different colleges and universities in the Midwest and Southeast portions of the United States. As stated earlier, the term “administrative assistants” used in this paper encompasses but is not limited to “secretaries,” “administrative staff,” “clerical support,” “program assistant,” or “staff professional.” Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the six participants.

Table 1

Administrative Assistant participants’ demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Job title	Years in position	Salary (United States currency)
Judy	60	Latina	Woman	Program Assistant	12	\$38,000.00
Sonia	67	White	Woman	Senior Secretary	22	\$30,000.00
Debbie	55	White	Woman	Program Assistant	22	\$38,000.00
Linda	67	White	Woman	Office Supervisor	8	\$36,521.00
Sandra	53	White	Woman	Admin Assistant	13	\$51,000.00
Rachelle	60	White	Woman	Secretary II	38	\$52,000.00

Data Collection

Data collection involves “a series of interrelated activities to gather good information to answer emerging research questions” (Creswell, 2007, p.118). For this study, data were collected through 60-minute structured interviews with each participant. Participants had the option to be interviewed in person, by phone, or via Zoom; two participants chose in-person interviews, one opted for a phone interview, and three interviews were conducted via Zoom. Thus, six participants in total were interviewed for the study.

During these interviews, participants were asked 17 open-ended questions (see Appendix) covering various aspects of their career and life experiences, including age, gender, salary, expectations, and relationships with students, faculty, and family. The development of the interview questions was influenced by Herzberg’s (1966) concepts of hygiene and motivators. Questions aimed at identifying hygiene factors included: “If you feel comfortable, what is your salary?” “Do you get salary increases or bonuses?” “What are the challenges you face in your current position?” “What changes would you make to your job description to improve your job and quality of life?” Conversely, questions aimed at understanding motivators included: “What do you enjoy the most about your current position? How do you define mentorship for secretaries?” “Who supports you? Describe that support.” Additionally, some questions could address either factor depending on the participants’ response, such as “Describe the culture of administrative assistants within your department, college, or university,” and “Describe the support you receive in your role and who supports you.” To address challenges, the 17-question open-ended interview protocol was developed, and the researchers discussed their perspectives privately to reduce bias and improve the consistency of data collection and analysis.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the research questions were reviewed by two administrative assistants to ensure relevance and validity. Although no pilot interviews were conducted, the feedback from the two administrative assistants provided the researchers with context to pursue the study. The interview questions (see Appendix) were developed after the establishment of the purpose and review of the research questions, drawing on insights from the literature review, theoretical framework, and the researchers’ experiences collaborating with administrative assistants.

During the interviews, participants described their current position, which included tasks such as managing communication and marketing plans, serving as a liaison between students, faculty and administrators, handling calendar management, event planning, organizing course schedules, processing budget and travel requests, managing admission applications, and learning new software used at the university. Four participants chose to be interviewed during office hours and their lunch breaks, continuing to answer the phone and respond to emergencies during the interviews. When participants needed to address work-related issues, the audio recording was paused until they

were available to continue. Two participants agreed to participate in the study, but only on the condition that it was after office hours because they were not allowed to take personal calls during their office hours. Interviews provide valuable, detailed insights into participants’ experiences, but they also present challenges, such as potential interviewer bias and logistical issues, necessitating careful planning and execution to ensure reliability and validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews were transcribed, cleaned (all personal self-identifiers and names of institutions and departments replaced by pseudonyms), and then analyzed. First, the data was organized into codes by all researchers. According to Saldaña (2009), codes are “often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Each researcher created their own list of codes, which were combined into a master code list using Excel. The code list contained 25 codes, which were subsequently categorized according to Herzberg’s Two Factor Theory (1966): 15 codes were classified as hygiene, 6 as motivators, and 4 as neutral.

After coding the data into hygiene and motivators, the codes were merged into seven themes. Themes represent meaningful patterns and reflect the research’s focus, highlighting what is significant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2009). The seven themes emerged based on the similarities among the codes; for example, codes related to training and mentorship (motivators) were merged into one theme. Another theme included the codes of salary and validation (hygiene). Then, using In Vivo coding, researchers analyzed the data by identifying direct quotes from what participants shared during the interview to provide in-depth and descriptive insights in the interviewee’s own words (Saldaña, 2009). Although the codes reflect both hygiene and motivators, the direct quotes reflect that administrative assistants’ experience was “dissatisfiers” (hygiene). The researchers reviewed all direct quotes, met to discuss their understanding of the data, discussed their interpretation, and derived meaning from the data.

