

9-2000

## Connection and Transition: Influences of Career Mobility on the Close Friendships of Women Student Affairs Professionals

Maureen E. Wilson

*Bowling Green State University*, mewilso@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hied\\_pub](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hied_pub)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Wilson, Maureen E., "Connection and Transition: Influences of Career Mobility on the Close Friendships of Women Student Affairs Professionals" (2000). *Higher Education and Student Affairs Faculty Publications*. 13.

[https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hied\\_pub/13](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hied_pub/13)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Higher Education and Student Affairs at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education and Student Affairs Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

# Connection and Transition: Influences of Career Mobility on the Close Friendships of Women Student Affairs Professionals

Maureen E. Wilson

*This study examined the close friendships of women student affairs professionals and explored the influences of career mobility on those relationships. Data were collected in individual interviews. Participants included 14 women ages 27 to 45 (8 single, 6 partnered; 4 Black or African American, 10 White or Caucasian; 4 lesbian, 10 heterosexual) All had a master's degree (from 6 institutions in 4 states) in student affairs, 4 had a doctorate (from 2 universities in 2 states). The women were living in five states and working at 10 colleges and universities in the West, South, and Midwest. Two were working at community colleges, 5 at small private colleges, and 7 at large four-year universities. Primary responsibilities were in six different functional areas. Participants defined close friendship and described the challenges of making professional and personal transitions. Implications for the student affairs profession are considered.*

Asked to describe her close friendships, Denise, a participant in this study, said:

These are the people in the world who taught me to value myself. Who taught me that I'm a wonderful person, which I didn't know 20 years ago. And that I'm extremely competent . . . . A lot of my self-esteem issues and my feelings about who I am and that I'm a good person really arose from these relationships.

Those relationships were incredibly powerful for her. As a student, student affairs professional, or faculty member, I observed and participated in close friendships in higher education for nearly 20 years. I saw both casual and close friendships and watched some people struggle without them.

In student affairs, I witnessed the painful separation of close friends who graduated, relocated for a new job, or did both. From that perspective, informed by the literature review that follows, I wanted to examine that process. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand more complexly the close friendships of women student affairs professionals. More specifically, this article addresses the influences of career mobility on close friendships and implications that may exist for the student affairs profession.

Although studies in student affairs do not address this topic directly, intersections of research in psychology and human development, gender, friendship, and career mobility in student affairs overlap and provide an important theoretical foundation for this inquiry. For several reasons, this study focuses on women. First, major theories that form a foundation for student development theory relied on samples that were predominately or exclusively male (and White) (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1958; Perry, 1970). Consequently, we tend to know more about the development of autonomy and independence than interdependence and intimacy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). According to Gilligan (1982), women typically define their identity in a context of relationship; however, the struggle for connection does not indicate a problem in achieving separation. Code (1991) echoes this. If autonomy and dependence are polarized, then self-reliance is thought to require complete repudiation of interdependence. As explained by Chickering and Reisser (1993), Erikson believed that adolescent females who were defining their identity through relationships with others were deviating from the "normal" pattern of (male)

---

Maureen E. Wilson is Assistant Professor of Counselor Education and Educational Psychology at Mississippi State University.

development by confusing identity with intimacy. More recent research argues that intimacy may precede autonomy, particularly for women (Straub, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986). Thus, to recognize the importance of relationships in the development of a sense of self, Chickering and Reisser (1993) reordered and renamed developmental vectors so “moving through autonomy toward interdependence,” which requires an awareness of one’s interconnectedness with others, now precedes “developing mature interpersonal relationships,” which involves rebalancing the needs for autonomy and attachment. Both are critical to development.

According to Miller (1986), Surrey (1991), and Josselson (1996), an important part of women’s identity comes from knowing who they are in relation to others and women’s development is influenced by their relationships. Within friendships, women can gain self-insight and self-confidence, and develop the courage to change and grow (Johnson, 1996; Josselson, 1996).

Psychological growth in *connection* involves finding more interesting and challenging ways of being with others, knowing them better (and simultaneously knowing oneself better), discovering more precise and meaningful forms of feeling known and validated as oneself, increasing moments of mutuality and bonds of trust, maintaining connection over time and distance, and grappling with the dilemmas of caring for another. (Josselson, 1996, p. 210)

So, in contrast to theories that emphasize independence and autonomy as markers of maturity, scholars are investigating the importance of connection in women’s identity development. “Women move along in the world through relational connections: Whom they know has much to do with whom—and how—they become” (Josselson, 1987, p. 169). Identity is clarified by sharing it with others, which confirms and strengthens women’s sense of self. Relationships, including friendships, are a source of personal validation and help answer the question, “Who am I?” Through writings in psychology and relational theory, a picture of relationships that

foster mutual growth and empowerment emerges (Josselson, 1996; Miller, 1986) and informs this study.

