

**Supporting Adopted College Students: Developing Student-Ready
Student Affairs Professionals**

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Students who were adopted are a unique and underserved identity group on college campuses who experience challenges, have complex needs, and can benefit from targeted support. Their lived experiences and developmental paths differ from their nonadopted peers and need to be understood to support them. Student affairs staff at most institutions are unaware of the complex developmental path and microaggressions experienced by adopted students and are underprepared to serve them. Using improvement science methodology, an education session focusing on seven core issues experienced by adoptees was developed and presented to residence life staff at Success State University. Qualitative and quantitative data in a pretest-posttest design were collected to evaluate how the session would impact staff knowledge and practice. Additional qualitative data were collected via follow up semi-structured interviews with volunteer participants from the session. Four key themes emerged from the data. A single education session can provide an awareness of adopted students as an identity group, motivate staff to want to learn more, and increase their desire to make practice changes in support of adopted students; however, more than a single education session is needed for staff to confidently create and implement practice strategies. An examination of the findings, using McNair et al. (2022)'s guiding principles, demonstrated there are opportunities for student affairs staff to become student-ready to serve adopted students. The improvement project has implications for student affairs professional education, provides opportunities for innovation in student affairs practice, and points to a need for more strength-based research focused on young adult adoptees.

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction

Student affairs professionals are dedicated to supporting, influencing, and contributing to student development, learning, and success. Their work is informed by theories that provide insight into students' experiences and growth and guide the implementation of action plans and strategies for support (Schuh et al., 2017). The work of contemporary student affairs is to be “student-ready” by intentionally structuring an environment that recognizes and reinforces belonging and acceptance of all students (McNair et al., 2022). This work ensures all students are seen, heard, and valued. Being student-ready means being prepared to serve and support students regardless of their identities, strengths, and challenges. This means understanding the emotional and educational needs of students, especially the barriers they face, providing targeted support, and valuing and welcoming diversity. Student-ready student affairs professionals recognize that marginalized and nontraditional students bring with them life experiences that add new perspectives, demonstrate resilience and strength, and hold potential for success in college and in life. They need support and encouragement to thrive and reach their potential, and an equity minded approach that acknowledges systematic inequities in student experiences (McNair et al., 2022). A strength-based approach that acknowledges the cultural wealth that marginalized students bring to campus, including their assets, strengths, perspectives and diverse experiences (Yosso, 2005), while supporting them in their unique challenges, can create a more welcoming learning and living environment.

To be supported, students must be first seen and understood. Marginalized students are “students whose identities cause harassment, are underserved, or are unable to succeed on college campuses” (Korn, 2021, p. 30). A unique identity group that is often stigmatized and encounters

frequent microaggressions (Baden et al., 2017; Riley & Meeks, 2006), utilizes mental health services at a higher rate than others (Miller et al., 2000; Morgan, 2017), and often struggles to graduate college (Anderman et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2013) is comprised of students who were adopted.

1.1 Problem Statement

Adoption is the legal process of transferring parental rights from one parent or set of parents to another with the purpose of providing permanency. Adoptees come into adoption in several ways including: (a) private adoptions, foster care, kinship, and intercountry adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022; National Council for Adoption [NFCA], 2022). Private adoptions include domestic agency and independent attorney facilitated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022).

At one point in history, secrecy was standard practice in adoption. The intent was to protect adoptees from the stigma of illegitimacy. It was believed that adoptees did not need to know their history, and they could simply assume their adopted family's heritage (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Today, adoptions exist on a continuum from completely closed, where there is no communication between birth and adopted families, to completely open, where there is ongoing communication between birth and adopted families (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

It is difficult to estimate how many adoptees are college aged in any given year because not all adoptions take place at birth. Intercountry adoptions and foster care adoptions often include older children. The NCFCA collects and reports data for all forms of adoption; however, it is not an exact science. No federal entity tracks private adoptions. Not all states track adoptions and those

that do, have various methods for tracking adoption data. Some states will include stepparent and kinship adoptions, and other states create separate categories for stepparent and kinship adoptions. Intercountry adoptions are tracked by the U.S. Department of State; however, some intercountry adoptions are finalized prior to entry, some are finalized after entry, and some are never finalized. Foster care adoptions are tracked by the Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, using a specific data base. Merging these data sources is challenging and results in inaccuracies. Given these difficulties, NCFA provides the best snapshot available of what adoption looks like in terms of numbers and is helpful in tracking trends. Intercountry adoptions experienced a peak in 2004 with 22,989 adoptions, with a decline in subsequent years. Foster care adoptions in that same year were 51,413, with a sharp increase in subsequent years (NCFA, 2022). NCFA reported 22,291 domestic infant adoptions in 2002 (NCFA, 2022). Those adoptees would be young adults in 2023, and potentially enrolled in postsecondary education opportunities (NCFA, 2022).

Adoptees are a diverse group who come to adoption with differences in experiences and are adopted by families with varying levels of preparation. Preplacement adversity and trauma can alter brain development and increase the risk of mental health and behavioral issues (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Children adopted and placed into stable, nurturing homes with skilled parents can show significant improvements in physical, intellectual, and psychological development post placement (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). As adopted children grow and develop, they have a need to understand and create meaning out of their adoption story. Some are supported, and their emotions are validated by family, friends and teachers, while others do not receive the emotional support needed to process their journey, resulting in increased adjustment difficulties (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Students who were adopted frequently experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioral concerns (Behle & Pinquart, 2016; Kaplan, 2009; Keyes et al., 2008; Melero &

Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Tieman et al., 2005). They experience unique challenges with identity development (Grotevant, 1997; Ranieri et al., 2021; Roszia & Maxon, 2019) and sometimes struggle with intimacy issues in adolescence and young adulthood (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). These experiences make their lived experience different than their same age college peers and elevate the learning of others by exposing them to diverse worldviews of family life.

In considering adopted students' complex path of identity development, I became aware of the need for student affairs to better serve this student group through targeted support efforts. I focused my work on a single institution; however, the need to expand support for adopted students applies to many, if not most institutions. I chose to use a pseudonym for the university examined in this work in order to protect the identities of the participants.

A problem of practice (PoP) I identified is that student affairs staff at Success State University are unaware of the needs and challenges of students who were adopted and are underprepared to serve them. The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI) at Success State University sponsors an affinity group for employees who were adopted. Adopted faculty and staff can receive support and discover a sense of belonging through the Adoption Community for Education, which seeks to provide support to one another and promote understanding of adoption. No formal support services are provided for students who were adopted, yet the strategic plan for Success State University indicates that the University enables students to succeed by valuing and embracing diversity and the perspectives of all students.

The university does in fact support many marginalized and special student populations through a variety of offices, including the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, the Office of Veterans' Services, and the Office of International Students, as well as through the Division of Student Affairs, yet no support services exist for adopted students.

The Division of Student Affairs at Success State University has recently undergone a reorganization with new leadership. In division meetings, the dean of students emphasized the need to be focused on student support and well-being by being a “student-ready” campus; however, a campus with no supports in place for adoptive students is invalidating their lived experience, excluding their voice and perspective, and not ready to meet their unique needs or acknowledge their unique contributions.

1.2 My Positionality

My identity as an adoptee, social worker, care manager in student affairs, and an adoption professional provides me with a unique lens to consider this PoP. My birth mother was unmarried in a decade that stigmatized single mothers. She named me Pamela. When I was 3 days old, she relinquished her rights under duress, and I was placed with my adoptive parents. My name was changed to Joanna, and I was taken from Maryland to Pennsylvania where my

adoption was finalized in a privately arranged adoption. I was issued an amended birth certificate and my original birth certificate was sealed. Growing up, I knew I was adopted; however, there was an aura of shame about my origins, and it was not a topic open for discussion. My adopted parents provided me with a stable, nurturing, loving home yet I thought about my birth parents almost every single day. I harbored a hope that someday I would meet them. I wondered if I looked like them. I wondered about my cultural heritage and health history. As a young child, I would stare at faces of strangers in public and wonder if they could be related to me. I wondered if my birth parents ever thought about me, if they were still alive, and if I had siblings. On good days, I wondered if my birth parents would be proud of me. On bad days, I wondered if they would be ashamed of my existence. After all, they gave me away. I wondered about the relationship my birthparents had with each other. Sometimes, I made up stories in my head of who they were and what they were like. My early identity was a mystery, so I filled in the pieces with my imagination. All those thoughts were rarely spoken.

My adoptive mother died during my early childhood. My adoptive father died when I was in college. While I grieved these losses, I also felt the freedom to conduct a search without causing them pain. In an age without deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) testing or Internet, I used the limited clues and resources at my disposal. At the age of 25, I was able to sit at my birth mother's kitchen table and hear her tell the story of how I came to be. I felt as though a void in my heart had finally been filled. We met one more time, but she has an established life and experienced ongoing trauma of stigma; therefore, we have not maintained a connection.

I still knew nothing about my birth father. I was told a false story that I believed for many years about who he was. I recently connected with biological paternal cousins through a commercial DNA website, and I now have a relationship with my birth father and cousins. I finally

feel a sense of peace in knowing my whole story. However, the state of Maryland still will not allow me to access my original birth certificate. The state of Pennsylvania will not allow me to access my sealed adoption records.

My career path in social work focused on health and mental health. My experience in the adoption field consists of completing home studies and post placement reports and providing post placement support for families in three different agencies. I currently work part time as a regional social worker for an international adoption agency. I prepare families for adoption and provide support post placement for as long as legally mandated, which can be up to 2 years, depending on the country of adoption. My agency employs many adult adoptee social workers and appreciates and elevates their voice in the agency's practice. I had discussions with adopted colleagues about their college experiences and what resources and services might have improved their experiences, enhanced their sense of belonging, and fostered a healthy identity development. Many were quick to offer suggestions and ideas based on their own lived experiences and in their work supporting adoptive families. I began to wonder how to bring those ideas from the adoption practitioners' world into the student affairs practitioners' world.

In addition to my work in adoption, I am a care manager in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. My role is to support students, connect them to support services and resources, and assist them in navigating the university system. I often assist students in connecting to groups based on their identity to help them find a sense of community and foster a feeling of belonging. In my work with adoption, I am aware that adoptees often face challenges in identity development. I often supported families in understanding and navigating identity development issues. I am aware that transitions in life can trigger feelings of separation and loss related to adoption, and that entering college can be an emotionally laden experience for these

families. I noticed that while there are numerous programs and support services for students, there were no resources offered by student affairs specifically designed to support adopted students. When mentioning this to student affairs colleagues, I sensed an unawareness of why adopted students needed additional support. Students' birth status was not considered in assisting first year students' adjustment to college. I discussed my observation with care manager colleagues from other universities and was met with surprise and curiosity as they had not considered adopted students as a population with unique identity challenges. Many were eager to enter conversations to learn more. They also confirmed that their institutions did not have support services specifically for adoptees.

1.3 Aim and Change Idea

In order for the Division of Student Affairs at Success State University to be student-ready to provide resources and services to support students who were adopted, the staff need to have an understanding of their challenges and how to address them. My aim was for adopted students to be seen and understood by student affairs staff. Given the commitment of the Division to support underserved students, I was confident the staff would want to ensure that adopted students are heard and supported if they were aware of the need.

When students are seen and understood by staff, there is an opportunity for resources and services to be developed. An educated, empathetic staff would be an essential resource and an important starting point. From there, in collaboration with adopted students, additional services could be created to meet their needs. Numerous offices in the division currently provide support services to students. Some of these offices could provide additional specialty services to support adopted students. Perhaps a new office could be created, programming could be developed, adoption informed counselors could be available, and a more welcoming atmosphere could be provided. An educated staff would also be better positioned to recognize the diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and knowledge adopted students bring with them to college and can assist in elevating their collective voices and make their perspectives known.

My change idea was to develop and present an education program, to student affairs staff, focusing on the needs and challenges of students who were adopted and how to best serve them. An educated staff would be better positioned to serve students who were adopted. An education program would be a catalyst to action.

1.4 Theory of Improvement

In considering the absence of support services and resources for adopted students, I noted that staff seem unaware of a need to provide resources and services for adopted students. I conducted empathy interviews with student affairs professionals at Success State University and

with care managers at peer institutions, which confirmed staff are unaware of the challenges experienced by adopted students and are underprepared to serve them.

The absence of education about adopted students is one of the root causes for staff unawareness. Student development education does not address the nonnormative development of adopted students. There is little written about adopted students in popular student affairs literature, and there is little research published in student affairs journals. There are few presentations about adopted college students at student affairs conferences. The Division of Student Affairs at Success State University engages in extensive ongoing staff development; however, there has not been any training about the experiences of adopted students during my 5-year tenure as a care manager.

Adoptees and their development have been a focus of research in social work, psychology, child development, and pediatric medicine; however, much research has been done on children and young adolescents and less research exists on the experiences of older adolescents and young adults. Recognizing the need for support across the lifespan of adoptees has been a newer development in the adoption field, fueled by adult adoptees' advocacy efforts (Kalb & Tucker, 2019). Research from adoption practice has not made the leap to student affairs practice. Conversely, a paucity of research relating to college age adoptees also means little is known about their strengths and the diversity of voice that they offer to the college communities where they live and study.

University administrators typically do not collect data on how many students are adopted (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). It is unknown how many are enrolled at Success State University. One out of every 10 adults is adopted (The Harris Poll, 2022). The Adoption History Project of the University of Oregon reported in 2012 that 5 million Americans living in the United States were

adopted. It is likely that at a large research campus with an enrollment of 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students, there is a substantial population of student adoptees at any given time.

An additional root cause is that adopted students are unnoticed. The lack of information about adoptees available to student affairs staff, coupled with unknown numbers of college aged adoptees creates an invisible group of students. Although they are unrecognized, adoptees are a unique and stigmatized social identity group on college campuses who face unique challenges and can benefit from supports tailored to their needs (Suda & Hartlep, 2016).

Another root cause is that many myths and tropes about adoption in popular media and culture portray adoption as happily ever after experiences and neglect to acknowledge the fact that adoption begins with trauma and loss (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Verrier, 1993). Literature and movies often inform the ideas that individuals have about adoption, and many times this information is based on stereotypes and filled with microaggressions. In the absence of research-based information, some student affairs professionals may trust the impressions about adoption they absorbed through novels, plays, and film.

Finally, the voice of adopted students is absent. Academic years 2021–22 and 2022–23 listed a student run adoption-related group among the list of student organizations at Success State University; however, the group did not make any wants or needs known to the Division of Student Affairs. They did not advocate for the provision of services or resources.

In considering these root causes, examining the literature, and reflecting on my practical knowledge, I developed a theory of improvement to address my PoP. I identified staff education as a primary driver and a leverage point where I could intervene. A secondary driver, and leverage point would be an in-house staff development program, which I could present to a subgroup of staff and tailor it to their specific work with students. If I wanted to increase staff awareness of the

needs and challenges of adopted students, their knowledge of how to address those needs, and an understanding of how adopted students enrich the campus community, I needed to educate staff through an in-house staff development program. One way to do this was to develop, promote, and execute a workshop to a specific department of student affairs staff within the division.

1.5 Stakeholders

There were several stakeholder groups relevant to my PoP. The focus area of my PoP was the Division of Student Affairs at Success State University. Division senior leadership was the first stakeholder. The leadership team includes the vice provost of student affairs, the dean of students, and four associate deans of students. Each associate dean leads a separate “team” of departments within the division. The leadership team promotes the division’s student-ready culture, making my PoP relevant, timely, and connected to leadership’s strategic goal.

The department teams were another stakeholder. The teams include the Wellness Team, Student Engagement and Professional Development Team, the Student Community and Inclusion Team, and the Student Experience Team. The Wellness Team includes the University Counseling Center, the Mobile Crisis Response Team, the Care Office, Campus Recreation, and

Student Health Services. The Engagement and Professional Development Team includes the Outside of the Classroom Curriculum Department, the Career Center, Leadership Development and Involvement and Student Unions. The Student Experience Team includes New Student Programs, Second Year experience, Commuter Outreach, and Residence Life. The Student Community and Inclusion Team includes Greek Life, Office of Belonging and Inclusion, Success Community Service, and Student Media. Together, these teams include approximately 200 student affairs employees, all who support Success State University students in specialized ways. It is important for them to be culturally competent to serve all student identity groups. My PoP was directly imbedded their daily work of supporting students, shaping their development through intentional program design, and ensuring they feel connected to the university community.