Through this data analysis, the researchers aimed to understand job satisfaction among administrative assistants in American higher education, resulting in three findings. To further ensure trustworthiness and accuracy, the researchers also engaged in member checking and provided the transcripts of their interview to each participant and the findings for their review. Participants provided feedback to the researchers, which enhanced the validity of the findings.

Findings

Study participants were interviewed about their experiences as administrative assistants working in higher education in the United States. The data reveal three findings that provide context to how administrative assistant women in higher education experience job satisfaction and how their experiences influence

their roles and relationships. First, participants expressed a need for more training, mentorship, and support from upper-level administration and faculty. Second, participants experienced less satisfaction with their positions due to feeling overworked and being underpaid. Third, because they lack support and do not feel validated by their institutions and colleagues, they seek to build relationships with other administrative assistants as well as students. See Table 2 for the summary of the findings and how they connect to the research questions.

Table 2

Summary of Findings

Findings	Summary
Lack of Training and Mentorship	Connecting to both research questions, this finding reveals how a lack of training and mentorship contributes to job satisfaction for administrative assistants. The participants expressed the necessity of training and mentoring themselves since they do not receive either from their institutions or departments.
Overworked and Underpaid	This finding answers both research questions and elucidates the absence of validation expressed by the participants. This highlights how the lack of a livable salary and the increased duties and demands placed upon them influence their satisfaction with their job, decreasing their feelings of worth and importance in their roles.
Job Satisfaction through Building Relationships	Lastly, this finding, which primarily answers the first research question, reveals the most positive aspect contributing to job satisfaction for administrative assistants: building meaningful relationships. The relationships the participants build with students and other administrative assistants were described as providing long-term support and community.

All participants stated that they did not receive training or mentoring in any of the programs necessary for their day-to-day jobs. For example, Judy said, "I didn't get any training, I pretty much had to train myself on everything and learn about all of the programs." Debbie declared how learning the required programs to do her job was challenging, "There was a huge learning curve with programs and software." Like Judy and Debbie, all study participants shared that they did not receive formal training or mentorship at their universities.

Due to the lack of formal training and mentorship, participants explained how they had to learn on their own and had to solicit the help of other administrative assistants. While this is not formal mentorship, they anticipated receiving some form of instruction from their employer on how to do their job successfully; yet their employer did not do so. For example, Sonia did not receive formal training or mentorship to use Workday software; thus, she learned to use the system by herself and is constantly challenged when there is an update on the Workday system. Sonia said:

Workday is challenging, yet they don't offer support or additional training. The [university] doesn't tell you

that it's done until it comes back. And then I say, 'I've done something wrong.' There's no follow-through regarding updates when they're changing in the system. They don't really tell us; we're the last ones to know. My only mentor was a book.

Sonia disclosed that one of her biggest challenges was figuring out a system herself. Another example of a lack of training was shared by Sandra when she explained how she had to reach out to different departments and ask, "Could I have training in a certain software system, or if they could explain something to me?" Because of the lack of training, Judy suggested, "If only we had some cross-training from the university, which would be nice because we could leave [work] and not have to worry about anything going wrong."

On top of the lack of training, there was no mentorship to help these women achieve any sort of personal or career goals. Rachelle stated, "The mentorship, there's nothing." Given that the participants of this study shared that there was no mentorship, all participants were asked in the interview to define what mentorship means to them. Linda stated:

Mentorship is when someone is dedicated to work with someone else to receive direction on specific issues that need to be resolved in a collaborative way. I really don't receive any mentorship in my position.

Sonia also defined mentorship as something where someone "supports [you] on a regular basis, which I have not seen in many years." Due to the lack of mentorship, the participants had no one to reflect on as an example of what should be done in their position. All participants shared how they lack training and mentorship at their institutions.

Overworked and Underpaid: Absence of Validation

Alongside the lack of training and mentorship, the participants of the study shared feeling underappreciated due to their heavy workload and low salaries, leading to increased stress. All participants stated how their annual salary had stayed the same after years of working at the same university in the same position, with no raise or bonus. For example, Debbie stated, "My salary is \$38,300, and that's after almost 11 years of working here." Alongside sharing her salary, Debbie expressed:

I haven't had any sort of substantial raise in over five years. My coworker and I had a very, very slight raise maybe three years ago that increased our pay by 20 cents per hour.