Second, I focused on women because I am often struck by gender differences in friendships. For instance, in his study of men’s development, Levinson (1978) concluded, “In our interviews, friendship was largely noticeable by its absence. As a tentative generalization we would say that close friendship with a man or woman is rarely experienced by American men” (p. 335). This often-cited finding was inconsistent with my observations of many women, particularly those in student affairs. Indeed, throughout my career in student affairs, I had witnessed (and participated in) many close friendships among women and watched some struggle personally and professionally when they lacked close and meaningful friendships. Ultimately however, I was interested in understanding more fully women’s experiences in close friendship, not in comparing that to men’s. Barr (1988) expresses this idea well. “I firmly believe that comparisons between groups can have value and should be continued; however, comparisons between groups sometimes blur our understanding of what is going on within a specific group” (p. 498). Thus, if women’s lives and experiences are examined, what can be learned about interdependence, interpersonal relationships, and intimacy?

Research on friendship is a third area on which this inquiry rests. Although student affairs researchers have focused on specific relationships such as mentors (e.g., Twale & Jelinek, 1996) and female friendship among college women has been examined (e.g., Becker, 1987; Martínez Alemán, 1997, 1999), they have not addressed friendship as a specific relationship that could have implications for women student affairs professionals. And though it does not focus on women student affairs professionals, research supports the importance of friendship, especially for women.

Defining something as individualistic as friendship is difficult (Fehr, 1996; O’Connor, 1992). Josselson (1992) defines a friend as someone with whom ongoing mutuality and resonance is experienced. Friendships incorpor-

ate companionship, sharing, and self-disclosure, a sense of "we" that is mutually created (p. 166). They are unique, enduring, chosen voluntarily, and have a sense of equity and mutuality of affection and interest (Bell, 1981; Friedman, 1993). Close friends, a distinction more often made by women, possess the attributes of friends to a greater depth and are more likely to be confided in and relied upon (Fehr, 1996).

Friendships contribute to psychological growth and well-being, especially for women (Lewittes, 1988; Siebert, Mutran, & Reitzes, 1999; Stevens & van Tilburg, 2000). Lewittes examined friendship patterns among older Caucasian and African American women and argued that friendships serve as a primary source of intimacy and provide critical support in coping with life changes. Aging women often lose roles and relationships through widowhood, retirement, and geographic relocation and may face several major changes within a short time. Similarly, student affairs professionals who relocate are likely to be dealing with major life changes and, like the women in Lewittes' study, may also have more time to devote to relationships. If, for instance, a woman has been juggling a graduate program, job or assistantship, friendships, and family, she could actually have more free time following a move to develop new friendships because familiar friends and family may be far away.

Berzoff (1989) explored the therapeutic value of college-educated, heterosexual women's adult friendships, and she concluded, first, that women created an empathic context with their female friends, which functioned as a holding environment in which ongoing psychological growth could occur. Second, self-knowledge and identity were enhanced by the feedback or mirroring received from friends. This mirror helped women clarify issues, identify patterns, and affirm their strengths. Third, women friends were described as models and by identifying with them, self-capacities were expanded. Furthermore, women often feel a greater sense of intimacy and emotional support with other women than they do with men (Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Fehr, 1996; Rubin, 1985), and Becker (1987) has suggested that important

friendships and sexual love relationships can offer comparable depths of intimacy that are equally valued. Therefore, fostering close friendships can have many personal and psychological advantages.

Similarly, according to Josselson (1996), friendship can be a rich source of self-exploration, companionship, and stimulation. Friends serve as sounding boards as important decisions are deliberated, providing perspectives from someone trusted to care deeply about the other. As women age, they tend to seek comfort and support from stable, close, long-term friendships and to feel that new connections are more difficult to develop (Gouldner & Strong, 1987; Josselson, 1996). They become more exacting in their requirements of friendship and separate casual or superficial friends from emotional, intimate, and enduring ones. In one of the few studies to examine the friendships of professional women, Gouldner and Strong studied 75 middle- and upper-middle class women, ages 35 to 75. They identified a new breed of professionals and middle managers, especially those in their 30s and 40s, who placed friendship at the core of their lives and remained connected with close friends throughout their careers. Research on important friendships between women can teach both genders about developing and maintaining fulfilling interpersonal relationships (Becker, 1987).

Finally, student affairs is a mobile profession (Sagarra & Johnsrud, 1988). At a recent joint meeting of the American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1800 candidates registered with the placement and career services center (ACPA, 1996-1997). Career advancement often requires relocation (Earwood-Smith, Jordan-Cox, Hudson, & Smith, 1990) and inability or unwillingness to relocate contributes to attrition in student affairs (Lunsford, 1984). Furthermore, student affairs professionals are expected to work closely with students and colleagues, and success as a student affairs administrator requires an ability to establish and maintain strong connections with others on campus (Barr, 1993; Brown, 1997). Transitions in and disruptions to close friendships are impli-

cations of relocating for career advancement.