Additional employees, apart from the structured teams yet included in student affairs, were also stakeholders since they interface with both parents and students and are involved in support services. These areas include student conduct, business administration, marketing, ROTC, and the parent and family program office. Outside of the Division of Student Affairs, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was a stakeholder. They recognize adopted individuals and adoptive family members as an affinity group for employees. They are tasked with shaping the campus culture to be inclusive and diverse through their initiatives, educational programs and strategies.

Students who are adopted are an important stakeholder group. They are the individuals who are reliant on the Division of Student Affairs to provide the services and supports needed to enhance their college experience, allow for campus engagement, and contribute to their success and well-being. Their voice needs to be elevated, supported, and valued. They bring unique

perspectives and assets to the campus community. Students who are adopted will be the beneficiaries of my PoP.

Adoptive parents of students were a stakeholder group. They rely on university staff to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of their student. They are often the ones financially supporting their student's campus experience and are financially and emotionally invested in their student's success. They are also beneficiaries of my PoP.

Finally, birth parents were a stakeholder group. Even though they relinquished their child, birth parents often care about their child's wellbeing and harbor hopes and dreams that their choice provided a successful future for their child. They trust that others will support their child's development. In that sense, they are also beneficiaries.

1.6 Conclusion

Students who were adopted are a unique identity group on college campuses who have complex needs, experience challenges, and are currently unsupported by the Division of Student Affairs at Success State University. Student affairs professionals are positioned to support students with identity development and growth. Staff development is needed for them to better understand the unique needs of adopted students and to be better prepared to support adopted students in their development. An educated staff would be student-ready to serve adopted students and would function as an important resource to adopted students, encouraging their growth, uplifting their voice, and ensuring their sense of belonging. As a unique identity group, adopted students provide unique perspectives and diversity to the campus community that should be recognized and valued.

2.0 Purpose of Review

The purpose of this review was to examine how student affairs professionals can support students who were adopted. I begin by presenting an overview of the evolution of student affairs in supporting students, then I explore the theoretical frameworks used in practice. It was important to examine the evolution of student affairs and theories of student development in order to understand the mission and vision of the profession and the scope of the work in supporting and developing students. This examination revealed how students are perceived and their needs supported by student affairs practitioners. It also allowed for an examination of who is included in the support offered and who might be left out. Examining the evolution of the practice and identity frameworks used by practitioners was important in order to understand how adopted students can best be supported by student affairs professionals and to ensure the voice and perspective of adopted students is elevated and valued.

I review the literature regarding psychosocial and identity development in students who were adopted, demonstrating they are a marginalized group who face unique struggles in college and that normative developmental tasks experienced by college students can often be more challenging for students who were adopted. Finally, I present a discussion on the need for specialized support services for students who were adopted and what those services could look like on a student-ready campus.

2.1 Evolution of Student Affairs

Student affairs as a profession has evolved from the supervision of women undergraduates in the late 1800s to contemporary practices of supporting all students holistically (Hinton, 2022). Understanding the profession's history and evolution sheds light on the work of student affairs professionals in higher education today, and how that work is important in supporting students who were adopted.

The profession began to flourish in the 1920s when Walter Dill Scott initiated the Student Personnel Movement (Schuh et al., 2017). Scott, president of both the American Psychological Association and Northwestern University, was an industrial psychology scholar practitioner who applied techniques refined through rigorous research in his work with serving students (Schuh et al., 2017). As college president, he applied personnel management techniques to student behavior while focusing on serving young people as they prepared to enter the work force (Schuh et al., 2017). He focused on increasing student satisfaction by addressing student needs, emphasizing the role of student affairs personnel in assisting students with job placement (Schuh et al., 2017). A professional organization, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) was established in 1931 to assist in the promotion and development of professionals engaged in college personnel work (ACPA, 2022). The American Council on Education (ACE) embraced Scott's philosophy in the late 1930s, amplifying the need for college personnel to identify and address the needs of college students (Schuh et al., 2017).

An influential positional paper establishing and guiding the student personnel profession was produced by ACE in 1937 (Schuh et al., 2017). Known as the Student Personnel Point of View, it emphasized the mission of supporting student learning and development holistically in

partnership with faculty and with families (Evans & Reason, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017). Rooted in the pragmatic educational philosophy of Dewey, it stressed the worth of the individual, the influence of the environment on learning and development, and the importance of experiential learning (Evans & Reason, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017). The need for the profession to base practice on research was also emphasized (Evans & Reason, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017).

After World War II, an influx of veterans returning to the United States and the benefit of the GI Bill created a need for expansion and specialization of campus services for students (Greenberg, 2004; Schuh et al., 2017). Campuses had to respond to the changing demographic that included an influx of older, working class, and married students who were focused on upward mobility through job preparation (Greenberg, 2004). The work of Student Personnel offices grew to include financial aid, student activities, Greek life, career planning, and residence hall management (Schuh et al., 2017).

ACE revised the Student Personnel Point of View in 1949, emphasizing the administrative aspects of the profession, providing guidance on the structure of student affairs divisions within the university, and outlining the services that should be provided (Evans & Reason, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017). The statement acknowledged the holistic approach to student development and stressed the importance of recognizing the individual differences in students, including students in their learning process, and the need to base practice on research and ongoing assessment (Evans & Reason, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017). There was less emphasis on collaborating with faculty and influencing academic learning and more emphasis was placed on outside the classroom learning experiences (Evans & Reason, 2001).

In the late 1950s and early 60s, the Baby Boomers' entry into higher education ensured a continued need for student services. Complex contemporary social issues salient to young adults

included the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The atmosphere on college campuses was charged with student activism, requiring an array of student support services (Schuh et al., 2017).

Several major laws were passed in the mid-60s and early 70s that expanded entry of previously excluded students into higher education. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited race-based discrimination, expanding educational opportunities for students of color. The passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments in 1972 opened new educational opportunities for women who were previously excluded from many academic programs (Schuh et al., 2017). Title IX offices and women's centers were developed on campuses to oversee compliance (Schuh et al., 2017). The Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973 providing equal access to education for individuals with disabilities (Schuh et al., 2017). With the elimination of racial, gender and disability barriers, more students were accessing higher education. The student affairs profession expanded to meet their needs. The profession was off and running (Schuh et al., 2017).

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), formed in 1979 and was comprised of 42 professional organizations in student affairs, developed standards to ensure quality and ethics in all functional areas of the profession (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2022). The standards identify over 40 functional areas in higher education and provide guidelines for practice, emphasizing quality, assessment, and improvement in each area.

The profession's values and principles evolved with the practice, providing clarity and setting standards for the role of student affairs professionals. ACPA published the Student Learning Imperative in 1994 reemphasizing student learning as the primary focus for the

profession. It positions student affairs as educators who share responsibility for student learning by providing intentional extracurricular learning experiences.

Values of the profession include concern for students' welfare, equality, capacity to exercise choice, human dignity, justice, community, and quality and meaning of the learning environment (Schuh et al., 2017, p 41). Guiding principles of the profession include a focus on students as the purpose of the work, recognition that environment has a role in student learning, practice is research based, and societal responsibility (Schuh et al., 2017). Through intentional and research grounded work, student affairs professionals support, influence and contribute to student learning (NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2022; Schuh et al., 2017). NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2022) asserted that student health and well-being, including mental health, is a priority. Student success is paramount, to the profession. NASPA (2022) noted that the work of developing and supporting students calls for recognizing and dismantling barriers that can be unique for each student and empowering disenfranchised students to be successful.

Contemporary student affairs practice is focused on being "student-ready," by meeting students where they are and collaborating with all campus departments to support students academically, socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally (Hinton, 2022). Student mental health and well-being has become a student affairs' priority at most campuses (Adedoyin, 2022; Chessman & Taylor, 2019; Eisenberg & Lipson, 2019; Liu et al., 2019). A Gallup poll survey indicated that 94% of student affairs leaders identified mental health as a time-consuming priority, followed by well-being, hunger, homelessness, race relations and substance abuse (Jaschik, 2020). Being "student-ready" means recognizing student challenges and being prepared to meet these critical needs for all students.

2.2.1 Student Development

Central to the work of supporting students is understanding how they grow emotionally from their college experience. Student development theory focuses on the transformative process that takes place while students transition from adolescence to adulthood, as they explore and understand who they are. Numerous theories have been proposed, and all inform the work of student affairs professionals by providing frameworks to develop programs and assess outcomes (Patton et al., 2016). Student affairs professionals are positioned to contribute to adopted students' development and learning by helping them to identify who they are and how they interact with the collegiate experience (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017).

Identity formation is the psychological process of understanding oneself. It is the process of developing one's sense of purpose, values, and belief system (Patton et al., 2016; Roszia & Maxon, 2019; Schuh et al., 2017). Erikson's theory of development describes life stages, each requiring the resolution of a crisis to propel the individual towards healthy psychological growth (Patton et al., 2016). Erikson described the task of adolescence, a time transitioning from childhood to adulthood, as developing one's identity by exploring possibilities (Patton et al., 2016). During this stage of development, individuals critically examine the beliefs they held about themselves and the world as children and begin to understand who they are and where they fit in as young adults. They develop their personal code of ethics and move toward the occupational and relationship roles they will fulfill as adults. Erikson defined adolescence from ages 12 to 18. More contemporary ways of considering adolescence argue that adolescence is starting earlier biologically, and that socially, adolescence is extending into the early 20s (Sawyer et al., 2018). Research in brain development supports this idea (Arain et al., 2013). Adolescence would include college students, whose age typically ranges from 18 to 24 years old (Hanson, 2022).

In addition to Erikson, Chickering was an early influencer in the study of student development. His psychosocial theory focused on seven interacting vectors of development that contribute to identity formation. Each vector requires accomplishing developmental tasks, which include emotional management, becoming interdependent, developing mature relationships, gaining self-esteem, finding a sense of purpose, and developing integrity (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh, 2019).

Evolving from foundational development theories, process theories provide insight into students' psychological growth. These theories focus on a developmental path that moves students in a positive direction of ongoing psychosocial progress (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017). Sanford's theory of challenge and support suggests that a balance between challenges and supports needs to exist for a student to experience optimal growth and to avoid being overwhelmed (Schuh et al., 2017). Student involvement theory is a process theory that emphasizes the importance of the student actively engaging in the academic environment in order to grow and develop (Astin, 1984; Patton et al., 2016). Transition theory is a process theory that focuses on the impact of transitions on the student. This theory considers the timing, impact, and student appraisal of the transition, noting that multiple transitions can cause increased stress, and the student's ability to cope is impacted by their support system, resources, and previous experiences (Goodman, 2002; Patton et al., 2016).

Holistic theories, such as Magolda's theory focusing on the concept of self-authorship, began to emerge in the early 2000s (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017). Based on longitudinal studies, these theories indicated that development extends beyond college. The process involves making meaning from interpersonal experiences to cultivate one's own inner voice. Self-authorship involves becoming less reliant on other individuals' beliefs and expectations to

developing one's own internal belief system that is used to make meaning of the world, guide one's behavior, and to act authentically (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017). Magolda described students as being in a crossroads when old meanings and directions no longer fit, and they begin to establish new plans and new directions (Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017). It is the process of taking ownership of one's own ideology. Helping students navigate this process requires understanding the whole student and involves guiding them through these crossroads, to establishing their own independent path based on their own beliefs.

Critical frameworks can also be used to understand student identity development and growth (Abes et al., 2019). Critical race, critical feminist, queer, and crip theories consider how systems of privilege and oppression based on identity can influence how students live their lives, see themselves, make choices, interact with others, and have access to opportunities (Abes et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016). A critical lens can provide an understanding of the impact of structures in higher education on the lived experiences of marginalized students.

Intersectionality is a useful lens to examine the complex interplay of multiple social identities with structures of power that extend or deny privileges as most students have identities that are both marginalized and privileged (Abes et al., 2019). Recognizing that social identities have meaning in society and these meanings impact daily experiences, access to resources, and how one is perceived by others adds a layer of complexity in considering student development (Abes et al., 2019). Intersectionality acknowledges the impact of social inequality and the need for social justice practices in Student Affairs (Abes et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016).

Student development theories provide frameworks for student affairs professionals to better understand and serve students, identify their needs, and provide supports (Patton et al., 2016). In contemporary higher educational settings, students identified as benefitting from

specialized support services include first generation students, student parents, students of color, military veterans, low-income students, students over age 24, students who are employed full time and immigrant students (McNair et al., 2022). Systematic inequities in higher education negatively impact minoritized groups and create barriers resulting in longer time to complete degrees (McNair et al., 2022). Identifying and supporting students with mental health and trauma related issues has become a focal point of student services in higher education (Adedoyin, 2022). Surveys consistently indicate that the majority of college students report feeling overwhelmed, difficulty functioning, and hopelessness (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2018; Eisenberg & Lipson, 2019). Depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidality are serious and prevalent challenges that negatively impact student success (ACHA, 2018; Eisenberg & Lipson, 2019). One in 3 college students meet criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem (ACHA, 2018; Eisenberg & Lipson, 2019; Liu et al., 2019). Mental health challenges have been negatively impacting student drop-out rates in greater numbers since the start of the Coronavirus 2019 pandemic (Adedoyin, 2022). While all students can potentially experience mental health difficulties, students who have been adopted are at greater risk (Kaplan, 2009; Keyes et al., 2008; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Morgan, 2017; Tieman et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Students Who Were Adopted

Students who were adopted are one group of students with specific developmental, emotional, behavioral, and academic concerns that have been largely ignored by student affairs (Anderman et al., 2022; Grotevant, 1997; McClelland et al., 2013; Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Research indicates that adolescents who were adopted use mental health services at a higher rate than their non-adopted peers (Miller et al., 2000; Morgan, 2017). They are 1.5 to 4 times more

likely to experience serious mental health concerns, including anxiety, major depression, personality disorders, and substance abuse and dependency (Kaplan, 2009; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Tieman et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2012) and experience a 4 times higher rate of suicide risk than their nonadopted peers (Keyes et al., 2008; Morgan, 2017).

Adolescents who were adopted often experience a higher incidence of learning disabilities, especially Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and executive functioning disorder, are referred for special education services more often than non-adoptees, often experience greater academic struggles than nonadopted students, and are less likely to complete college (Anderman et al., 2022; Kaplan, 2009; McClelland et al., 2013; Peñarrubia et al., 2020). Many adolescents who were adopted have more frequent police-related conduct incidents than their same age nonadopted peers (Kaplan, 2009; Keyes et al., 2008). During adolescence, some adopted individuals demonstrate more delinquent and aggressive behaviors (Tieman et al., 2005). These behaviors diminish significantly over time (Tieman et al., 2005); however, they can create consequences that make college more challenging to navigate. While noting these trends, it is important to also recognize there are variances among the experiences of adopted students and that adopted individuals are a heterogeneous population, which include many students who present with no clinical issues or behavioral concerns (Baden & O'Leary Wiley, 2007; Grotevant et al., 2000).

It is important to understand the unique challenges of adopted students, the research associated with those challenges, and it is helpful to examine their experiences through the lens of development theories. In order to be student-ready, student affairs staff need to not only be prepared to address students' challenges and needs but must also amplify their strengths and value the social capital and diversity of experiences and perspectives they bring with them to college

(McNair et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005). Examining research associated with adopted students' complex developmental paths and associated challenges is necessary for preparing student affairs professionals to provide adequate support. It can also assist in helping staff to recognize and appreciate the assets adopted students bring with them to campus, the excitement they have for college life, and their capacity to develop and learn. Examining their experiences through the lens of development theories can provide cultural competence in working with adopted students that will allow them to feel seen and understood and to ultimately thrive.