Even though Debbie received a 20-cent raise, it is not enough to show appreciation for the 11 years of service that she has invested in her position, department, and the university.

Although almost all the participants shared their salaries, which ranged from \$30,000 to \$38,000 annually, Linda felt uncomfortable when asked to share. Despite not sharing her salary, she said, "The salary is not enough compensation for the

job responsibilities that I do.” When asked what Linda’s responsibilities were, she explained:

I manage all of the front desk operations. Registering transfers, refunds, mailing supplies, customer service, and special projects, as needed. I did supervise three officestaff members before the closure of COVID-19. And before COVID, we received a 2% increase every year, and then we also had a year-end bonus.

Like all other participants, Linda has many responsibilities and recognizes that they are not being paid sufficiently for their work. Judy shared how her stressful job responsibilities are never-ending without any type of praise, including salary increases. Judy shared:

There are so many systems here to learn; for every little thing, there's a new system or software that you have to learn; it can be a lot. When you look at the salary of administrative assistants, I mean \$14 an hour, you could make \$15 at Panera.

Judy compared her salary to a fast-food restaurant. In addition, she recognized that she could be paid more by doing less than she currently does as an administrative assistant.

In addition to the low salary with no raise or bonus, the participants expressed the pressure they feel under all the work they have, with no free time for family or personal reasons. For example, Linda said:

The only change that I would like in my job is to have another person who supports the front desk so I would have the time to go to appointments and breaks and feel more comfortable because I have to ask them [my supervisors] to relieve me.

Judy also expressed similar feelings to Linda, stating that the amount of work she must do is challenging because “you can’t take a day off and just chill. You must check in because there are things that you are responsible for, and you can’t just disconnect.” Like Judy and Linda, Sonia also feels that her ongoing job responsibilities are to support administrators and faculty, reasons for which she cannot disconnect from her job, and her salary does not reflect the effort she puts into her work. Sonia shared:

I come in because I'm supporting other people who are here or people with time off; the position requires that I'm here. I don't get paid extra, I don't know what's going on, and I take every day as it comes, and when there's a problem, I do my best to correct it.

Like Sonia, participants shared a feeling of being overworked and underpaid.

Moreover, Debbie expressed, “The challenge is to come to work with a smile on your face, knowing that you haven’t been really acknowledged for the more work that's been put on you.” Overall, the participants expressed a lack of appreciation in terms of salary, alongside stress related to increased duties.

Job Satisfaction through Building Relationships

Participants acknowledged that they are overworked and underpaid; however, when describing why they continue to be satisfied with their jobs, they all explained how they enjoy building relationships with students. Debbie, for example, explained how she builds relationships with students:

I talk to prospective students and advise them about all our different programs and degrees. I build relationships with them, and even after they graduate, they stay in touch with me.

In brief, Debbie described how she helps students. Judy also stated, “The students rely on me. And there are many times I have to talk to them and help them through the program or whatever their needs are.” All participants played a crucial role in the lives, decisions, and education of the students seeking help.

The relationships the participants made with these students were not temporary; in fact, some participants shared how they stayed in contact with students after they graduated. Like Debbie and Judy, Sonia worked with students “recruiting bilingual and bicultural students from the [school district] to help them enroll and earn a degree in counseling.” Sonia then further explained how:

A lot of them still send me emails and communicate how they're doing with their new positions or with their family. They still come back. They remind me of the love that I've always had for students. It's wonderful to hear from them.

Similar to Sonia, Rachele said:

I've been in touch with all the students that I know from the first time I met some of them in 2011. I know them, and I keep in touch with a lot of them. They get so excited that I reach out. I give words of advice, and they can trust me.

Rachele further explains how “helping students is a gift, and I love to see them get their education because I didn't have it,” bringing her joy, knowing that she is making a difference in the lives of these students. Building relationships with students was a positive experience for the administrative assistants of this study.

The relationships built by the study participants also stretch to the administrative assistants’ colleagues they work with. When asked about the people they work with, all participants said nothing but positive remarks towards their fellow secretary coworkers. Debbie, for example, expressed:

The Dean's secretary is very supportive. I love her as a person in her role because she stays away from conflict. She would go out of her way to help me.