This inquiry is significant for a number of reasons. First, it will help increase understanding of women based on the experiences of women, not men. Studying women's lives and relationships contributes to a greater understanding of growth-enhancing interpersonal connections and a more complete sense of the full human experience (Miller, 1987). Second, this research extends the literature in higher education and student affairs where women have been a focus of research, but their close friendships have not been examined. The fields of student affairs and psychology can benefit from an enhanced understanding of the complexity of women's lives and friendships. Finally, career mobility in student affairs involves transitions that are personally and professionally disruptive, and even positive and desired ones can be difficult (Bridges, 1991; Schlossberg, 1990). Friends help each other sustain a sense of continuity in their lives and can provide emotional and instrumental support which eases the distress associated with major life transitions (Stevens & van Tilburg, 2000).

## METHOD

A qualitative study was designed to explore participants' experience in close friendship and how they constructed meaning of that phenomenon. Qualitative research interviews strive to understand from participants' perspectives and to uncover the meaning of their experiences (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). Therefore, to create a complex description of participants' close friendships that allowed for elaboration and clarification, individual interviews were conducted to collect data.

### Sampling

Using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), participants who had a graduate degree from a student affairs preparation program and at least 2 years of full-time experience in student affairs were selected to obtain diversity in age, race, sexual orientation, partnership status (single or partnered), graduate institution, professional experience, and geographic location. Based on

recommendations of professional and academic colleagues, women student affairs professionals who were 27 to 47 years of age were invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were contacted via phone or E-mail, and the purpose of the study and requirements of participation were explained verbally and in writing. Participants were assured confidentiality and the opportunity to make changes or clarifications in the interview transcript. All who were contacted agreed to participate.

### Participants

As summarized in Table 1, participants in this study were 14 women student affairs professionals from the U.S. who ranged in age from 27 to 45. Eight were single, and 6 were partnered (married or in a committed dating relationship or lesbian partnership). Four women identified themselves as Black or African American and 10 as White or Caucasian. Repeated efforts to locate women from other racial or ethnic groups who met the sampling criteria and who were available for face-to-face interviews were unsuccessful. This is a limitation of the study. Four were lesbian, and 10 were heterosexual. Only 3 were mothers. All had earned a master's degree in student affairs, and 4 had earned a doctorate in education. Master's degrees were earned at six institutions in four states. Doctorates were earned at two universities in different states. During the study, the women were living in five states and working at 10 colleges and universities in the West, South, and Midwest. Two were working at community colleges, 5 at small private colleges, and 7 at large four-year universities. Primary responsibilities were in six different functional areas. As a group, they had lived in 17 different states since attending college.

### Interviews

Individual interviews focused on each woman's definition of a close friendship; in-depth descriptions of those relationships; intimacy, conflict, and transitions in close friendships; a comparison of friendships by gender; and influences of close friends on personal and professional development. (Not all of these are

addressed in this article.) Interviews followed a semistructured format using the interview guide approach (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990) and lasted 45 to 90 minutes. Three women who participated in exploratory research for this study were interviewed a second time to discuss topics that arose as the interview protocol developed.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with slight modifications to maintain confidentiality (names and places were changed or omitted). In reviewing their transcripts, some participants made minor changes in wording, but none made substantial changes to content.

Data Analysis

Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987), and

Strauss and Corbin (1990) described the constant comparative method of data analysis. Initial coding of interview transcripts resulted in 145 codes. These codes were grouped into 21 concepts that were collapsed into six key categories (constructions of close friendship, nature of close friendship, managing conflict, and influences of career mobility, gender, and partnership status on close friendship). For instance, codes including loss of immediacy, isolation, and saying good-bye were grouped into the concept of transition that is reflected in the key category of career mobility. This article addresses the career mobility category.

Trustworthiness in these findings was enhanced by triangulation of methods. First,

TABLE 1.  
Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Name	Age	Ethnic Identity <sup>a</sup>	Sexual Orientation	Partnership Status	Degree
Artemis	29	Black	Heterosexual	Single	Master's
Dana	29	White	Heterosexual	Single	Master's
Denise	40	White	Lesbian	Partnered	Doctorate
Dorothy	40	African American	Heterosexual	Married	Doctorate
Hannah	37	White	Heterosexual	Married	Master's
Jill	36	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married	Master's
Kirra	35	White	Heterosexual	Single	Master's
Lauren	30	Caucasian	Lesbian	Single	Doctorate
Margaret	37	African American	Heterosexual	Single	Master's
Monique	30	African American	Heterosexual	Committed Dating Relationship	Master's
Renee	27	White	Lesbian	Single	Master's
Stella	45	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single	Doctorate
Susan	34	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single	Master's
Tamara	32	Caucasian	Lesbian	Partnered	Master's

<sup>a</sup> Self-identified terms.

during exploratory research for this inquiry, another investigator conducted an interview using the semistructured interview format, coded the interview transcript, and provided feedback on the interview guide and data analysis. Second, another outside investigator read and coded two full interview transcripts plus excerpts of all interviews. Interpretations of meaning were then compared and discussed between the researchers. Third, several outside readers (including my doctoral dissertation committee) provided feedback and challenging perspectives on research questions and emerging findings. Finally, peer debriefing was provided by a doctoral writing group that provided critical feedback on research methods and data analysis.