Some therapists who focus on treating adoptees agree that the frequent presentation of problematic behavioral symptoms in adoptees, including impulsiveness, provocativeness, aggression, and antisocial traits, is related to feelings of loss, grief, and abandonment inherent to the adoption experience (Donovan & McIntyre, 1990; Verrier, 1993). The primal wound theory, introduced by Verrier (1993), asserts that attachment is a biological process that begins prenatally. Severing biological ties through adoption creates an indelible, traumatic wound that negatively impacts the adoptee throughout life, often causing depression, mistrust, anxiety, and behavioral issues (Donovan & McIntyre, 1990; Roszia & Maxon, 2019; Verrier, 1993). The theory is based on clinical evidence of adoptees seeking therapy, rather than scientific research, which is limited in scope. Not all adoptees seek therapy. Other practitioners and researchers note that the dissolution and recreation of families through adoption always begins with a crisis and significant loss that carries long lasting impact (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

Trauma can increase an individual's risk for psychological difficulties (Van der Kolk, 2014). Traumatic experiences have been shown to create neurological changes in the brain that can manifest in severe and persistent behavioral and psychological symptoms such as hypervigilance, alteration in perception, and mistrust of others (Van der Kolk, 2014). Adverse

childhood experiences are specific traumatic experiences that have been linked to long lasting social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, chronic health problems, and decreased longevity (Felitti et al., 1998). Sustained childhood trauma (i.e., abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction) has been shown to negatively affect brain development and is linked to dysfunctional and unhealthy coping behaviors, which have lasting negative effects on health and safety (Felitti et al., 1998; Van der Kolk, 2014). When assessing the impact of traumatic events, it is important to consider the individual's experience and perception of the event as traumatic (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Trauma research has shown that protective, nurturing, and safe early relationships are critical to positive psychosocial development (Van der Kolk, 2014). The level of security a child establishes with their primary caregiver in the first 2 years of life is the strongest predictor of behavioral problems in adolescence (Sroufe et al., 2009). Emotional dysregulation, difficulty in school, conflicts with peers, and aggressive and oppositional behaviors are associated with childhood neglect and abuse. These negative behaviors lead to further rejection and punishment. By late adolescence, over half of abused and neglected children in a large, longitudinal study had a mental health diagnosis in adolescence (Sroufe et al., 2009). This work has implications for adopted children, as many experienced childhood adversities prior to adoption, including multiple placements, neglect, abuse, abandonment, and institutionalization (Murray et al., 2022). Many did not enjoy a secure attachment with a caregiver prior to age 2. Some may have been removed from a secure attachment at an early age.

Adopted adolescents are more likely to have experienced perinatal and postnatal adversity (Anthony et al., 2022) as well as physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Murray et al., 2022). Adoptees who were exposed to alcohol, drugs and/or maternal stress in utero, had a low birth

weight, or experienced deprivation and/or abuse, were found to demonstrate increased behavioral and emotional problems post-adoption (Hornfeck et al., 2019). Postnatal stressors were found to be more predictive of long term negative psychological outcomes for children adopted from foster care (Blake et al., 2022); furthermore, those who experienced postnatal trauma and emotional dysregulation prior to adoption, demonstrated psychiatric and behavioral problems, including criminality, aggression, psychiatric hospitalization, running away and suicide attempts, in adolescence and early adulthood (Blake et al., 2022). The exposure to trauma and traumatic stress may play a role in the elevated risk of suicide in adolescent adoptees; however, issues related to relinquishment by biological parents, and experiences unique to adoption cannot be ruled out as contributing factors (Murray et al., 2022).

2.1.2 Frameworks for Understanding College Adoptees Challenges

A conceptual framework for understanding loss and trauma inherent in adoption has identified seven core issues that are reflective of not only the adoptees' experiences but are also descriptive of the lived experiences of adoptive and birth parents (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). These core issues of loss, rejection, shame and guilt, grief, identity, intimacy and mastery, and control are considered normative reactions to abnormal experiences (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Examining these core issues through the specific lens of adopted young adults can help student affairs professionals better understand and support the complex needs of students who were adopted as they traverse developmental tasks in college.

The core issue of loss begins the adoption journey and impacts all other stages (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Loss symptoms include anxiety, depression, emotional reactivity, poor self-control, and feelings of isolation. For adolescents, this may manifest in acting out behaviors that can be

self-destructive and risky. Loss can impact the adoptees' ability to live authentically as they are asked to live a false reality, living as if their birth family, race, and culture are inconsequential and left wondering about the person they could have been. Adoptees continue to process loss throughout their lives (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019), but since it is not socially recognized, their experience of loss is often not discussed (Riley & Meeks, 2006). Even holidays and birthdays can become reminders of what was lost (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Transitions in life, such as leaving for college, can trigger feelings of loss. Traumatic events, major disappointments, and new losses can also be triggering (Riley & Meeks, 2006). For adopted students, this can include disruptions in peer groups, loss of an adoptive parent, and failing an exam.

Some adoptees view adoption as rejection and as a result can be sensitive to rejection throughout life (Nydam, 1999; Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). This dynamic can play out in avoidance strategies to prevent the reignition of painful feelings in current relationships, as well as in provocative behaviors to prove to themselves they can validate their feelings of unworthiness (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Relinquishment sensitivity has been viewed as an underlying, primal hurt that manifests as anger or depression and can be a driving force in relationships (Nydam, 1999). To defend against further rejection, some adopted students may be reluctant to have their needs met as they work hard to blend in and not complain (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Feelings of unworthiness can make them vulnerable to unhealthy and even harmful relationships. Others may even become defensive, rejecting, or bullying towards others in order to maintain distance and defend against psychological trauma (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Nydam, 1999; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). The fear of rejection can cause anxiety, depression, and hypervigilance (Riley & Meeks, 2006). Students may struggle with these complex emotions

at a time when their social world is expanding. In addition, they may struggle with separation from adoptive families, pre-college friendships, and significant supportive relationships that may no longer be available as they were before college.

Shame is a result of chronic trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014) and manifests from the secrecy often involved in adoption (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Secrecy drives policy and practice in adoption and is supported by stereotypes that distort and limit adoptees' identity development (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Shame can cause anxiety, feelings of unworthiness, and deep isolation. Feeling unlovable and "less than" are common responses to shame. Shame can cause a physiological response and impact brain processing (Van der Kolk, 2014). Extreme guilt leads to chronic self-criticism, feelings of helplessness, and intense self-blame. Some adoptees may feel shame and guilt if they feel as though they are disappointing their adoptive family, if they do not feel gratitude for being adopted, when they have divided loyalties between birth and adoptive families, and when they initiate a search (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). These behavioral and emotional concerns intensify during adolescence (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019) and can negatively impact student success.

Grief is an emotion that does not have closure, takes up a great deal of psychic energy, leaves individuals feeling dysregulated and alone, and is triggered at unexpected moments. Grief is the ongoing work of profound loss that forever changes the adoptees worldview and how they live their life (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Grief can manifest in infants as protesting behaviors, despair, and detachment (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Grief in adoptees' childhoods can often manifest in behavioral symptoms and can result in diagnosis of ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). In adolescent years, grief associated with adoption is felt most intensely as adoptees' capacity for abstract thought allows for deeper understanding of their

relinquishment and the complexity of the loss of their birth family (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Grief, anger, and sadness can be overwhelming and can potentially result in substance abuse, complicate identity formation, and frequently drives the normative desire to search for birth family (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

The loss experienced in adoption has a permanent impact on the trajectory of the adoptees life and thus impacts their identity development (Grotevant, 1997; Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Adoptees who may not have medical, genetic, and religious information about themselves, have amended birth certificates, and struggle with integrating their birth identity with their adoptive identity have unique and mentally exhausting challenges to identity development (Grotevant, 1997; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Transracially adopted individuals have the additional challenge of merging their racial identity with the cultural understanding of the race they are adopted into (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Discussions focusing on identity can be triggering for adopted students. Processing loss, shame and guilt, and grief is an added burdensome task for adoptees that must be addressed in order to successfully construct a healthy adoptive identity (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). In addition, the adoptee needs to make sense of society's views of adoption and must wrestle with those stereotypes, tropes, and myths (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Identity is mentioned here as one of the core issues associated with adoption but will be explored in greater depth at a later point in this work.

Intimacy is another core issue impacting adoptees throughout their life span (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Early childhood attachments have been shown to have an impact on future relationships and social functioning (Felitti et al., 1998; Sroufe et al., 2009). Intimacy in relationships requires the capacity to form strong attachments and the ability to trust (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Traumatic childhood events create neurological changes in the brain, which make

trust difficult, negatively impact intimacy (Roszia & Maxon, 2019; Van der Kolk, 2014). Feeling vulnerable in a relationship can be triggering for adoptees (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Adoptees struggling with rejection may avoid emotional closeness or may form frequent, quick, but distant attachments (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Intimacy and identity are closely aligned and struggles with identity can cause difficulties in making commitments (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Adolescents who were adopted later in childhood may still be struggling with attaching to their family and now must navigate intimate relationships while becoming more independent (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

Finally, mastery and control are issues at the core of adoptees struggles. The adoptee had no consent in the early life decisions regarding relinquishment and the loss of their birth family. They may have lost access to their birth story, birth identity, health history, and connections to their cultural heritage. These losses can lead to feelings of powerlessness, incompetence, struggles with accomplishment, and a need for control (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Adopted students may struggle with believing they have agency over self-authorship. Feeling invisible and unvalidated further inhibits agency. Reconnecting with birth family, learning about their birth story, integrating their adopted and birth families into their complex sense of self, and making intentional choices about their future are tasks that can cultivate a sense of mastery in a world that has felt out of control (Riley & Meeks, 2006; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Working on these tasks takes a great deal of psychological energy that can negatively impact college success.

2.1.3 Birth Privilege and Stigma

Some researchers disagree with the primal wound theory that adoption is inherently traumatic, but instead view the lived experience of adoptees as fraught with challenges brought on by social stigma. As adoptees develop socially and cognitively, these experiences become

integrated into the adoptee's identity (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; French, 2013). In examining self-esteem in adoptees, French (2013) recognized that biological kinship is a default setting by which society views and prioritizes families with biological offspring and devalues adoption as a way of forming families. Adoption is viewed as "second best" by families, media, researchers, and social service agencies (French, 2013). Coping with continual judgements from a society that devalues adoption and prioritizes biologically formed families is a psychologically exhausting hardship that non-adoptees never experience (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; French, 2013). Adopted children grow up feeling stigmatized and "less than," often causing adoptees to reconsider their family connections, legitimacy and worth (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; French, 2013).

Birth privilege and the stigma of adoption may contribute to adoptees' negative outcomes such as increased mental health concerns and academic struggles (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; French, 2013). Frequent inconsiderate remarks and microaggressions related to birth status are commonly experienced by adoptees in social interactions and via the media (Baden, 2016; French, 2013; Riley & Meeks, 2006). These incidents can make adoptees' adoption status more salient in unexpected moments, chronically impacting well-being (French, 2013; Riley & Meeks, 2006). The remarks can force an adoptee to consider ideas they had not yet encountered and may not be prepared to confront (Riley & Meeks, 2006).

Few opportunities to interact with other adoptees can contribute to feelings of isolation and can leave adoptees feeling invalidated in their experience and feelings (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Feeling unsupported and invalidated can impact self-esteem (French, 2013), amplify feelings of grief and loss, making it harder to cope (Brodzinsky et al., 2022) and contribute to a sense of isolation (Riley & Meeks, 2006). These intense feelings are felt most profoundly in the adolescent years (Brodzinsky, 2011). Society reinforces a feeling of powerlessness and shame in adoptees,

which may contribute to suicidality (Gair, 2008). Throughout their lives, society judges adoptees, makes decisions for them, withholds information from them (Gair, 2008), and infantilizes them by referring to them as “adopted children” even when they are adults (Baden, 2016; Wegar, 2000).

Baden (2016) presented a framework of adoption microaggressions to better understand adoption stigma by naming and defining four distinct types of microaggressions. Three types are based on racial microaggression categories identified and discussed by previous researchers. The final type is unique to adoption. Viewing adoption through this framework helps to understand the lived experience of adopted individuals and can help student affairs professionals to better support this population.

Adoption microassaults are the most explicit form of microaggressions and are intended to cause harm. This can include name-calling and behaviors that exclude or oppress the adoptee. Harmful labels such as “bastard” and “illegitimate” fall into this type. Adoption microinvalidations are the most common experienced subtype. This includes communications that devalue the profound feelings and experiences of the adoptee and result in silencing the adoptees’ voice and perspective. At times, these communications can send opposite messages, such as interest in biological kinship is not necessary versus asking intrusive questions about their “real” parents, which implies biological relationships are primary. Such messages also negate authentic connections with adopted family members. Microinvalidations also include the experience of transracial adoptees who often struggle as they navigate to fit in more than one racial or cultural group.

Adoption microinsults are insensitive and demeaning comments that relay judgement about adoption and are reflective of myths, tropes and fairytales that influence societal beliefs. Examples might be assuming that an adoptee feels privileged and grateful for being adopted or asking how

much they cost, as if the adoptee was a commercial commodity. Microinsults also include cultural exceptional assumptions that transnationally adopted children are better off in life if adopted by Americans, and that adoptive parents are altruistic rescuers (Myers, 2019).

Adoption microfiction is a type that is unique to adoption. Adoptees' histories are often purposefully changed or contain inaccuracies. Many times, adoption agencies or adoptive parents choose not to disclose details of the adoption to the adoptee. Examples of microfiction include sealed birth records and falsified birth certificates, which present a fictional identity and erase the existence of the adoptees' true origins. Adoptees are forced to accept a legal document that provides them with a legal identity and ethnicity. Microfictions also occur when adoptees are provided with fictional narratives that ignore the pain and loss associated with adoption, such as telling the adoptee they were "lucky" or "chosen," and when portraying adoption as a "win-win" solution, which fails to recognize loss and trauma. "Love is enough" is a microfiction portrayal of adoption that minimizes trauma, emotional pain, and biological kinship and sets the adoptive family up for failure when they encounter conflict. Student affairs professionals need to be student-ready to recognize and support students who may experience mental health struggles as a result of the additional psychological labor needed to cope with microaggressions and stigma that undermine healthy identity development.

2.1.4 Adoptee Identity Development

Identity development, a focal point in student development, is a more complex process for adoptees than it is for non-adoptees (Grotevant, 1997; Ranieri et al., 2021; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). In addition to normative developmental tasks, students who were adopted need to understand and process both their birth and their adopted family connections. Students who were adopted must

integrate these dual connections into their emerging identity, while coping with difficult emotions such as grief and anger (Grotevant, 1997).

Understanding the meaning of adoption in an adoptees' life is an ongoing process (Brodzinsky, 2011; Ranieri et al., 2021), that begins in adolescence and continues over the adoptees' lifespan (Grotevant, 1997). Adopted adolescents frequently experience unique and frustrating challenges in identity development because much of their personal histories are often unknown, preventing them from developing a narrative that connects their past, present, and future (Grotevant et al., 2017). Their birth family forever exists in the adoptees' cognitive and emotional life, often occupying their imaginative energy, driving behavior, and impacting identity development (Brodzinsky, 2011; Riley & Meeks, 2006). Self-authorship becomes more challenging as adoptees typically construct a narrative about their adopted identity, with or without birth information (Grotevant et al., 2000).

Adoptive parents' ability to support their adolescent by allowing open discussion and expression of emotions related to adoption and demonstrating empathy for the adoptees' feelings has a positive impact on adolescent adoptees' satisfaction with life, overall well-being, and identity outcomes (Ranieri et al., 2021). Positive communication about adoption with adoptive mothers is related to the adolescent's ability to make meaning out of their adoption story, while positive communication about adoption with adoptive fathers is related to the adolescent's feelings of future life satisfaction (Ranieri et al., 2021). Adopted students arrive at college from a variety of family backgrounds, some having experienced openness about discussing the meaning of adoption in their lives, and others with less discussion about adoption. As a lifelong process, feelings about adoption can influence both adoptees and adoptive parents during transitions in family life and can be most impactful when identity issues become salient during adolescence (Ranieri et al., 2021;

Riley & Meeks, 2006). For colleges students arriving at college, separating from their adoptive families for the first time can be a highly emotionally charged experience, impacting their adjustment to campus life.