Another participant who shares the same feelings is Stephanie, who said:

I have great support from other secretaries from different departments and the staff that covers the desk, since we have not had any backup support personnel.

In addition to this, Debbie explained:

I think that we have created a special place as far as the people. I prayed to work around just the best, and I got what I prayed for. I enjoy my secretary coworkers. We have [conversations that are] deep, personal, [and] friendly. They are my friends.

The connections the participants make with their administrative assistant coworkers contribute to building a positive work environment from their perspective. All participants of this study shared how they created meaningful relationships with other administrator assistants.

While participants of this study shared that they build relationships with students and their administrative assistant colleagues, they shared that they are challenged to build relationships with their supervisors. Sandra indicated:

I do have very little interaction with a few students. I always feel sort of an affinity to [students] just because I'm a mom. Building relationships with students is important... The challenge in my current role is I feel a little isolated. There are people in and out all day. It's not like I can just chat and ask for help. Plus, I'm too busy to do that anyway.

Furthermore, like all other participants, Sandra shared that she has developed relationships with other administrator assistants where they use each other as “a sounding board.” Participants indicated that they use each other as a support network to navigate their workplaces. Having a network of individuals who share similar experiences and job titles fosters community and support. These relationships also inspire the participants to nurture their long-standing relationships with students.

Discussion

Herzberg's Two Factor Theory emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing the factors that improve job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). All participants of this study expressed a need for more training, mentorship, and validation, including better pay, in their current roles within higher education institutions. Despite the lack of formal training and mentorship, the administrative assistants of this study found a sense of validation through their relationships with other administrative assistants and some students. While all participants of this study self-identified as women, it is important to acknowledge that not all secretaries are women, and the role of a secretary has traditionally been viewed as a female-dominant profession. The participants felt that the title of “administrative assistant” was more appropriate than “secretary,” suggesting a need for further research on the implications of these titles. Future research should also explore the experiences of men and gender-nonbinary administrative assistants, as well as examine the role and impact of gender in this field. Most

published research underscores the significant contributions of secretaries to “the missions of education, research advancement and public service” (Kuo, 2009, p. 43). Job satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional concept influenced by situational, relational, organizational, and personal factors (Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). It is linked to organizational outcomes such as higher performance, commitment, and retention (Lund, 2003) and is also shaped by gender, degree, academic rank, and financial stress (Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). Administrative assistants in higher education possess a vital role in supporting students, faculty, and university leadership in higher education.

In the first finding, administrative assistants reported a need for both formal training and mentorship to perform their job requirements effectively. While formal training and mentorship serve different purposes, participants in this study expressed a lack of both. Training provides educational opportunities to develop specific skills, while mentorship involves a dynamic relationship in which a mentor guides a mentee through professional and personal growth experiences (Torrens et al., 2017). Investing in mentorship can provide positive returns for higher education institutions, including increased staff retention rates and enhanced career satisfaction (Gardiner et al., 2007). Research by Allen et al. (2004) indicates that academic staff with mentoring relationships experienced greater career satisfaction and are more committed to their work. Additionally, mentoring has been shown to decrease work-related stressors (Allen et al., 1995; Gardiner et al., 2007; Wilson & Elman, 1990).

The participants revealed that they do not feel validated by their pay, with salaries remaining stagnant and starting rates already too low. All participants expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation and lack of opportunities for raises. Many rely on financial support from a partner to manage their modest salary. The lack of recognition and limited prospects for advancement contribute to decreased job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). Offering competitive compensation could enhance job satisfaction and improve retention. Despite the absence of formal mentorship, participants were able to build relationships with students and peers, becoming mentors themselves. The relationships they built, particularly with students, often lasted long after students graduated. These peer relationships also contribute to job satisfaction. However, one participant reported feeling isolated due to the minimal interaction with others, which hindered their ability to build meaningful relationships and reduce both emotional and professional support.