In addition to peer debriefing and critical feedback, the use of multiple literatures in psychology, gender, friendship, and student affairs provided different perspectives from which to identify themes and patterns in the data. Member checks with participants provided clarification of ideas and confirmation that I was accurately interpreting their experiences. After participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy and clarity, I spoke with each woman to discuss findings emerging from the data.

Lastly, transferability of these findings depends on the similarity between the researched context and contexts to which the results may apply (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Based on detailed descriptions of participants and data, readers must judge the transferability of these findings to other settings.

## FINDINGS

### Friendship Patterns

Participants developed close friendships by spending sustained time engaging in intimate conversations and sharing the most important aspects of their lives. These friendships were formed most often with college or graduate school classmates and work colleagues; only 2 participants had no close friends working in higher education. Most women (12 of 14) named six or fewer close friends; only 2 had more. Most were close in age, although some participants had a close friend several years older or younger than

herself. The majority of each woman's close friends were the same race that she was, yet 9 had at least one of another race.

Regarding gender, the majority of close friends named were women, and most participants (9) named no men as close friends. Just 2 women, both married, had more men than women as close friends. Single women (lesbian or heterosexual) did not name single men as close friends, and only 1 African American woman included men among her close friends. The 5 women who were close friends with a man spoke of a boundary that made the relationship "safe" and minimized the complications of sexual or romantic attraction that interfere with many male-female friendships. That is, these women were married or lesbian or their male friends were married or gay, and so, they said, those friendships had clear parameters.

Based on this sample, clear patterns did not emerge regarding race or sexual orientation. African American and Caucasian women described very similar experiences in close friendship, and the individual relationships detailed by participants did not appear to vary based on the race of friends. Two of the African American participants were among the most frequent relocaters whereas 2 had always lived in the same city. Lesbian participants named the smallest number of close friends (2) and the largest (12); 1 included men as close friends and 3 did not. Each lesbian woman included close friends who were heterosexual, whereas heterosexual participants did not always indicate the sexual orientation of their close friends. Some issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are addressed in the findings.

### Defining Close Friendship

Each participant was asked to define close friendship and their responses were consistent with definitions stated in the introduction. Some focused on the ability to be themselves with close friends. Denise said, "They're people who kind of like me in spite of myself. And vice-versa. They're people that I know all their warts and I love them anyway." For Artemis, they are "an asset to my life, versus a burden." Both Dana and Kirra stressed the importance of being able

to “pick up where you left off” after an extended absence. Because their families were so important to them, Jill’s and Dana’s close friends knew their families, whether or not they had actually met them. “So I mean they know about who I am because they know where I come from.” Kirra has to “feel comfortable sharing very intimate things” with a close friend and for Lauren, “It’s a relationship between two people that, it’s not a sexual relationship, but it is an emotionally intimate relationship where there’s mutual trust, mutual respect and . . . unconditional regard for one another.” Renee included a range of critical qualities including genuineness, commitment to the relationship, open communication, perseverance, the willingness to grow and change within that relationship, a good sense of humor, an appreciation for life and for the other person, and a willingness both to challenge and to support that person.

Consistent with the findings of Berzoff (1989) and Josselson (1996), close friends helped these women examine themselves and situations more fully. For example, Stella said,

Ultimately, I think it’s somebody who is probably not going to deliberately harm me or hurt me. . . . And that doesn’t mean they won’t give me constructive feedback, but is generally out for my own best interest. And generally supportive. . . . Someone who I can trust and I feel comfortable asking for alternative perspectives. I think one thing I value a lot in my friends is that they do give me different perspectives that I normally wouldn’t think of when I’ve got a dilemma.

As it was for the college women that Martínez Alemán (1997) studied, the freedom from negative judgement or evaluation from close friends was very important. Every woman talked about being challenged by her close friends, and those challenges were accepted because they occurred within a safe context of acceptance, love, and commitment. Without risk to their relationship, close friends confronted these women on difficult issues, and even when feedback was hard to hear, they were trusted to

be very honest. For Artemis, her close friends could, “see [her] vulnerable and not use that against [her] in the future.” She explained,

I’m 29 years old and I’d say that there are six women in this world, out of all the women I have met, that I feel close and near and dear to. And I think because I feel comfortable with [my close friends] I feel that I’m not judged. I feel like when she says something to me, it’s to help me and not to hurt me. It’s to help me either be a better person, be a better professional, be a better woman, be a better Black woman. . . . And I feel like I have a responsibility to give that back to her, so it’s reciprocated.