Grotevant et al. (2017) conducted the first study to examine identity development from adolescence throughout early adulthood in a nonclinical group of adoptees found an elevated risk for adjustment issues. The researchers found that young adults think about their adoptions frequently, even if they do not frequently discuss it. Four subgroups were identified among the adoptee participants, indicating there are significant differences in adoption concerns among adoptees. The groups included those who unexamined the role of adoption on their identities, those who examined the role of adoption on their identity in a limited amount, those who were unsettled about their adoption identities, and those who integrated their adoption identity successfully. Out of the four groups, those who were considered unsettled had the highest levels of internalized emotional problems such as anxiety and depression and struggled the most with identity development. Those who were unsettled in early adolescence were also unsettled in early adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2017).

Despite these elevated risks, identity development in adoptees should not be viewed as pathological but rather as complex (Grotevant et al., 2000). For some adoptees, their adoption identity is salient theme, taking up much mental energy and time while for others, it may hold little interest or it may be integrated with other aspects of their identity (Grotevant et al., 2000).

Identity development for adoptees becomes even more complex if their adopted families differ in ethnicity or race from their birth families, and/or if they were transnationally adopted (Baden & Steward, 2000; Lee, 2003), and this factor becomes more significant with age (McGinnis et al., 2009). Transnationally adopted students sometimes feel different from their same race peers while

at the same time, feel different from their adopted family members (Wegan, 2000). An examination of the lived experiences of adult South Korean adoptees who were adopted by White parents in the United States indicated that most adoptees experienced incidences of bias while growing up and as adults (McGinnis et al., 2009; Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Perceived discrimination was linked with an increase in psychological distress, decreased self-esteem, and greater discomfort with their race (McGinnis et al., 2009). Race became more salient during adolescence, increased while in college, and remained important throughout young adulthood (McGinnis et al., 2009). Prior to adolescence, transracial South Korean adoptees reported identifying with White children. Seventy eight percent considered themselves to be White or wanted to be White as children. Eighty three percent stated that race was very important to them when they were young adults (McGinnis et al., 2009). Having “color blind parents” contributes to negative racial self-esteem and further complicates racial identity development (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). Factors that were helpful in positive adjustment, included having diverse role models growing up and living in a diverse community (McGinnis et al., 2009). Few studies have examined the lived experiences of transracial and transnational adult adoptees. More research examining the lived experience of adopted college students with multiple social identities is needed.

2.1.5 Concepts of Student Development and Adoptees

In addition to theories, examining universal conceptual elements of student development provides useful insights into students’ lived experiences and the impact of systems of power and oppression (Abes et al., 2019). Concepts of identity and agency have been discussed as they relate to the core issues experienced in adoption. Additional student development issues to consider in relationship to adoption are dissonance and authenticity.

A core concept in student development theories is the experience of dissonance, as students encounter disequilibrium in their world view from events that challenge their beliefs. Such moments spark growth as students make sense of their experience and choose their response (Schuh et al., 2017). Critical theories reframe these experiences as validating moments for marginalized students who have spent their lifetimes navigating systematic oppression that creates persistent dissonance in what the world tells them and what they experience (Abes et al., 2019). Adopted students frequently experience persistent dissonance as they navigate identity issues. Many have been given a false identity, reinforced on their amended birth certificate. The world tells them this is who they are; however, they are aware it is a fictionalized identity. Adoptees often struggle with reconciling others' expectations with their experience of reality, as they encounter situations that assume inferiority of their birth status and imply the need for gratefulness for being rescued and treat them as though they are still children (Kalb & Tucker, 2019). Abes et al. (2019) asserted that for marginalized individuals, dissonance can be triggering as opposed to a moment of growth, as dissonance is interwoven with power. In the case of adoption, oppressive systems, that have always favored the experience of adoptive parents, perpetuate the false identity of the amended birth certificate. In addition, the dominant culture prioritizes kinship families over adoptive families (French, 2013; Wegar, 2000). These experiences underscore the need for adoption support across the lifespan of the adoptee. Naming and validating the lived experience of adopted students would be a supportive way to encourage growth and positive well-being while avoiding a triggering experience (Abes et al., 2019).

Another core concept to consider is authenticity, or how students develop their core foundation of who they are, what they believe, and how they outwardly express their inner self (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Authenticity is shaped through a combination of experiences and self-

reflection (Abes et al., 2019; Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Abes et al. (2019) entertained the notion of how external issues can confirm or invalidate authenticity and asserted that authenticity can be fluid and dependent on context. For students who were adopted authentic self-knowledge becomes more challenging as they may have been severed from knowing their true origins and may continually wonder about their alternative truths (Grotevant et al., 2000). External issues, (i.e., amended birth certificate, adoptive family culture, racism, and societal views that privilege biological kinship) can impact how students show up in university spaces (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Transracial adoptees, reconciling their racial and cultural identities, often select an identity based on the context of their environment (Suda & Hartlep, 2016), which may result in denying an authentic part of their identity in order to best adapt. Absence of agency (Roszia & Maxon, 2019), divided loyalties between adopted and biological families (Riley & Meeks, 2006), and imaginative narratives constructed in the absence of truth (Grotevant et al., 2000), can all contribute to adoptees' self-alienation (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022).

2.1.6 Supporting Adopted Students

Student affairs staff are trained in supporting students experiencing psychosocial growth and understand their needs and challenges; however, adopted students follow a nonnormative path in their identity development. It is important for student affairs staff to understand their path is complex but not pathological. In order to best support adopted students, student affairs professionals need education about their unique needs and challenges (Blair, 2012). For example, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the gaps adopted students have in knowing their own history and how that can play a role in identity development. They need to understand how some adopted students may feel alienated and alone in discussions about identity, and how some

transracial and transnational adoptees may feel unprepared for participating in cultural and ethnic clubs yet have a desire to learn more about their birth heritage. It is important for student affairs staff to recognize that adoption is an experience that has lifelong impact. It is normal for adopted students to experience challenges along the way and they need a supportive and understanding community.

Adoptees are a heterogeneous group. Staff must be aware of the diversity of each adoptee's experience as well as the variety of types of adoptions and not use a one-size-fits-all approach. Some families have been more open and supportive in discussing adoption. Some adoptees may have had extensive counseling or attended adoptee camps that focus on identity development. Some may have experienced more preadoption trauma than others.

Recognizing that not all adoptees have the same concerns (Grotevant et al., 2017) would be a more student-centered approach to support. For some students, adoption may be an organizing theme of their identity, consuming much energy and attention. For others it may be less salient or even well balanced with other aspects of their identity (Grotevant et al., 2017). Staff should be aware that high salience of adoption identity can influence the adopted student's choices, behaviors, and activities, such as dating, searching for birth family, and career choices (Grotevant et al., 2017).

Becoming interested in searches and reunions with birth parents is a common experience in emerging adulthood (Baden & O'Leary Wiley, 2007). The college environment may provide freedom from adoptive families that allows for exploration. The availability of DNA tests can also make searches and reunions accessible. Student affairs professionals need to understand that engaging or not engaging in a search or a reunion is an individual choice, and the adoptee needs to be supported if they choose to search or not (Baden & O'Leary Wiley, 2007). Engaging in a

search can become very time consuming, perhaps creating additional conflicts with academics and responsibilities. The outcome of a search is unpredictable and may cause distress. Being able to listen to students' concerns and providing a space for the expression of feelings is important. Connecting them to adoption competent counseling services if they experience distress is essential.

College counseling centers need to be staffed with counseling professionals who are trained in adoption related issues. Adoption competency was ranked by adoptees as the most important factor in selecting a therapist, regardless of the presenting issue (Baden et al., 2017). Adoptees reported higher levels of satisfaction with counselors who addressed adoption identity issues and validated their feelings about adoption (Baden & O'Leary Wiley, 2017). Unfortunately, many adoptees who seek counseling report feeling unsupported because their therapist did not understand adoption related trauma and loss and did not use appropriate language related to adoption (Atkinson et al., 2013).

Student affairs staff need to be aware that young adults think about their adoptions frequently, and many are reluctant to discuss their thoughts and feelings about adoption with their families because they do not want to upset them (Grotevant et al., 2017; Riley & Meeks, 2006). Student affairs staff may be in positions where students confide their feelings and experiences of adoption. During these interactions, staff can validate and normalize students' emotions to help them feel less isolated and understood (Grotevant et al., 2017; Riley & Meeks, 2006). Support for adopted college students is not a commonly recognized need. Many college campuses have student run clubs for adopted students, but few institutions have formal staff run programs. An example of an exemplary student run organization can be found at the University of Oregon. Adopted Students United was founded in 2018 and is supported by the Division of Equity and Inclusion's Multicultural Center Student Union (University of Oregon, 2023). The organization provides

opportunities for adoptees to share their stories, support each other, and increase awareness of the adoptee experience. The student group, in collaboration with campus and community partners hosted a virtual adoption conference that included a nationally recognized keynote speaker, panel discussions, workshops and a film. They host regular hybrid meetings for members that may include games, potlucks and social time, as well as formal discussions on topics such as mental health and adoption, empowering and disempowering adoption language and genetic testing (University of Oregon, 2023).

An exemplary institutional program that supports adopted students is The Rudd Adoption Research Program, which is part of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2023). The program influences policy makers and practitioners, encourages collaboration among researchers, and creates a welcoming, supportive environment for adopted students. The program supports a student panel that elevates the voice of adoptees and enriches the campus community. Panel members meet weekly for support and adopted-related discussions. They plan campus wide events to educate the campus, the community, and parents. They serve as guest speakers in classes where they educate their peers about the lived experience of being adopted (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2023).

Texas A&M University provides resources, support, and skill development to adopted students through the Former Foster and Adopted Aggie Program. The program is part of the Student Assistance Services in the Division of Student Affairs and is funded through alumni and private funds. The program provides case management services and information about financial aid, housing, transportation, health care, campus employment, and other available campus and community resources (Texas A&M University, 2023).

The Success State University's Division of Student Affairs has opportunities to increase support for adopted students. Providing space on campus for adoptees to connect with one another would be a way for adopted students to safely explore their identities, feel understood, and experience a sense of community (Blair, 2012; Kalb & Tucker, 2019). This can be done formally through counseling centers or living learning communities or informally by offering a designated space for student run programming.

Promoting adoption themed programming, such as films, book clubs and speakers can make campuses more welcoming to adopted students. Providing resources and instruction for genealogical research would be supportive. Wellness themed groups, such as yoga or running, for adopted individuals could foster healthy connections and a sense of belonging.

November is recognized as National Adoption Month (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). Student affairs along with the offices of diversity, equity and inclusion could promote campus wide educational programming and awareness campaigns each November. It can be an opportunity to elevate the voices of adopted students, validate their experiences, and recognize their contribution to providing a diverse campus experience for all.

Knowing that transitions can be difficult, student affairs professionals should be prepared to check in with and provide additional support and any needed referrals for adopted students who undergo transitions, experience separations, and reach milestones (Riley & Meeks, 2026). Helping students to prepare for expected transitions by identifying supports and coping mechanisms can ease the difficulties associated with it. This can include entering and graduating college, moving off campus, completing an internship, or returning from a study abroad. Transitions or separations in relationships can be especially painful, such as breakups with a romantic partner, a roommate moving, rejection from a friend group, or not getting a bid during rush week.

It is also critical for student affairs professionals to understand how intersecting identities in adoption, such as transracial and transnational identities, can impact adjustment. Helping students make connections with other adoptees with intersecting identities can be helpful. Adopted students may want to explore their birth identity but may not have the cultural competencies to navigate spaces with students who share their race or ethnicity (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Mentors could be helpful guides to assist them in experiencing their cultural heritage.

Routine university forms and surveys often ask students to identify their race and/or ethnicity. This can force the transracial adoptee to choose between equally salient identities of their birth and adopted families (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). It would be more inclusive to add a category for transracial adoptees. Student affairs professionals need to guard against asking a transracial student to represent a culture they are perceived to represent (Suda & Hartlep, 2016).

Eliminating racism on campus is a critical step in supporting transracial adoptees. Campus leaders must work to ensure that all faculty, staff, and students know how to report incidents of hate and transracially adopted students need to know where to turn for support should they experience an incident of bias.

Student affairs professionals need to be student-ready to support students who may experience adopted related-microaggressions. Some staff members may also be adoptees, adoptive parents, or have adopted relatives. Being able to recognize their own biases about adoption and being aware of their own beliefs about adoption is critical.

Programming should be respectful of adopted students. Student affairs staff need to combat stereotypes and negative attitudes about adoption when they arise. Programming offers opportunities to elevate perspectives of adopted students, validate their lived experiences, and acknowledge the diversity they bring to campus.

Additionally, student affairs staff need to be aware that some adopted students may find discussions about identity triggering. Providing trigger warnings prior to potentially emotional discussions can raise awareness for all students and can serve to protect adopted students from distress. Ensuring adopted students have culturally competent support and know where they can go for assistance in processing triggering moments is critical for their well-being.

Surveys could be conducted to identify demographics of a somewhat invisible population and to best determine support needs. Data can be used to tailor services. Regular assessment of initiatives to support adopted students would be needed to ensure quality and effectiveness and to promote ongoing improvement. Most importantly, the perspectives of the adopted students need to be included in shaping the supports, programming, and services that impact them.

2.2 Conclusion

Students who were adopted experience psychosocial challenges that impact their development differently than nonadopted students. Their lived experience is different than nonadopted students and not widely understood by society. Some adoptees bring with them histories of trauma and loss that may not have been processed or acknowledged prior to their arrival on campus. Normative developmental tasks such as identity development and forming intimate relationships is more complex for adopted students. Although their development may be more complex, adopted students contribute to the campus learning environment through their cultural knowledge, perspectives, and capabilities that differ from their nonadopted peers. Adopted students are a unique identity group with unique needs and unique strengths.

Student affairs professionals are positioned to support marginalized students, help them to thrive, and affirm their strengths. Student-ready professionals are aware of systematic inequities in student experiences and seek to provide equity minded services and support to help students

reach their potential (McNair et al., 2022). A student-ready campus is prepared to support every student; however, the complex developmental path and unique needs of adopted students are often overlooked (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Consequently, adopted students may feel unsupported by campus administrators who do not understand them as a minoritized, unique social identity group (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). Feeling unsupported may lead to a diminished ability to positively manage stressors and can be emotionally destabilizing for adoptees (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Their feelings are frequently unvalidated and they frequently experience microaggressions in a world that is biased against adopted individuals and views kinship families as normative (Baden, 2016; French, 2013, Wegar, 2000). Institutional leaders can do better to create a welcoming environment for adopted students. I intended to move the system in that direction by creating an education program for student affairs staff at Success State University.

Societal views and cultural myths of adoption, misinformation, and an unawareness of trauma in adoption can sustain microaggressions. There is little training or information for student affairs professionals about the needs of adopted students and the complexity of their developmental path. Uninformed student affairs professionals may be unintendedly retraumatizing adopted students and causing additional harm by engaging in microaggressions, invalidating feelings, and triggering complex emotions. Adopted students could be left feeling isolated and unsupported as they navigate a critical time in their life. Student-ready professionals need to be aware of the challenges of adopted students and their own biases about adoption in order to be student-ready and better serve them.

The lack of research on college students who were adopted also means that little information exists on the assets and resources they bring with them to enrich their campus communities and elevate the learning of their peers. Their nonnormative development presents

new perspectives and offers a diversity of experience that should be embraced, valued, and amplified by their campus community. Student-ready professionals can foster a sense of belonging for adopted students by recognizing and affirming their identities and experiences.