Recommendations

Future research should elaborate on how campus climate affects the job satisfaction of administrative assistants and investigate existing policies aimed at retaining and rewarding them. Given the crucial role administrative assistants play, it is imperative for university leaders to understand their job satisfaction experiences. Published research has explored job satisfaction in higher education; yet, the role of administrative assistants has been ignored. Therefore, this paper contributes to higher

education management and job satisfaction by sharing the experiences of administrative assistants. To enhance job satisfaction, university management should focus on improving work conditions and recognition for administrative staff. Additionally, universities could implement regular feedback mechanisms to address concerns promptly and establish clear career development paths to support long-term career growth and satisfaction among administrative assistants. For example, instituting a formal mentorship program to build support and foster connections. While the participants eventually found relationships with their peers and the students, several noted feeling isolated and that they had no one to support them. In addition to mentoring programs, recognizing the important role of administrative assistants by increasing salary and hiring more support staff could bolster their sense of validation. Several participants had expressed feeling undervalued due to their low pay and lack of support in their duties. These recommendations should be considered by higher education institutions as options to increase the satisfaction and well-being of administrative assistants.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the lack of published research about administrative assistants in higher education in the United States. Administrative assistants in higher education are in a unique position due to their involvement with students, faculty, and administrators. Therefore, the role of a university administrative assistant is multifaceted and involves juggling multiple responsibilities, expectations, and relationships. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1966) draws attention to the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects contributing to job satisfaction. In the case of this study's participants, satisfaction was impacted by both these factors, notably the absence of validation, lack of training and mentorship, and building meaningful relationships with other administrative assistants. The participants expressed an absence of validation due to a lack of pay, showing the impact of extrinsic characteristics on dissatisfaction. With raises being rare and starting salaries being low, the participants expressed a need for more support, training, and mentorship in their roles. To succeed in their duties, they had to seek out training on their own without support or mentorship. Participants also expressed how they built relationships with students and peers. Although they did not receive mentorship, they became mentors by helping students and peers navigate the higher education landscape. This highlights how the participants developed an intrinsic sense of value in their work, motivating them to stay in their position despite the dissatisfaction with pay, mentorship, and training opportunities. Due to the vital role of administrative assistants in higher education and the variety of skills they must possess and duties they undertake daily, more insight and understanding into their contributions is needed. Thus, the researchers encourage leaders, administrators, and faculty not to ignore the value and support that administrative assistants provide to higher education institutions.

References

- Ablanedo-Rosas, J. H., Blevins, R. C., Gao, H., Teng, W.-Y., & White, J. (2011). The impact of occupational stress on academic and administrative staff, and on students: an empirical case analysis. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33*(5), 553–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2011.605255>
- Ahmad, S., Kalim, R., & Kaleem, A. (2017). Academics' perceptions of bullying at work: insights from Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Management, 31*(2), 204–220. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-10-2015-0141>
- Allen, T. D., McManus, S. E., Russell, J. E. A., & Reiniger, A. (1995). *An examination of the impact of peer mentoring on socialization and stress*. In Southern Management Association Meeting, Orlando, FL.
- Allen, T. D., Eby, L. T., Poteet, M. L., Lentz, E. & Lima, L. (2004). Career benefits associated with mentoring for protégés: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*(1), 127–136. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.1.127>
- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2024). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dentith, A. M., Wright, R. R., & Coryell, J. (2015). Those mean girls and their friends: bullying and mob rule in the academy. *Adult Learning, 26*(1), 28-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159514558409>
- Faria, J. R., Mixon, F. G., & Salter, S. P. (2012). An economic model of workplace mobbing in academe. *Economics of Education Review, 31*(5), 720-726. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.04.004>
- Fogg, P. (2008). Academic bullies. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 55*(3), B10-B13. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/academic-bullies/>
- Frazier, K. N. (2011). Academic bullying: A barrier to tenure and promotion of African-American faculty. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy, 5*(1), 1-13.
- Gardiner, M., Tiggemann, M., Kearns, H., & Marshall, K. (2007). Show me the money! An empirical analysis of mentoring outcomes for women in academia. *Higher Education Research & Development, 26*(4), 425-442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360701658633>
- Ghazi, S. R., Shahzada, G. & Khan, M. S. (2013). Resurrecting Herzberg's Two Factor Theory: An implication to the university teachers. *Journal of Educational and Social Research, 3*(2). <https://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/jesr/article/view/270>