Similarly, Dorothy reported,

I could tell them anything. I am not concerned that they’re going to evaluate me. I can really mess up. I can say stupid things. I can do stupid things. And they might tell me it was a stupid thing, but they’re not going to not want to be with me again. Or not want to talk to me again. And I can talk it out and process it. And they can be supportive and honest at the same time.

Furthermore, Dorothy explained that her close friends are “good at getting me to move from places that aren’t good. . . . These people I trust to do that because I know they’ll be honest with me but I also know they have my well-being at heart.” For Monique, a close friendship is “one where I can share everything with that person. Even if it’s wrong. Even if it’s unrespected.” Margaret said, “They’re very blunt and will just tell you about yourself. I mean if you’re being stupid, they’ll just tell you . . . but there’s still a lot of caring and I appreciate that.” All 4 of these African American participants described an ability for close friends to be very direct or even blunt with them (and vice versa), and those challenges helped them learn and grow. Yet, every participant had close friends who helped her gain valuable insights and see complex issues in new ways, and each felt safe that she would not be judged.



The connection between close friends was different from other good and enjoyable friendships. First, emotional intimacy and self-disclosure, markers of close friendship for many of these women, were deeper with close friends. Second, the level of trust was higher with close friends than with colleagues and friends. Finally, the sense of longevity and commitment was more significant. Susan said this about those outside her circle of close friends:

I probably wouldn't tell them the deepest secrets in my life. I probably wouldn't call them in the middle of the night if I was really upset about something because I love them and they're great but there's not a deep connection there.

Many participants spoke of the nature of student affairs and the flow of terrific people in and out of their lives. It was impossible to maintain close ties with all the friends with whom they had studied, worked, and lived. However, close friendships survived and thrived, even when geographical distance between them was great and circumstances prevented frequent visits. Yet, most knew that proximity facilitated close friendships, and not all important relationships remained close over time and distance.

In summary, common to participants was a construction of close friendship as an intimate connection with another person where a woman felt safe to reveal her successes and deepest vulnerabilities; to bare her soul and not be rejected or judged negatively. They were relationships of high-level, mutual trust and honesty. In trust and candor, close friends supported each other in times of need and challenged each other as requested or perceived as needed. Even following a long physical separation, close friends picked up where they left off and regained an immediate feeling of intimacy and connection.

### Career Mobility and Close Friendships

Consistent with the findings of Sagaria and Johnsrud (1988), participants in this study were very mobile, relocating often to advance their careers in student affairs. Only 2 had always lived in the same state. Almost all went to college in

their home state (12 of 14), whereas 4 moved to a neighboring state for graduate school. For their first or second professional position in student affairs, 10 participants moved to a different state. Six women had lived in three or four states since college, and 9 returned to a state in which they lived previously, often to be closer to family. This mobility created significant challenges for close friendships.

Transition points in relationships were most often precipitated by relocation, typically when a woman or her close friend moved for a new job. Invariably, those relocations resulted in a shift from frequent and sustained face-to-face contact to phone calls, E-mails, and infrequent personal visits. Depending on the geographic distance between friends and other life circumstances (e.g., financial resources and family responsibilities), most close friends tried to see each other at least once a year and felt fortunate when visits were more frequent. When close friends were still working in student affairs, professional conferences were often the time see one another. A few participants identified as close friends women whom they had not seen in many years. The experiences of loss, sadness and pain, and strategies for coping were the primary themes that emerged in discussions of transitions.

*Losses.* Loss of details and immediacy were two phenomena that contributed to the sadness and pain of being distant from close friends. For Stella, moving away from close friends was "horrible."

And when [my husband and I] moved, what I missed more than anything was the loss of details and knowing what was going on with her on a daily basis. . . . I look back and I think maybe the fact that we moved here without any friends was the beginning of the end of our marriage.

When she and her husband moved away from a close network of friendships, they did not form new ones. She was incredibly lonely then and, in retrospect, saw that as the time her marriage began to unravel.

When she moved alone to a small college in a small town without a visible lesbian community, Renee struggled with the loss of

immediacy with close friends.

It was really hard. . . . I think initially it was that sense of immediacy. . . . I don't see these people. I don't talk to these people. I can't just go hang out with them. That was so folded into my total transition of "I'm out of graduate school, I'm at a new place." . . . I focused a lot on my job. . . . It was very awkward.

Remarking on the difficulty of her transitions, Artemis said,

It's been something that I don't want to go through again. And I'm happy with the people in my life and if God sees fit to bring somebody else that's fine but right now, I'm okay. . . . I have enough to balance and . . . even though we're still friends there's that sense of loss of immediacy that I don't like.