3.0 Methodology

My PoP was that there are no support services or resources offered by Success State University's Division of Student Affairs specifically for students who were adopted. Like most institutions of higher learning, the division provides an array of services for various student populations but does not provide resources or supports specifically for students who were adopted. Adopted students are a marginalized population with unique challenges, and yet they are unrecognized. Student affairs staff are not student-ready to serve this identity group.

In analyzing this PoP with a fishbone diagram (see Figure 1) that examined root causes for the problem, and a driver diagram (see Figure 2), focusing on a theory of improvement, I developed a change idea to address the problem. My change idea was to develop and present an education session to student affairs professionals, highlighting the unique challenges of adopted students and addressing how to best support them. I also wanted the session to help staff become more self-aware of their own biases about adoption and avoid harming students through microaggressions. An educated staff would be the first step in becoming study-ready to serve adopted students and would function as a resource for adopted students. An educated, student-ready staff, with an understanding the lived experience of adopted students, would be more likely appreciate and amplify their voices, advocate for additional resources, and recognize opportunities to provide additional services for them. They would be better positioned to create a welcoming, inclusive campus for adopted students that would value the assets they bring with them and support their success. I utilized an improvement science framework to address my PoP. The following sections describe the setting and population of my inquiry, the data I collected, and my analysis.

3.1 Inquiry Questions

My inquiry was guided by the following questions:

1. How does an education program increase staff knowledge about the challenges experienced by college students who were adopted?
2. How does an education program provide staff with practice strategies to support students who were adopted?

3.1.1 Inquiry Approach

I addressed these inquiry questions by using improvement science, a systematic approach often used to address practice problems in education (see Perry et al., 2020). Improvement science is an applied method used to help a system function better (Perry et al., 2020). The approach relies on iterative plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles that inform whether a change results in an improvement to the system (Perry et al., 2020). Prior to conducting an intervention, I planned a presentation for student affairs staff to educate them about the challenges experienced by adopted students and how to be student-ready to meet those challenges. Presenting the education session was the intervention that I used to address my PoP. I collected data to measure the effectiveness of the training and used the data to inform future presentations that will serve to develop a student-ready staff, prepared to meet the needs of adopted students and create a campus where they can thrive. My theory of improvement was that an effective training would be a catalyst to action in providing programs, resources, and services to adopted students to enhance their student experience and promote their success.

3.1.2 Inquiry Setting

The setting for my inquiry was the Success State University's Division of Student Affairs. Success State University is a large, urban, research university consisting of approximately 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The Division of Affairs is organized in four working teams of student affairs professionals who focus on student development and growth outside of the classroom. The teams, each led by an associate dean, include the Wellness Team, Student Experience Team, Student Engagement and Professional Development Team, and the Student Community and Inclusion Team. Each team consists of several offices which provide specialized services to students.

3.2 Population for the Study

In examining my change idea, I determined it could be more effective to create an education program designed for one area of student affairs in order to better tailor the program to the educational needs and the work of the staff in that area. Thus, I chose to focus on the Office of Residence Life as they are positioned to impact the most students and their reach is very broad across the student population. The Office of Residence Life is part of the Student Experience Team.

The Office of Residence Life (Res Life) serves nearly all first-year students. Most first year students, unless they live near campus and choose to commute, will move into campus housing and be supported by Res Life staff. In addition, some upper-level students may also choose to live in campus housing supported by Res Life. Altogether, Res Life serves approximately 6,000

students. The mission of Res Life is to build inclusive communities. Res Life accomplishes their mission by assisting students in developing meaningful relationships and connections on campus, creating a welcoming environment for students to live and grow, and encouraging the exploration of new perspectives. They create robust programming to address student needs and design learning curriculum relevant to the community they serve. They conduct over 1,000 programs annually that promote student engagement and connection to the campus community. Res Life staff are involved in the day-to-day experiences of the students they serve and interact frequently with them. They utilize intentional interactions to promote student growth and development. Res Life staff supports students in their initial adjustment to college life, with ongoing struggles, and through unforeseen crisis. They assist in connecting students to campus resources. Over 90% of the referrals received in the Care Office come from the Office of Residence Life. The Care Office provides support and resources to students of concern.

The Office of Residence Life consists of the director, three assistant directors, three administrative assistants, a business manager, two assistant resident directors (ARDs), two area coordinators, and 14 resident directors (RDs; see Figure 3). In addition to professional staff, there are 180 resident assistants (RAs) and two community assistants (CAs).

The director provides leadership over the day-to-day operations, ensuring that goals and strategy are aligned with the University's mission and the vision for the Division of Student Affairs. Each assistant director oversees an essential component of Res Life, including staff services, curriculum and leadership, and academic initiatives. Staff Services encompasses the recruitment, selection, training, and development initiatives of residence life staff. Curriculum and Leadership implements a curricular approach to programs and student learning, advises the residential student association, and provides leadership to hall councils. Academic Initiatives

include overseeing the living learning communities, academic-related programming, and welcome week planning and implementation.

Area coordinators develop, implement, and assess programs that promote student learning, address residential community concerns, and manage crisis situations. RDs are full-time, live-in professional staff members who manage the daily operations of a residence hall. They have master level degrees and prior experience working in a college environment. They are tasked with promoting a sense of belonging for students, cultivating a safe, welcoming, and engaging living environment, supporting students' growth, and responding to students' needs. They accomplish these tasks through one-on-one interactions and through creative programming. They also provide supervision for RAs. ARDs are part-time staff members, currently pursuing master's degrees in higher education who assist the RDs. RAs are student leaders who provide front line assistance to residents through intentional conversations, leading programming, and gathering information. CAs serve in the same capacity as RAs but are dedicated to serving undergraduate student-athletes.

The population my improvement project addressed was the professional staff in the Office of Residence Life. This included the director, assistant directors, area coordinators, administrators, RDs and ARDs. All staff were invited to participate in the session. I did not include the CAs and RAs because their academic schedules and their large numbers were difficult to accommodate. In addition, they are undergraduate students who represent multiple fields of study, and the focus of my project was to prepare professional staff to be student-ready for students who were adopted.

3.3 Intervention

My intervention was conducting an education session for professional staff in the Office in Residence Life that defined adoption and focused on the unique developmental challenges and experiences of college students who were adopted, using student development theoretical perspectives. The session utilized a power point presentation that addressed core issues in adoption and microaggressions experienced by adoptees. It demonstrated the value these students add to the campus setting and highlighted strategies to support adopted college students and amplified their unique perspectives within the residence life setting.

The Res Life staff engage in monthly required training sessions offered during their regularly scheduled staff meetings. I offered a 90-minute training during one of these monthly staff meetings. I coordinated the scheduling of the training with the director of Res Life and assistant director of staff services. I utilized their regular meeting space, which was large enough to accommodate the group and provided the needed audio/visual equipment.

3.4 Data Collection

I gathered quantitative and qualitative data in a one-group pretest-posttest design to evaluate the session. This mixed methods design measured the participants' knowledge before and after the intervention to determine if it was effective. Such a design is useful for interventions designed for changing knowledge or attitudes that would not be likely to change without the intervention (Mertens, 2019).

A week before the session, I obtained email addresses of the staff from the administrative assistant to the director. I emailed all staff an optional Qualtrics survey to self-assess their knowledge of adoption, understanding of adopted student's experiences, and their confidence and skill in supporting adopted students in their current practice, using a 5- point Likert scale (see Appendix B). No identifying information was collected. At the conclusion of the session, I announced that an optional posttest survey would be emailed to them so they would know to expect it. I also announced that I was looking for volunteers to participate in follow up interviews to further evaluate the effectiveness of the education session. I offered a \$10 gift card reward to incentivize their participation. After the intervention, I sent a posttest survey to staff who were in attendance, asking the same Likert- scale quantitative self-assessment questions, a question about the relevancy of the training, and some additional open-ended qualitative questions (see Appendix C).

I collected additional qualitative data by interviewing six participants 2 to 4 weeks after the program. The interviews were conducted individually and recorded via Zoom. The interviews allowed for a deeper examination of additional perspectives related to the educational session. It also allowed for a deeper understanding of the impact of the intervention beyond conclusions from the pre and post survey data. I asked open ended questions about what participants learned, what information was helpful to them, and how their practice may have changed as a result of their participation (see Appendix D). The interviews provided insight into the impact the session had on the participants' knowledge and understanding of adopted students, and on their practice. The interviews were an opportunity to identify improvements for potential future PDSA cycles.

3.5 Data Analysis

The Likert scale questions on both the pre and post tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics that assisted in understanding and describing the characteristics of the sample (Mertens, 2019). I utilized Microsoft Excel to record and analyze the data, measured central tendency with a mean score and measured standard deviation to examine variability for each survey item. I examined percentages of individuals who agree and strongly agree with questionnaire statements before and after the session to better understand the session's effectiveness. I compared the scores on the pretest and posttest to see if there was an improvement in staff's self-ratings as a result of my intervention.

To analyze the qualitative survey data, I identified and reviewed the themes that emerged from the open-ended questions, coding the responses based on the themes. I then grouped codes together in categories, examining patterns. Similarly, I transcribed the interviews and coded them by creating categories for the content (see Mertens, 2019). Initially, I read the transcriptions and wrote memos based on common ideas that I identified in each interview. These memos informed the codes that I created, representing each of the common ideas. I again carefully read the transcriptions, assigning a category code to each line based on the content expressed by the interviewee. I utilized a codebook to organize the codes and keep track of their meanings. I created summaries of each interview, illustrating the themes that emerged in each interview question. I used each interview summary to examine themes and patterns that emerged across all the interviews. I used the themes and patterns to examine my initial inquiry questions to determine if the educational session was impactful in increasing staff knowledge about the experience of adopted students and effective in informing staff practice.

3.6 Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness of the data, I created summaries of the interviews, emailed the summaries to the interviewees, and asked them to review the summaries for accuracy. I asked them to complete their review and return the summary with any comments within a week. I was prepared to consider the feedback for further modifications; however, there was no disagreement with the summaries and no adjustments were needed.

3.7 Conclusion

The aim of the intervention was to create an education session to develop a student-ready staff, able to serve and support students who were adopted. They would serve as a valuable resource to students who were adopted and would be positioned to advocate for and to develop additional resources for adopted students. Such a staff could contribute to the success of such students by creating more welcoming campus spaces, ensuring that adopted students feel seen, understood, and valued, as well as supporting their unique developmental path.

4.0 Inquiry Findings

My inquiry was guided by the following questions:

1. How does an education program increase staff knowledge about the challenges experienced by college students who were adopted?
2. How does an education program provide staff with practice strategies to support students who were adopted?

For this initial PDSA cycle, I planned and conducted an information session for residence life staff at the University of Pittsburgh. I coordinated the event with an assistant director in residence life who is responsible for staff training. The session was scheduled during the regular staff professional development time and all residence life staff were included in the session invitation. On the day of the session, several staff members were pulled away into other operational duties. The result was a slightly smaller group than anticipated, with 14 individuals in attendance. The group included 12 RDs and two assistant RDs.

The session involved a PowerPoint presentation providing an overview of types of adoptions, adoptees' need for support across the span, challenges experienced by adopted students, microaggressions experienced by adopted individuals, and strategies to support adoptees in the university setting. During the information session, participants were asked how they can change their practice to be more supportive of adopted students. This allowed participants to consider their work of supporting students and brainstorm ideas as a group. There was also ample time for discussion and question and answers during and after the presentation.

For data collection, all staff were sent Qualtrics pre-session and post-session surveys as well as reminders to complete them. Only seven pre-surveys and three post-surveys were

completed. The surveys provided quantitative data to examine participants' learning and confidence in supporting adopted students. The post survey included additional qualitative data to examine ways to improve the education session. Participants in the education session were also invited to participate in follow up interviews. Six participants volunteered to participate in the interviews. The interviews took place virtually on Zoom and were approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded by themes that emerged. The interviews provided in depth qualitative data addressing the inquiry questions. Considering the few responses to survey, the findings relied primarily on information gleaned from the interviews.

In considering the first inquiry question, two themes emerged from the qualitative data. Firstly, all participants indicated they have a new awareness of adopted students as a unique identity group. Secondly, all participants in the interviews affirmed they learned something new from the session and identified a variety of issues related to new learning. In considering the second inquiry question, two themes relating to practice strategies emerged. These themes were a desire to make practice changes, and a need for additional education in order to implement the changes and to develop additional ones. These four themes of increased awareness, new learning, desire to make practice changes, and a need for more education will be discussed in this chapter.

4.1 Awareness

From the interviews, it was apparent that the information session increased awareness of adopted students as a unique, yet heterogeneous, identity group that may benefit from support. The survey data support this finding, as only 5 out of 7 pre-survey respondents described adoptees as a heterogeneous group while 3 out of 3 post-survey respondents described adoptees as a

heterogeneous group. All interviewees affirmed they experienced a change in how they thought about adoption and about individuals who were adopted. All interviewees had a personal experience with individuals who were adopted outside of their work with students and chose to share those stories in the interviews. Four of the participants' experience with adoption included family members. For example, one participant noted because she has a parent who was adopted, she thought a lot about the impact of adoption prior to the information session. She indicated that the session "redirected" her view of adoptees and reminded her of things to be aware of in her work with students, pointing out that "recognition of identity and loss was something I haven't thought too deeply about before." Several participants shared how the session made them think more deeply about their own family members' experiences.

One interviewee stated,

I learned a lot of the experience of adoptees and the fluidity or heterogeneity. Having a mom and uncle be adopted and seeing the vastly different ways they coped with that and came to understand their identity, it rang true for me, in my own family dynamic, but in a way that I never made sense of before.

A participant who identifies as Black shared that prior to the session she only considered adoption as part of the foster care system. She described how her understanding of kinship adoption changed:

In Black families it's just a given that if birth parents can't take care of a child, it goes to the next relative. I never considered that adoption. I just considered it stepping up. It takes a village to raise a child, so I never considered that like a formal adoption process.

She reflected further on the intersection of race and adoption, sharing a new awareness of transracial adoption:

Something I took away that I didn't know before is just the impact of transracial adoption. That was really interesting to me because I was born into a Black family, and I never thought about the impact of your identity being different from your diversity. It opened my eyes to the different ways that identity can take shape.

Even though, each interviewee had personal experiences with adoption, they had not viewed adopted individuals as an identity group and had not previously considered how adopted students could benefit from support.

Numerous individuals who attended the information session also discussed their own personal connections to adoption, revealing stories about parents, siblings, and grandparents who were adopted. Several participants shared how their family members' experiences also impacted their own life. Some of the stories shared included experiences of trauma. One story involved issues of racial identity struggles. One participant shared she was planning to begin an adoption home study soon, with the hope of adopting a child. All interviewees found this to be impactful. One interviewee stated, "I learned that nearly everybody in my department has a connection to adoption. So that was amazing to me. That was truly really cool to see." Several interviewees acknowledged that seeing so many staff members impacted by adoption was not only surprising to them, but it also made them consider how many of their students may also have been impacted by adoption. One interviewee stated, "So many people are impacted by adoption in so many different ways. What's really important for me, especially in working with students, is it's pretty common."

Interviewees expressed surprise that the topic was novel. A participant stated, "The conversation you had with us as RDs felt so simple, but was so needed, and was just like a good reality check of these are the things students are struggling with that we don't know." One

participant was a master's level social worker who voiced dismay at the lack of training she received in adoption education in her former social work training and career. The participant shared,

I know this is a topic we don't talk enough about because I was so shocked at like how common this was. Oh my gosh! Why don't we talk about this more often? Learning from the presentation about the lifelong impact that adoption can have throughout the entire lifespan was a very new idea. I worked in the mental health side of social work, but this wasn't even something we talked about in my training or CEUs that I did. I would have loved to have known this.