- Hagedorn, L. S. (2000). *What contributes to job satisfaction among faculty and staff?* New Directions for Institutional Research. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Herzberg, F. I. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. World Pub. Co.
- Issad, M. (2021). Perception of fit and job satisfaction among administrative staff in a mid-western university in the United States of America. *SAGE Open*, 11(2), 215824402110275–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211027564>
- Johnson-Bailey, J. (2015). Academic incivility and bullying as a gendered and racialized Phenomena. *Adult Learning*, 26(1), 42-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159514558414>
- Kalleberg, A. L. (1977). Work values and job rewards: A theory of job satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, 42(1), 124–143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2117735>
- Kuo, H. (2009). Understanding relationships between academic staff and administrators: an organisational culture perspective. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 31(1), 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800802559278>
- Lampman, C. (2012). Women faculty at risk: US professors report on their experiences with student incivility, bullying, aggression, and sexual attention. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 5(2), 184-208. <https://doi.org/10.1515/njawhe-2012-1108>
- Lewis, D. (2004). Bullying at work: The impact of shame among university and college lecturers. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 32(3), 281-299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880410001723521>
- Listermann, K. J., & Salinas, C. (2024). “Underpaid” and “Undervalued”: The Experiences of Women Administrative Assistants in US Higher Education. *Journal of Education Human Resources*, 42(2), 257–277. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jehr-2023-0001>
- Lund, D. B. (2003). Organizational culture and job satisfaction. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 18(3), 219-236. <https://doi.org/10.1108/0885862031047313>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Newman, M. (2008, July 10). *Academics perpetuate 'class divide', say secretarial staff*. The Times Higher Education. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/academics-perpetuate-class-divide-say-secretarial-staff/402661.article>
- Osakwe, R. N. (2014). Factors Affecting Motivation and Job Satisfaction of Academic Staff of Universities in South-South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. *International Education Studies*, 7(7), 43-51.
- Othman, N., Mokhtar, S. S. M., & Asaad, M. N. M. (2017). Quality management system, employee satisfaction and employee performance in private higher education institutions: A proposed framework. *International Journal of Management Research and Reviews*, 7(6), 681.
- Plattner, I. E. & Mberengwa, D. S. (2010). 'We are the forgotten ones': Occupational stress among university secretaries in Botswana: original research. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 8(1). <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.10520/EJC95915>
- Ponjuan, L., Martin Conley, V., & Trower, C. (2011). Career stage differences in pre-tenure track faculty perceptions of professional and personal relationships with colleagues. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 8(2), 319-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2011.11777204>
- Prevost, C. & Hunt, E. (2018). Bullying and mobbing in academe: A literature review. *European Scientific Journal*, 14(8). <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2018.v14n8p1>
- Provost, M. W. (2005). *A study of four public higher education institutions in Florida: The relationships between faculty and administrator goal congruence, faculty productivity and job satisfaction*. Boca Raton, FL: Florida Atlantic University. <https://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A9037>
- Raineri, E. M., Frear, D. F., & Edmonds, J. J. (2011). An examination of the academic reach of faculty and administrator bullying. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(12), 22-35. https://www.ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol._2_No._12%3B_July_2011/4.pdf
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Sorcinelli, M. D., Austin, A. E., Eddy, P. L., & Beach, A. L. (2006). *Creating the future of faculty development: Learning from the past, understanding the present*. Jossey-Bass.
- Teles, L. & Ragsdale, R. (1989). The impact of word processing on writing behaviour: the interaction of faculty and their secretaries. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 8(2), 217-235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436890080207>
- Torrens, O. D., Salinas, C., & Floyd, D. L. (2017). Examining the value of mentoring and men of color staff members of a community college. *Mentoring & Tutoring: partnership in Learning*, 25(5), 509-527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2017.1415830>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *American Community Survey 2019*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>
- Volkwein, J. F., & Parmley, K. (2000). Comparing administrative satisfaction in public and private universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 41. 95–116.

- Volkwein, J. F., & Zhou, Y. (2003). Testing a model of administrative job satisfaction. *Research in Higher Education, 44*(2), 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022099612036>
- Volkwein, J. F., Malik, S. M., & Napierski-Prancl, M. (1998). Administrative satisfaction and the regulatory climate at public universities. *Research in Higher Education, 39*(1), 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018752311951>
- Wilson, J. A. & Elman, N. S. (1990). Organizational benefits of mentoring. *Academy of Management Executive, 4*, 88–93. <https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.1990.4277215>