Like the experiences of Renee and Artemis, the losses associated with transition may be particularly intense for single lesbians and women of color at small colleges in small towns. Although they had developed relationships with friends and colleagues, both their campuses and communities were lacking in diversity and offered limited opportunities to interact with other lesbians or African Americans. This can exacerbate a feeling of isolation.

*Sadness and pain.* Another difficulty in being separated from close friends was coping with the sadness and pain associated with those transitions. Stella compared moving and losing daily contact with close friends to a child going off to college. "You sort of have to let go. You have to let go of the details. And let go that it's not going to be the same as it was, the friendship." Although her close friendships from graduate school have persevered, she knew they would have less detail and intimacy than they did when they lived in the same city.

Unlike Stella, Dorothy had remained at the same institution while close friends entered and exited her daily life.

It's hard. It's sad to me to go from lots of frequent contact and I can stop by and

that kind of thing to . . . it's a major logistical—not to mention financial—task to get together. So initially, those transitions are difficult for me. They're sad for me.

After standing in the driveway crying as a close friend drove away, Dorothy had begun to protect herself by pulling away before close friends departed, even though she did not think doing so was a good idea. "I start protecting myself so we're not hanging out every minute up until the time they leave because that would be really, really tough for me."

For Artemis, the intensity of emotions was sometimes overwhelming, even after her network of close friends had been living apart but gathered at conferences. Upon leaving,

I mean all of us were bawling like babies like we were never going to see each other again. And I'm like "Oh my [goodness]! . . . And people were looking at us like, "What is their problem?" And it was just so hard. I was like, "Just get away. . . . I can't even look at you anymore because I'll be crying like I'm about 2 or 3 years old." And it was just so hard.

So, even parting after a reunion was painful. Time together was followed by intense sadness upon separating again. When she moved far from home after graduate school, Dana became close friends with Mary. When Dana moved again after a few years, they cried "buckets of tears." Although Mary did not want her leave, she helped Dana prepare a new resume because, "You help your friend do whatever you can so they can have the best life possible at the time." Consistently, participants expressed great sadness in separating from close friends, particularly when time together had been frequent and intense, and relocation would bring drastic changes.

*Coping.* Coping with separations from close friends, especially in the months following a move, was always challenging and sometimes unhealthy. Renee, for instance, said she coped with her losses by becoming a workaholic and

enduring costly phone bills. Excited to apply what she had learned in graduate school, she immersed herself in her work, spending time with her staff and learning the new system. Looking back, she interpreted that as her strategy for coping with the changes in her relationships. “After a couple of years it’s like what are you doing? Why are you spending all your time focused on work?” Watching two of her close friends living in another city become more established as a couple and more connected with a lesbian community made Renee more aware of her singleness and of her inability to find similar connections. Even though she had developed some close friendships, she felt temporary and unsettled.

When Denise, now in her 40s, moved with her partner away from close friends to take a new job early in her career, she was miserable. She spoke at length about that experience.

I vividly remember when I was a new professional. Those friendships really got me through some times that were very challenging. . . .

I think of those early years when I was a hall director and an area coordinator [and] my friends kept me sane. . . . The organization was saying, “You have to be perfect. . . . Nothing can go wrong or it reflects on you.” . . .

By the time I got to be a hall director, which I think is a really challenging position, I had a pool of friendships that could help me. When I left here and went to another university, I had my partner, who was key. There were people there who welcomed me, you know, like they always do, but . . . the first year I didn’t have those kind of relationships and I think for the first 4 months of my job there, I cried every day. It’s the only time in my life that I ever abused drugs. I smoked pot all the time because I couldn’t deal with it. . . .

Change is really hard. It’s really hard to go from where you’re known and respected and viewed as competent to

where they hired you but you don’t have a reputation. You don’t have a presence. You’re new. You know [nothing], really. And it became bearable when I hooked up with a couple [of] women, and developed those supportive open friendships.

In Denise’s case, she needed to have close friendships with colleagues, but it took her nearly a year to develop them. Even with a partner, she needed friends who were intimately familiar with the demands and challenges of student affairs. The stresses of moving, starting over, and establishing a reputation can be overwhelming at times, and close friends helped these women regain a sense of balance.

Some participants had been at the same institution for many years, especially those who were partnered. In contrast, those who had moved most recently or most often presented vivid descriptions of the effects of that mobility. Two patterns of coping with geographic distance from close friends were most apparent for participants.