Another RD talked about how working with adopted students was not included in the curriculum in her Med program by stating,

If I'm being honest, and I feel bad, that it's never a group that I thought about. We did, like, the American college student, in my master's program. We looked at a bunch of different identities, and adoption was literally never brought up. I never thought about it. We never talked about it. Once I got my job here, I never thought about it. I never talked about it. The program brought awareness to this student group and my passion of supporting them and being someone who can support them. It's one of those things that you think 'Why didn't I? Why didn't that click when I'm thinking about all these other identity groups?'

During the information session, participants confirmed that they were not aware of training related to adopted students offered at conferences. The novelty of the topic may have contributed to the high level of engagement during the information session. Several participants lingered afterwards to ask more questions and continue the conversation.

Finally, several interviewees talked about becoming more aware of their own biases and assumptions related to adopted students. One interviewee discussed her assumptions about transracially adopted students by stating,

I don't know if we talked about this but there are some students on campus who look like, and we assume based on looks, that they're international students, and then they have white parents from the U.S. That's something I'm thinking about.

The survey data also reflected a change in participants' assumptions. Two survey respondents indicated a belief that adopted students were unable to succeed in college, while no post survey respondents expressed the belief that adopted college students were unable to succeed.

4.1.1 Learning

All interviewees affirmed that new learning took place and discussed some of the information they learned. Microaggressions, understanding trauma and loss, and identity development were the most frequent areas of learning identified. Several interviewees discussed learning about microaggressions experienced by adopted individuals. All of the interviewees who discussed microaggressions described how language and words can be harmful. One interviewee shared how microaggressions in the form of language can affect a student's sense of belonging by stating,

I appreciate how words can be a little triggering for students who are adopted because if they hear 'family' and they hear that you are using it in a context that doesn't apply to them they will immediately feel like they don't belong. We want students to feel like they belong. That's absolutely one of the tenants. And so, if we are not including in that students who are adopted, we are not doing our job.

The survey data also reflected an increase in learning about microaggressions experienced by adopted individuals. In the pre-survey 3 out of 7 respondents could not correctly define birth privilege while all post survey respondents correctly defined birth privilege.

All participants brought up issues about identity development in their discussions about new learning. Several participants acknowledged that birth status can play a role in identity and they had not thought about that prior to the session. Some interviewees discussed learning about the connection between racial identity development and adoption. One interviewee mentioned she learned that adoption identity is salient for some but not for others. One interviewee discussed the need for making adoption “as an identity more widely known” by stating that,

It’s not widely talked about. Until you mentioned it. I mean, we know there’s groups of queer students. We know there are Black students. Like these affinity spaces. But we don’t see this as an identity because people don’t talk about it as an identity.

Several interviewees mentioned learning about trauma and loss experienced by adoptees. One interviewee shared that she learned:

One of the pieces was this idea of gratitude. When you’re adopted, you should be grateful that somebody chose you. Somebody adopted you. When we think of adoption that way, we’re not looking at the whole picture. There’s also loss with adoption. There’s also uncertainty about your identity. You can be grateful but that doesn’t negate all those other feelings. The presentation gave me a more holistic view of what adoption is like. Not just the good but the losses.

A survey response indicated that “hearing about the core issues” was the most helpful part of the training. An interviewee indicated that several of the RDs continued to discuss the information session afterwards and several commented that “they learned a lot.”

4.1.2 Changes in Practice

All interviewees expressed a desire to change their practice to be more supportive of adopted students. All had suggestions of strategies they could implement to improve their practice and reported they had been thinking about additional ways they can change their practice to be more supportive of adopted students. Prevalent themes related to making practice changes included avoiding microaggressions, offering support groups, and creating programming.

In discussing how the session will influence their work with students, interviewees wondered about how many students may be impacted by adoption and felt it was a higher percentage than they would previously have guessed. Two interviewees suggested that the Office of Residence Life should collect survey data. One interviewee reported that her work was already impacted. She shared that several days after the information session, she held a conduct hearing for a student who talked extensively about being adopted. She felt the training was helpful in shaping her responses. Another interviewee shared that she once provided support to an adopted student who experienced the death of a parent. She felt that the student's identity as an adopted person may have impacted the student's grief.

One RD talked further of the impact of the training on her practice in the future, "Do I fully know how to navigate that? No. But I think, like there is a bit more intention to how I will navigate it, and the vocabulary that I will use to navigate it." She also described herself as being "more empathetic" as a result of the information session.

Several participants discussed their concern about the impact of their language on students' sense of belonging. It was clear that ensuring that students experience a sense of belonging was very important to the staff members who took part in the interviews, and they were concerned about adopted students experience of belonging. Several interviewees discussed how they will be

more mindful of language they use when discussing family and birth status with students. One resident director stated, “Moving forward, how I talk to students about their family and what home looks like is gonna look different.” Two interviewees talked about the use of the term “gratefulness” and several interviewees talked about not making assumptions about family and birth status. Two interviewees talked about using the term “guardian” instead of “parent” when working with students and expressed the thought that the term would be more inclusive. This example was not discussed in the information session and was not part of the PowerPoint presentation, making me question if the RDs engaged in discussions about adopted students after the information session. When an interviewee was asked if she participated in any further discussions about the information session’s content, she affirmed that many from the group had lunch together a few days after the session and continued to discuss adoption and how it impacts students.

In addition to being conscious of language and microaggressions, several interviewees mentioned that providing opportunities for adopted students to come together for support groups was something that could be done in their setting. The discussion of providing group opportunities was framed as an effort to increase belonging and decrease isolation. None spoke of any immediate plans to create a support group opportunity; however, the mention of the possibility is something that would not likely have occurred prior to the information session. One interviewee suggested utilizing university counseling staff embedded in residence life settings for facilitating formal support groups.

Several interviewees mentioned that targeted programming would be a way to support adoptees in the residence life setting. Most interviewees talked in very general terms about programming as a tool for support but had no specific suggestions for what types of programming

could be offered. Three interviewees suggested providing a table or an undefined activity at Welcome Week to support adopted students. One stated participant stated,

Welcome week could be a great time to program specifically for students who were adopted, because I think that can be the start of creating this community and support. We can host that event. If you want to interact it's not mandatory. So, this something that if you want to explore, it's here and it can help forge connections right in their first week, which is already a scary week. So, if you are surrounded by those with similar identities that could be helpful.

One interviewee suggested including birth parents at orientation, and another suggested including birth parents on emergency contact listings. There was also a suggestion of creating a Living Learning Community (LLC), noting that several identity-based LLCs already existed at Success State University. One RD was very enthusiastic about supporting adopted students and talked about hoping to engage in "continuing conversations" with other staff. She described herself as an advocate for adopted students and that she plans to:

Keep telling everyone how helpful it was for me to think about it. Let's keep moving forward on this. Why are we not talking about this? [Success State University] wants to be a leader and trailblazer university, okay, then this is a group that we now see needs support. So let's do it.

She questioned why she had not thought about adoptees as population needing support but emphasized that with awareness she notices she has "passion of supporting them and being someone that can support them." Other interviewees echoed her enthusiasm. One stated the training "challenges me to think about how res life can change some of their policies and

procedures. It was so beneficial.” One interviewee emphasized the need to ask adopted students what practices may be harmful to them and incorporate that feedback into practice.

4.1.3 More Education

The need for additional education, both for themselves and for others, was mentioned by all interviewees. Each affirmed the desire to learn more about how they can better support students who were adopted. One interviewee expressed, “I think it would be important for me to attend more training so I know how to engage with adopted students better.” Another stated that she “would be very interested to learn more and feel even more like an equipped resource to help these students if the needed it.” A few interviewees expressed hesitancy in moving forward with support strategies because they felt they needed more information and knowledge. One interviewee wanted to survey residential students to find out how many adoptees lived on campus but pondered if it would be ethical to ask about birth status. Another interviewee was unsure if adoptees would feel singled out if groups were offered for them to attend. A post survey response indicated that the information program could be improved by listing best practices in supporting students. One interviewee stated she intended to educate herself further by searching for more information, and especially wanted to seek out information about best practices, expressing concern about unintentionally harming students with her words or actions. She indicated she could see herself as a resource for adopted students by being an advocate and championing for additional training.

The interviewees indicated that growth in awareness was greater than the growth in learning. One interviewee in describing herself stated, “I would say I’m a resource and that I have an understanding that adoption could impact them, but I think I’m just learning about it. I want to get better at this knowledge.” The quantitative survey data, while sparse, seems to endorse the

same conclusion. The pre-survey data revealed that 2 out of 7 respondents agreed that they were student-ready to support adopted students, and two disagreed that they were student-ready. None of the respondents strongly agreed that they were student-ready and three respondents neither agreed or disagreed. Post survey data indicated that 3 out of 3 respondents agreed that they were student-ready to support adopted students. None of the respondents strongly agreed.

Several interviewees recommended that training be offered to other staff members, faculty and students. One interviewee stated that college could be more welcoming for adopted students by “just making it more widely known that it is an identity that is held by a large population of people and the effects it has, making it more known, not just at [Success State University], but at other campuses.” There was strong agreement among interviewees that student affairs staff were not aware of the challenges, needs, and strengths of adopted students and therefore were not student-ready to support them. One interviewee, when considering the student affairs division stated, “I think about how much our res life group learned from the presentation, and that’s just a small group. I think it’s easy to say on a large scale our staff is not prepared or even thought about this.” She indicated there was a need to “mend those gaps” and felt that division-wide education would be a helpful start. She also felt that all functional areas in student affairs have unique opportunities to improve and that collectively the division could have a “pretty big impact” in terms of supporting students.

4.2 Conclusion

Four key themes related to the inquiry questions emerged from the data. All participants indicated an increase in both awareness and learning, as well as interest in making changes to their

practice and a need for additional learning. Data from staff interviews and surveys indicated that although their awareness increased and learning took place, they would need additional education to feel confident in their ability to support students and implement changes in practice. The growth in awareness seems to have been greater than the growth in learning. All interviewees expressed a desire for additional professional development and a desire to grow in adoption competency. Several also indicated that education was needed for professionals who work in other areas of student affairs.

5.0 Impact on the Aim

The aim of this improvement science project was for adopted students to be seen by student affairs staff and for them to have resources to be successful. After participating in the information session, RDs reported being more aware of issues and concerns facing adopted students and reported a desire to be more supportive. In follow up interviews, RDs were able to share suggestions and ideas they could implement in their setting to better serve adopted students and expressed a desire to do so; however, they did not have immediate plans to implement their suggestions. In addition, all expressed a need and a desire for more education to improve their practice and be more supportive of adopted students.

The impact of the change was minor in that it moved the system slightly, in one small area of student affairs, closer to the aim. Some student affairs staff now see adopted students as a unique identity group and are aware that many may benefit from resources and supports. One PDSA cycle made an impact; however, more renditions of the cycle need to occur to educate more staff members and in order to capture more data to further fuel improvement. More areas in student affairs need to be educated for the aim to be achieved.

5.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Improvement Project

A weakness of the process was the size of the group. The residence life staff is a small group and not all staff members participated in the surveys and interviews. Although the session was scheduled in advance, participants experienced schedule conflicts and could not attend. Some staff members had to leave early. Another weakness is the homogeneity of the group. The group

was comprised of only RDs working in residence life. Conclusions may not transfer to student affairs staff who work in other capacities within the division. Additional PDSA cycles are needed with larger groups and in additional functional areas to make reliable conclusions about the impact of the information session on student affairs staff members' knowledge and practice and to guide wider scale improvements.

The strength of the process lies in the adherence to improvement science. In deciding how to address the PoP, an investigative process was utilized starting with a fishbone diagram (see Figure 1) and exploring research, followed by empathy interviews. The process involved listening to stakeholders and taking their perspectives into account. A theory of improvement was formulated and illustrated in a driver diagram. After the intervention, qualitative and quantitative data were collected and examined. The improvement science methodology gives strength to the process, conclusions, and plans to move forward with the next cycle of improvement. Knowing that the biggest weakness was the small, homogenous sample size, means that future cycles need to include larger groups from additional functional areas in student affairs. Continuing the same process with a larger and heterogeneous group will provide additional data, bring attention to mistakes and problems, and inform yet another iteration that can eventually lead to wider scale improvements.

A strength of the change was the reported increase in awareness of adoption as an identity. Another strength was interviewees were considering ways to incorporate the training into practice and demonstrated a desire to support adopted students. A final strength was that all interviewees expressed a desire to continue learning more about how to support adopted students. It was encouraging to hear from those interviewed they felt that the information session was worthwhile, and that the information session applied directly to their work with students. A weakness of the

change was participants did not demonstrate strong confidence in their ability to support adopted students and had no specific suggestions or immediate plans for programming.

The following sections will reflect on the impact of the education session on the PoP, utilizing McNair et al. (2022)'s guiding principles for higher education leadership to create a student-ready culture. This will be followed by a discussion of the improvement project's implications for future work in supporting adopted students.

5.2 Becoming Student-Ready

McNair et al. (2022) described student-ready environments as “intentional and supportive” spaces where “every student is known, respected, supported and valued” (p. 81). McNair et al. (2022) presented five guiding principles for creating student-ready environments. These principles include having strategies in place, embracing transformative leadership and cultural values, intentional design, developing strategic partnerships, and educating the whole student. An examination of the improvement intervention, using this framework, demonstrated that educating staff can move the system in the desired direction of being student-ready and illuminated additional opportunities for student affairs to become student-ready for students who were adopted.

5.2.1 Guiding Principle 1: Having Strategies in Place

Without action steps, the concept of a student-ready campus will remain a concept and not translate into practice (McNair et al., 2022). A single education session increased awareness of adopted students as an identity group and inspired a desire to improve practice among residence life staff. However, without practice strategies in place when adopted students arrive on campus,

residence life is not student-ready for them. Residence life is just one part of the campus ecosystem impacting students at Success State University. Outside of residence life, adopted students are not acknowledged or valued as a unique identity group and resources are not in place for them. Student affairs staff are not student-ready to support adopted students. Following McNair et al. (2022)'s guiding principles for transforming campuses into student-ready learning environments will require additional efforts at raising awareness of adopted students and educating all staff before strategies can be developed to support them.

5.2.2 Guiding Principle 2: Embracing Transformative Values and Culture

McNair et al. (2022) made the case that creating a student-ready environment requires buy-in from all staff to take collective action. The Division of Student Affairs has embraced and endorsed the concept of student readiness and strives to promote a culture where all student identities are embraced and can thrive. Within the division, there is ongoing discussion and emphasis of values and mission, uniting all staff in centering their work on equity, justice and supporting all students. The vision is for Success State University to be to be a place that is ready for all students and values their well-being. Adopted students have not been included in the vision.

The interviewees noted that the topic of supporting adopted students was novel to them. The notion that adopted individuals need support across the lifespan is also recent development in adoption work (Kalb & Tucker, 2019). Providing support to adopted students has not been widely addressed in student affairs practice and is an opportunity for inclusive innovation in practice (Suda & Hartlep, 2016). One interviewee noted this was a gap in student affairs practice. Therefore, the idea to bring light to the needs, challenges and complex issues faced by young adult adoptees in the college setting should be promoted and strategies to do so should be explored.

McNair et al. (2022) encouraged and provided guidance for investing in innovative strategies to be student-ready. Among the suggestions, it is recommended that the priorities, commitments, and goals of primary stakeholders be prioritized by obtaining feedback directly from them. This is a novel idea in adoption work, as adoptees have had little say so in policies and practices that impacted their lives so deeply. In inviting students to be decision-makers in the innovation process and inviting them to be part of the shared vision, student affairs has an opportunity to support adoptees by directly impacting the core issue of mastery and control (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). The responsibility for the work to provide student support; however, must belong to student affairs staff.

5.2.3 Guiding Principle 3: Intentional Design

Student-ready professionals understand and accept the shared responsibility of all educators in supporting student success and therefore work together to create an intentional, supportive environment centered on equity, diversity, and belonging (McNair et al., 2022). Institutional self-assessment is a necessary action step in developing inclusive excellence. An examination of the campus climate where adopted students live and learn can reveal its impact on students and lead to removal of barriers to success. The initial action steps are knowing and understanding the adopted students at Success State University. This means being cognizant of their lived experiences, knowing how they are doing on campus, and what support services or resources they need. Staff would need to engage in discussions, focusing on students' assets and the cultural capital they bring to campus, while examining the campus climate and identifying student needs.

Student-ready colleges know who their students are (McNair et al., 2022). It is difficult for staff to see a population of students who are invisible to them. Currently, there is no system in place to identify and track adopted students. Surveys and data can help to bring to light the number of adopted students attending Success State University, how they experience the campus climate and what they need to be successful. Two of the interviewees discussed surveying students as a practice strategy. To be student-ready to support adopted students, student affairs staff would need to have a better idea of the number of students in need of specialized services. Data driven inquiry can help student affairs in becoming more strategic and effective in targeting the right students with the right support services (McNair et al., 2022). Creating information tracking strategies to identify adopted students and their needs would be a necessary step in creating support services and assessing the utilization and effectiveness of services and resources. The findings of the current project indicate that staff education has the potential to lead to data tracking strategies that can drive practice improvements.

A student-ready community embraces a culture of care (McNair et al., 2022). Every staff interaction with students should come from a place of empathy and care and be focused on serving students and ongoing quality improvement. To be a staff that meets these standards of excellence, all need to examine their own core beliefs, biases, and experiences relating to adoption and adopted students, and be informed about the challenges many adopted students experience in identity development and the microaggressions they encounter. The education session provided such an opportunity, and some interviewees reported an increase in empathy as a result.

All staff need to commit to self-examination to eliminate microaggressions from their own language and behaviors and to be able to challenge microaggressions they witness. This is the first step in affirming and valuing adopted students and their lived experiences. Additional education

with facilitated courageous conversations and discussions about adoption is needed for all student affairs staff. A recent division required staff development workshop about microaggressions included breakout sessions to identify and correct specific microaggressions experienced by various student identity groups. None of the examples presented included information about microaggressions experienced by adopted students. Throughout the summer, weekly staff development workshops are scheduled. Many are focused on supporting specific social identity groups. Many are required for all staff to attend. None of the workshops have addressed supporting adopted students and understanding their lived experiences. These examples illustrate opportunities that exist within the current training structure in the student affairs division to develop a staff that is prepared to serve adopted students.

The education session for RDs provided an opportunity for self-reflection and created heightened awareness and understanding of the student population. It started a discussion of the campus climate, began looking at the assets adopted students bring to campus, and addressed the issue of microaggressions. Interviewees acknowledged an increase in awareness, demonstrated a new concern for adopted students' well-being, and even talked about developing empathy. The change effort demonstrated that an education session can move the system closer to the aim.

5.2.4 Guiding Principle 4: Developing Strategic Partnerships

In addition to collaborating with adoptees, opportunities exist for student affairs to collaborate with additional stakeholders. McNair et al. (2022) emphasized the need for strategic partnerships to strengthen the campus ecosystem and provide students with an enhanced level of support. External partnerships, based on common goals, commitments, and interests, allow institutions to leverage resources to better support students. Opportunities exist for both learning

and practice mutually beneficial partnerships between adoption and student affairs practitioners. Adoption professionals could be a valuable resource for student affairs staff to become educated about the needs and challenges of young adult adoptees and to learn about support groups and specialized counseling services for young adult adoptees that exist in their communities and virtually. Partnerships with adoption professionals can help student affairs professionals to move beyond common stereotypes and assumptions about adopted students and appreciate the assets, strengths, and networks adopted students bring to campus. Student affairs professionals can assist in demystifying the institutional systems for adoption professionals who are working with young adults. Adoption professionals can then better prepare and educate adoptees and their families about the types of supports and resources available on college campuses. When educated about the resources that exist and are informed about how to navigate university systems, adoption professionals and families can better prepare young adult adoptees in learning to self-advocate for services and support prior to their arrival on campus.

Campus partners are essential pieces of the campus support ecosystem. Several interviewees recommended that education opportunities be extended to everyone invested in student success. McNair et al. (2022) recommended investing in professional development in innovative practice as part of aligning ecosystem partnerships. Student affairs professionals have opportunities to include the ODEI in the work of creating a student-ready campus for adopted student. ODEI has resources in place to provide education and awareness to the campus community as well as direct support services to adopted students, especially adopted students with intersecting identities. ODEI is positioned to have a great impact on the recognition of adopted students as a unique identity group and in supporting their well-being, sense of belonging, and success. ODEI professionals need to become adoption informed; however, before they can become

an effective resource in the work of supporting adopted students, they need to examine their own beliefs and attitudes about adoption and be educated about the continuum of support needed by adoptees and microaggressions they experience.

5.2.5 Guiding Principle 5: Educating the Whole Student

A student-ready approach necessitates a whole person approach to supporting students by recognizing the challenges they face and seeking to alleviate their obstacles (Hinton, 2022; McNair et al., 2022). Doing so requires insight into their development, recognition of their talents and strengths, and believing in their capacity and desire to learn. Student-ready professionals are committed to holistically supporting all students' well-being, leaving no group behind (McNair et al., 2022).

The interviewees indicated that learning about core issues impacting adopted students was new information. Adoptees have a developmental path that is more complex and differs from their nonadopted peers (Grotevant, 1997; Ranieri et al., 2021; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). Student affairs staff need to understand and appreciate adopted students in order to be student-ready to support them. The interview data indicated that student affairs staff have an opportunity to become more proficient in supporting adopted students by learning about their core issues and complex development.

The Division of Student Affairs promotes an ethos that values diversity; however, there is no recognition of the positive impact of adopted students on the campus community. The lived experiences of adopted students go unnoticed and unacknowledged, meaning they are not afforded a whole person education that is offered to other student groups. The assets, talent, and cultural capital of adopted students need to be celebrated and valued to be student-ready for them. It is a

matter of equity that adopted students be supported through their unique challenges and celebrated for the unique perspectives they offer.

5.3 Implications for My Practice and Organization

Findings based on this PDSA cycle indicated that an education session can raise awareness of adopted students as a unique identity group. The topic is novel in student affairs, and there was interest among student affairs professionals to learn more about the topic. My hope is to continue to raise awareness of the lived experience of student adoptees among student affairs professionals by advocating for additional professional development opportunities to other areas in student affairs. My position of working in student affairs as well as in adoption practice, provides opportunities to offer education to social workers in adoption practice about how adoptees can be better supported in the college setting. I have opportunities to do this through agency professional development presentations, social work continuing education venues, professional conferences, and informal networking with colleagues. Working through social work channels can allow for information about support needed for young adults to reach families and adoptees, thus encouraging adoptees to find ways to voice their needs and share their lived experience with others when they arrive to campus. Adoptees, and their families, can be coached by social work professionals about how to navigate campus resources and supports, how to self-advocate, and how to find allies. My positionality can also facilitate connections between higher education and adoption professionals to leverage resources. Approaching this problem from both higher education and social work practice, brings more awareness to the issue and can result in achieving

the aim of adopted students feeling seen and having the support and resources they need to thrive in the college setting.

Currently, Success State University's division of student affairs is not student-ready to support students who are adopted. The implication of this initial PDSA cycle on my PoP is that the residence life staff at Success State University have gained some awareness that adopted students are a unique identity group with specific needs and challenges who bring unique perspectives to campus. They are more aware of microaggressions that occur and can work to eliminate them. A small sample of residence life staff indicated that they would welcome additional training. Those who attended the training affirmed they had not previously seen training opportunities regarding supporting adopted students at their professional development opportunities. Adopted students who come into the residence life setting at Success State University in academic year 2023-2024 may be better supported, as RDs who participated in this training could be a resource for them. Even though participants indicated the need for additional training, several interviewees were able to identify ways that students could be better supported in the residence life setting. Several interviewees mentioned the use of programming as a method to support students who were adopted and enhance their college experience. Offering opportunities for adoptees to come together would be a way to recognize adoptees as a unique identity group, decrease isolation, and provide adoptees with a platform for self-expression. While there are currently no groups planned, the fact that staff are identifying the possibility is an indication the system has moved slightly toward the aim.

5.4 Implications for Practice, Education, Research, and Policy

It is likely that student affairs staff are frequently serving students who were adopted and are unaware. They have not considered adopted students as a unique identity group with a unique world view that presents challenges as well as offers new perspectives. Data driven strategies are needed to bring visibility to the number of students being served.

Current education about student development does not address the complex developmental path experienced by students who were adopted (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant, 1997). This is an area that can be improved by including the lived experiences of college students who were adopted in the curriculum and by including research from the adoption field into the master's level education programs that focus on student development theories. In the adoption field, social workers who were adopted are moving into policy making positions, working at adoption agencies, and bringing attention the support needs of adopted individuals throughout the life span (Kalb & Tucker, 2019). Higher education professionals can learn from them and can also make room for higher education professionals who were adopted to inform and improve student affairs practice.

Given the complexities of international adoption, there is a need for more complex staff education about the experiences of transnationally adopted students. Adoptee support includes recognizing that oppression, war, and capitalism produced and sustains the need for international adoption. Support also means acknowledging the role of political, historical, and economic forces that give privilege to White, western, adoptive families (Myers, 2019). Such education could be provided to staff by partnering with experts in the field of international adoption, conducting workshops, or assembling panel discussions.

Student-ready practice requires leveraging resources by collaborating with community partners. Efforts to develop relationships between the two practices, emphasizing common goals,

challenges and commitments can not only mutually benefit to both professions, but would also be in the best interest of the adopted individuals they serve. Supporting adopted students was a novel topic for the RDs, with much new information to absorb. The participants also experienced an epiphany that although they were aware that students were adopted, they had not considered adoption as an identity that may impact the collegiate experience. Several expressed dismay they had not previously noticed adopted students. The group also discovered adoption impacted many in their own families and in their workplace. This knowledge had a profound impact on the group as a whole and on individual members. Interviewees reported the group conversed about the impact outside of the session. Processing their emotional reaction to the session content, thinking about their own family dynamics, reflecting on the missed opportunities in their career of supporting students, and absorbing new information about coworkers takes cognitive and psychological energy and may have influenced learning. These factors underscored the need to provide participants with trigger warnings and resources for supporting their own emotional wellbeing at the start of future staff education sessions. Providing support for staff members also models a culture of care that is needed for a student-ready campus.

The adoptee's perspective has historically been ignored in adoption practice, creating a situation where agency and self-authorship over one's life can be a struggle for many adoptees (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). In student affairs practice, adopted students have not been considered as an identity group with unique needs. Two of the interviewees expressed the need to include the adoptees voice in practice decisions. Including the adoptee's perspective would be an essential support strategy as well as a method to drive improvement to practice. Surveying or interviewing recent adopted graduates about their college experience and how they believe that their college could better support their adoptee identity should be part of ongoing improvement efforts.

Finally, much of the current research on adoptees examines clinical populations and measure deficits (Behle & Pinguart, 2016; Donovan & McIntyre, 1990; Kaplan, 2009; Keyes et al., 2008; Tieman et al., 2005). Researchers frequently examine the prevalence of mental illness (Keyes et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2022), behavior disorders (Blake et al., 2022; Sroufe et al., 2009), and academic deficits (Anderman et al., 2022; Kaplan, 2009; McClelland et al., 2013; Peñarrubia et al., 2020) in adopted individuals. Taking a deficit approach in examining adoptees provides an unbalanced viewpoint and ignores the strengths and successes of adoptees. More research is needed that identifies specific strengths of adoptees in order to promote asset-based perspectives and foster a greater appreciation of their strengths and capacities among practitioners.

Success State University is not alone in underserving adopted students. Few resources and programs exist among higher education institutions to support adopted students, yet they can benefit from support and can be high achieving students. Rather than being overlooked, adopted students should be noticed, respected, and valued for the wealth of new perspectives and experiences they bring to our campuses. Supporting adopted students is a novel area of student support providing rich opportunities for innovation and specialization in student affairs practice.

5.5 Conclusion

While my improvement project only included a small sample of student affairs staff, key findings indicated the system made positive movement towards the aim. A single education session can provide an awareness of adopted students as an identity group, motivate staff to want to learn more, and increase their desire to make practice changes in support of adopted students. The data

indicated more than a single education session is needed for staff to confidently create and implement practice strategies. An examination of the findings, using McNair et al. (2022)'s guiding principles, indicated there are opportunities for student affairs staff to become student-ready to serve adopted students. Adoptees can be better supported with partnerships between student affairs and adoption professionals. The project motivated me to continue additional PDSA cycles with larger and more diverse student affair groups as well as with adoption professionals.

6.0 Reflection

This chapter will reflect on the impact of the inquiry on my learning and personal development, as an improver and as a scholarly practitioner. I will also reflect on how this project will impact my future work. The overlap of my fields of practice, student affairs care management and adoption social work, made the PoP clear to me while it was invisible to others. As a leader, I learned to trust in my own instincts and lived experience to inform my work as a leader and practitioner. Being student-ready means appreciating the importance of students' lived experiences and valuing their cultural capital. To be a student-ready practitioner, I needed to first acknowledge and value my own lived experience and story.

6.1 Improvement Science Methodology

As an improver, I learned the importance of following the process. Improvement is a science with distinct steps to follow. I understood the importance of each step, starting with the intensive research and planning that must be done before initiating the change cycle. Understanding the system was necessary before change can be initiated, otherwise I risked failure. Unintentional consequences may occur, or the needs of important stakeholders can be overlooked. The time spent analyzing and understanding the problem was a worthy investment.

I learned that improvement happens by changing the system. Success is shifting the system ever so slightly in the direction toward the desired change. It may seem like only a little is accomplished, but improvement occurs through incremental changes. Continuing to hone the

system with repetitive cycles can result in bigger changes. It takes patience, persistence, and faithfulness to improvement science methodology.

Part of the improvement process involved careful listening and collaborating. While I have expertise, I do not have all the answers; furthermore, gathering experts as consultants along the way challenged my views, provided me with insights, helped to shape the project, and made the work more satisfying. Listening to the participants in my interviews will help shape the future direction of the work. In addition, I learned to be aware of where I have agency and the importance of being flexible. I am confident that I can use improvement science to address new problems of practice that I will encounter.

6.2 Identity and Practice

As a scholarly practitioner, I discovered that my identity as an adoptee matters and can inform my work and practice. I hope to use that confidence and knowledge to support other adoptees in their journeys and to work toward additional change in practice. Noticing the intersection of how my two separate practice fields, student affairs and adoption social work, impacts adoptees has been both an exciting and frustrating discovery. It is exciting because I can see the shared interests and opportunities these fields have to work together to better support adoptees, and frustrating because it has not already been done. In the process, I witnessed that some student affairs professionals do not see the need for this work and adhere to cultural beliefs, myths, and tropes about adoption. I am committed to being a campus leader who challenges unexamined biases and beliefs. The awareness that college campuses are failing adopted students motivates me to press on in making them student-ready. I plan to continue looking for ways to forge a strong marriage between adoption work and higher education and identify sites for action,

in both the adoption profession and in higher education, to support young adult adoptees' development.

Rapid, repetitive PDSA cycles that are the hallmark of improvement science have the power to improve systems. Going forward as a scholarly practitioner, understanding and using this recipe for change will be a powerful way to address oppressive systems and work for justice for adoptees, and for other underserved identity groups. It will also serve me well in addressing any PoP I am tasked to improve. Taking the time to understand problems of practice through examining literature, listening to stakeholders, and analyzing potential causes by drilling down and continually asking "why" are necessary steps to take before formulating and implementing a change idea.

I discovered that others in student affairs view me as an expert on the topic of supporting adopted students. I do not feel I am an expert although I have a good deal of knowledge, as well as lived experience. I feel many of my colleagues in adoption practice know more about supporting adoptees, and I am constantly learning from them. My colleagues in adoption regard me as an expert on student affairs. Although I know a good deal about campus resources and have experience working in student affairs, I do not consider myself a student affairs expert and look to my colleagues in student affairs for additional learning. My identity and positionality provide me with a unique lens to identify a PoP where my areas of practice intersect, which others did not recognize. I studied the problem, listened to others, and then introduced a change idea to improve the problem. Additional iterations of the change idea will continue to identify strengths and weaknesses needed to inform improvements.