*Maintain close friendships and seek new ones.* One pattern was to maintain old friendships while developing new ones. This pattern was strongest for single women who had moved alone and needed to develop close friends nearby to be involved in the day-to-day details of their lives. Being unable to spend a lot of time together and to know the daily happenings in each other’s lives were two of the aspects of moving away from close friends that made the move so painful and difficult. Therefore, new relationships were developed to fill immediate needs for companionship and intimacy. Fortunately, Dana was always able to locate a new close friend to fill the void in her life when she moved away. “It’s always kind of like the transition happens and someone moves, but then immediately someone moves into my life that fills that gap, fills that need.” Although she often had a large group of friends and acquaintances, Dana typically had one intense relationship with a woman with whom she spent a lot of time. As noted above, Denise’s move to another state became bearable only after she developed friendships on campus. Hence, in this pattern of coping with transition,

new close friends were sought even as old ones were maintained because intimacy was needed on a daily basis with someone who knew the details of her life. Old friendships still were important, but they usually lost a level of detail and intimacy and new relationships filled those needs.

However, those wanting to develop new friendships often faced a smaller pool of potential friends. Similar to Josselson's (1996) findings, many participants experienced more difficulty making close friends as they got older, even when they wanted to develop new relationships. Why was that? First, the pool of potential close friends shrank. It takes a large investment of time to develop, nurture, and maintain a close friendship and those with partners, children, families, and careers had less time to devote to them. Additionally, as some women were promoted to higher positions, they tended to have fewer colleagues at the same level. So, if they wished to avoid close friendships with supervisees, women had fewer potential close friends. Similarly, female senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) reported feeling lonely (McHugh Engstrom, Andreas, Roper, & Sina, 1999), and women executives also were lonely often (Gouldner & Strong, 1987). They hesitated to build friendships on the job and lacked time to develop and sustain them outside of work. In another study, women SSAOs reported feeling isolated because few women were in comparable positions, thereby reducing the number of professional peers in whom they could confide or with whom they could socialize (Randall, Daughtery, & Globetti, 1995). According to Scott (1992), female SSAOs relied most heavily on friendships, support groups, and networking to cope with stress. Having access to fewer close friends, therefore, can exacerbate stress for women professionals and forming close friendships can be very challenging.

Furthermore, to develop intimate friendships is to be vulnerable (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Rather than face the risk and vulnerability of initiating new relationships, Lauren maintained the intense friendships she already had.

And so the transition is kind of like, do I let my natural barriers come back up or

do I let people see who I really am and then take the risk of them not really liking me? . . . That is tough. I've met a couple of people here that I think are really cool people, but it's still touch and go. Do you call them every day like I would talk to Nancy and Julie or do you see them once a week?

*Maintain close friendships and do not seek new ones.* Another pattern of coping with transitions was to maintain the intensity of previously established close friendships and not to seek new ones. Like the women in Josselson's (1996) study, some of the participants in the current study became more particular in developing new close friendships. Sometimes relationships were avoided because a woman's needs were met by her current relationships; she was "full." There was little incentive to invest limited time and energy into developing new close friendships. Gouldner and Strong (1987) refer to this concept as a friendship budget. Most can manage a limited number of relationships and if close friends lived far away, these women may have sought companions or friends, but not people to enter the inner circles of their lives. If a close friendship "slot" becomes available, it may be difficult to fill, as noted above.

Other women avoided new close friendships in hopes of not experiencing the pain and sadness of having to part again after a relatively short time together. Artemis had a strong network of close friends in other cities but felt isolated on her campus where she had acquaintances and friends, "but it's not like sister friends stuff." She continued,

But I guess I've gotten to a point, especially after my last position where I'm like, I'm not letting anybody else get that close to me again because I'm getting tired of saying good-bye. I'm getting tired of trying to coordinate relationships when I have all these women dispersed all over the state, and I love them so much, and I don't know if I could deal with that again.

Margaret, another single African American

woman, had moved more than any other participant, and did not actively seek additional close friends either. Attending college nearly 1,000 miles from home, she moved to another state for graduate school, and then to three more states across the country, one of them twice. Because the majority of her close friendships were developed in college and graduate school, she had not lived near her close friends in many years. Yet even from a distance, they played a significant role in her life.

I've moved a lot so if I'm in a new place, I kind of let the chips fall where they may. So if there is someone that sort of pops up as someone who could become a good or a close friend, that's okay, but because I already have in these other people a very significant and strong support network, it's not necessary. So it's not something that I seek.

Renee believed her avoidance of new friendships operated somewhat subconsciously. She had realized the difficulty of maintaining the closeness of long-distance friendships.

In this field, particularly in residence life, it is not knowing where you're going to be and for how long. . . . I'm only going to be here a couple years. Better just pour myself into work and move along. . . . I don't think I'm aware I'm doing it, but if I had to examine my life and say, "What choices are you making in terms of maintaining or getting new relationships of any type?" it would be slim to none. Not doing much, just not getting out there.

Having their needs for close friends filled, albeit from a distance, some participants felt little motivation to look for more close friends as they moved to new locations. Some women only sought casual companionship with others in their environment and relied on already established close friendships for primary support and feedback. Some who felt professionally mobile and temporary believed it was emotionally safer to invest in work than in relationships if they planned to relocate again in a few years. For

many, their desire or ability to develop new relationships decreased. They were established in relationships, careers, and routines and had most of their needs for intimacy met, even if their close friends were geographically distant. New relationships often remained on the edges of their lives but the attachment was less intense than with their close friends.