I also learned that, for me, the work of creating a student-ready environment for adopted students is deeply personal and therefore at times can be emotionally exhausting. MacFarquhar

(2023) examined the emotional toll of adoption on the lives of adult adoptees. The impact of adoption on one adoptee was described as “a profoundly different way of being human, one that affects almost everything about her life” (MacFarquhar, 2023, para. 5). This sums up what I have always known and what many other adoptees can also confirm. This is the message I wish to convey to other student affairs professionals.

Bringing my whole person and my lived experience, as I was living it, into the work meant that life and work were inseparable. Leaning into peer groups of other professional adoptees who work in social work and in higher education, was an essential part of my self-care and a constant reminder of the importance of the work. Focusing on the need, ignited and continues to fuel my passion for changing higher education into a more empathetic, welcoming, and celebratory place for adopted students. In considering the aim of adopted students being seen, understood, and supported, I am reminded that McNair et al. (2022) emphasized the need take the long view but to also stay focused on action, remembering that change comes in small increments.

Appendix A Figures

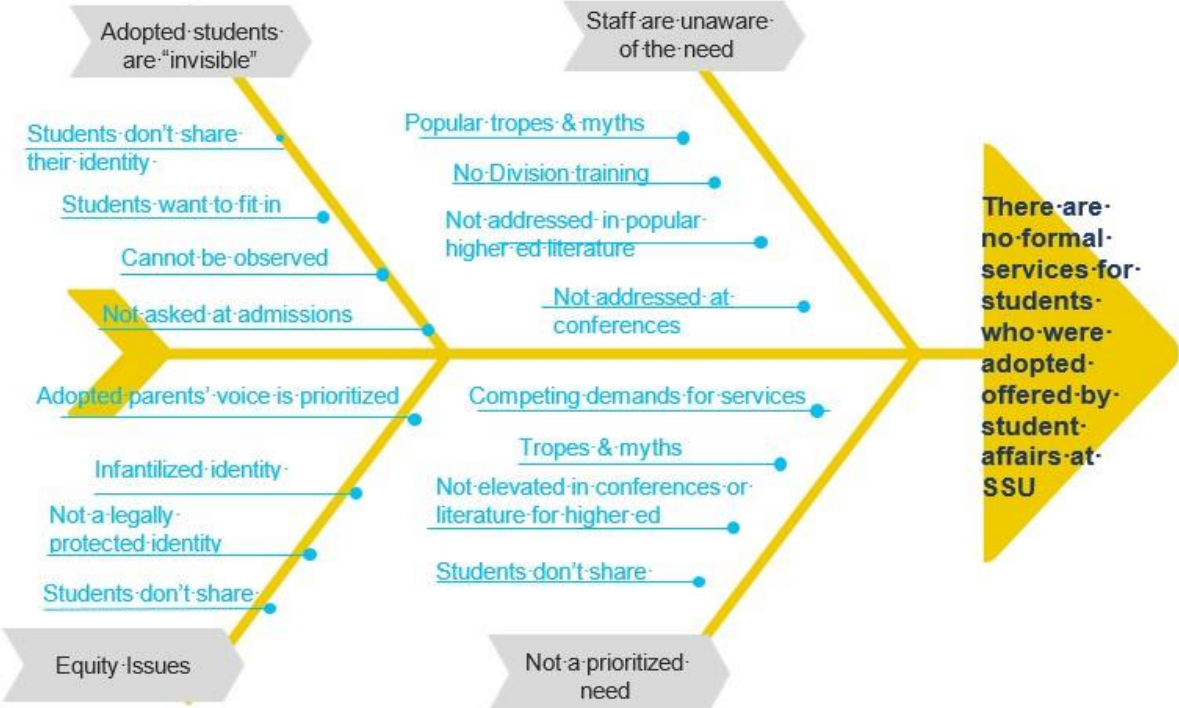


Figure 1 Fishbone Diagram

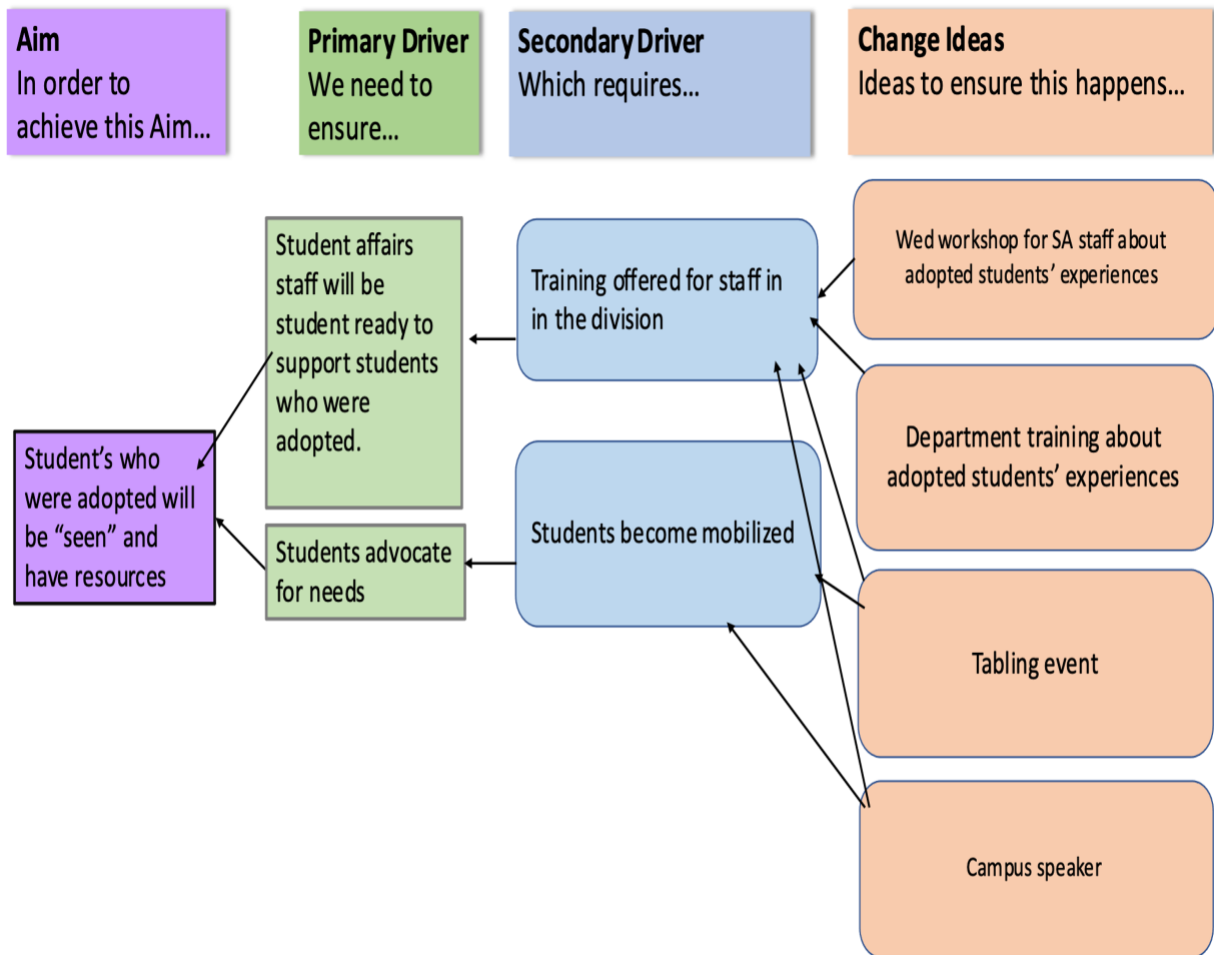


Figure 2 Driver Diagram

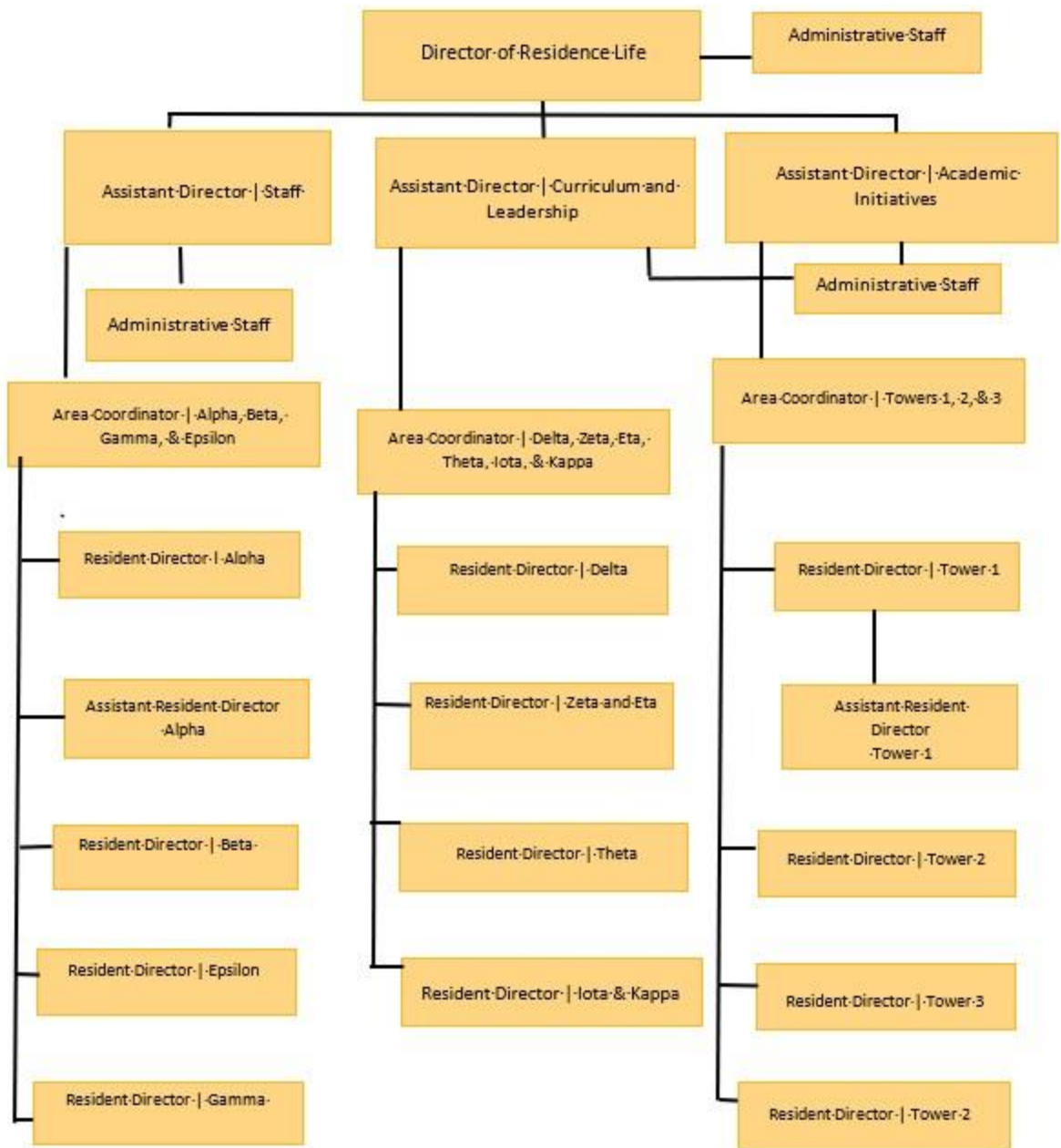


Figure 3 Residence Life Organizational Chart

Appendix B Educational Session Pretest

Please take a few minutes to help evaluate the education session by answering the following questions.

Please select the number which best describes your response.

1. Core issues of students who were adopted include:
 - 1- Grief, remorse, and anger
 - 2- Searching for birth parents and self-acceptance
 - 3- Loss, identity, and rejection
 - 4- Depression and anxiety

2. Birth privilege is
 - 1- The result of children adopted transnationally by U.S. families
 - 2- The legal right of adoptees to access their original birth certificate
 - 3- Devaluing adoption and prioritizing biological family ties
 - 4- Biological children inheriting more than their adopted siblings

3. Supporting students who were adopted means
 - 1- Facilitating referrals for family therapy
 - 2- Encouraging and listening to their voices
 - 3- Discouraging discussion of birth parents
 - 4- Frequently screening them for depression

4. Which Statement best describes the adoption experience?
 - 1- Adoptees' developmental trajectory has a predictable path.
 - 2- The impact may be felt throughout the lifespan.
 - 3- Grief and loss associated with adoption are resolved in adolescence.
 - 4- Closed adoptions result in less identity confusion and more positive adjustment.

5. Suggesting that an adoptee should feel grateful
 - 1- Demonstrates empathy and compassion
 - 2- Helps them to identify and express feelings
 - 3- Elevates their voice
 - 4- Is an example of a microaggression

6. Which statement best describes adoptees?
 - 1- Adoptees who search for birth parents are maladjusted
 - 2- Adoptees as a group are heterogeneous
 - 3- All adoptees have the same struggles
 - 4- Few adoptees succeed in college

7. I feel confident in my ability to be “student-ready” to support students who were adopted.
 - 1- Strongly disagree
 - 2- Disagree
 - 3- Neither agree or disagree
 - 4- Agree
 - 5- Strongly agree

Appendix C Educational Session Posttest

Please take a few minutes to help evaluate the education session by answering the following questions.

For this section, please select the number which best describes your response.

8. Core issues of students who were adopted include:

- 5- Grief, anxiety, and anger
- 6- Searching for birth parents and anxiety
- 7- Loss, identity, and rejection
- 8- Depression and anxiety

9. Birth privilege is

- 5- The result of children adopted transnationally by U.S. families
- 6- The legal right of adoptees to access their original birth certificate
- 7- Devaluing adoption and prioritizing biological family ties
- 8- Biological children inheriting more than their adopted siblings

10. Supporting students who were adopted means

- 5- Facilitating referrals for family therapy
- 6- Encouraging and listening to their voices
- 7- Discouraging discussion of birth parents
- 8- Frequently screening them for depression

11. Which Statement best describes the adoption experience?

- 5- Adoptees developmental trajectory has a predictable path.
- 6- The impact may be felt throughout the lifespan.
- 7- Grief and loss associated with adoption are resolved in adolescence.
- 8- Closed adoptions result in less identity confusion and more positive adjustment.

12. Suggesting that an adoptee should feel grateful

- 5- Demonstrates empathy and compassion
- 6- Helps them to identify and express feelings
- 7- Elevates their voice
- 8- Is an example of a microaggression

13. Which statement best describes adoptees?

- 1- Adoptees who search for birth parents are maladjusted
- 2- Adoptees as a group are heterogeneous
- 3- All adoptees have the same struggles
- 4- Few adoptees succeed in college

14. I feel confident in my ability to be “student-ready” to support students who were adopted.

- 6- Strongly disagree
- 7- Disagree
- 8- Neither agree or disagree
- 9- Agree
- 10- Strongly agree

Please share feedback to the following prompts:

- 1. What was most helpful about the training?
- 2. What was least helpful about the training?
- 3. Do you have suggestions to improve the training?
- 4. Is there anything else you would like to share?
- 5. Would you be willing to participate in an additional interview in approximately 2 weeks to help assess the effectiveness of the training in exchange for a \$10 Starbucks gift card?

Appendix D Educational Session Follow Up Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your role in res life.
2. Tell me about anything new you learned from the session.
3. How will you apply some of the things you learned in the session to your work with students?
4. Has your viewpoint about students who were adopted changed as a result of attending the session? If so, how has it changed?
5. What changes, if any, do you think could be implemented to make Res Life more welcoming for students who were adopted?
6. What opportunities does Success State University have for providing services or resources for adopted students?
7. Would you consider attending a future training on the topic of supporting adopted students? Why or why not?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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