Almost every participant attempted to maintain close friendships across time and distance. Sometimes, caught up in the demands of work and family, friendships that had been close eventually faded in intensity while local friendships became more important. This was more prevalent for married women and those who lived near family. Some partnered women like Denise, Dorothy, Jill, and Hannah spent less time with close friends as they balanced competing demands at home and at work. Remarking on life changes since she had a child, Jill said, "What gets reduced? A lot of the time it's friends because I'm not going to shortchange my family. . . . I can't afford to shortchange my job so what goes [sometimes] are avocational things and investment in friendships."

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research illuminates the importance of women's close friendships, particularly as they relate to student affairs and career mobility in the field. The experiences of these participants help us better understand interdependence and intimacy among close friends. These women built richly rewarding connections, often with professional colleagues and classmates. What these findings also illustrate is the importance of intimate interpersonal relationships. Instead of a narrow view of maturity predicated on autonomy and independence, the lives of these adult women were intertwined and they relied on close friends for emotional, instrumental, and professional support. Developing and maintaining mutually enriching relationships was immensely rewarding. Fostering those connections over time and distance was challenging but successful when friends were mutually committed to the relationship. Participants' experiences also present a picture of "forced autonomy." These women did

not lack the ability to operate autonomously. Rather, the transition out of a life in equilibrium within a network of close friends was very disorienting, and they relied on close friends to navigate new territory. Single women who moved alone faced an especially daunting task of rebuilding a network of local relationships while maintaining others at a distance. Still, all who relocated faced significant adjustments.

Findings of this study have several implications for the student affairs profession. First, student affairs professionals should pay special attention to those in transition—the professionals who are new to campus and those who remain when their close friends have moved. Those who are facing their first major transition may find it particularly difficult. Schlossberg (1990) provides one framework for analyzing transition. Logically, the more one's life (roles, routines, assumptions, relationships) is altered in transition, the greater the effect of those changes and the need for coping strategies. Even if a change is desired and positive, as in the case of an exciting new professional opportunity, people in transition may be overwhelmed, as many participants in this study expressed. Schlossberg believes workshops can help people help themselves, cope more effectively, and help others. Mastering transition requires people to assess the change and their resources to cope (Schlossberg). This research suggests that close friendships can be a powerful source of support and aid in coping. A caring and responsive organization can anticipate the challenges for professionals new to campus and take active steps to help facilitate successful transitions. Perhaps these efforts may also help in the retention of professionals and promote their effectiveness.

Not surprisingly, transitions may be particularly intense and difficult for those on small campuses, especially when women are single, lesbian, or African American. One of many suggestions for recruiting, advancing, and retaining minorities in student affairs offered by Sagaria and Johnsrud (1991) is to provide adequate financial support for travel, phone calls, and professional memberships. To counteract feelings of isolation, maintaining contact with

colleagues and friends can be exceedingly important for minorities. As more diverse staffs are recruited to reflect the growing diversity of the student body, leaders in student affairs must also promote their satisfaction and success. Martínez Alemán (1999) raised an important question regarding similarities among female friends. Do women of color and lesbians have a special need to connect with close friends who face common issues? Future research may help answer more fully that question for women professionals. Studies incorporating greater racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender diversity may reveal patterns of influence not evident in this study. Although this study supports existing research on the importance of friendship for women, what would a similar study of men's close friendships reveal?

Second, a study of women student affairs administrators by Blackhurst, Brandt, and Kalinowski (1998) suggests a relationship between the quality of nonwork life and satisfaction at work. Those suffering personally are likely to suffer professionally as well. Without an adequate network of local support, this study indicates that some women may seek unhealthy coping mechanisms. This imbalance may contribute to personal and professional ineffectiveness and may provide poor role modeling for students and aspiring student affairs professionals (Blackhurst et al.). Sanford contends that an empowering balance of challenge and support promotes growth (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and periods of transition can be too challenging at times. Obvious challenges to those in transition may include the loss of or disruption to friendships, familiar routines, and comfortable work styles and relationships. Additionally, understanding a new campus culture takes time, which adds to one's sense of disequilibrium. How, then, can institutions provide an adequate balance of support that fosters personal and professional growth? Acknowledging the enormity of personal and professional transitions and offering support seems an important first step.

Third, although the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993) addresses college students, student affairs professionals may face similar issues of development. For instance, Denise

talked about trying to establish her reputation on a new campus. In a sense, issues of intellectual and interpersonal competence resurface. Professionals may be asking themselves, "Can I make it here?" To address these issues, perhaps new employees can be appointed to lead a particular project which may help them regain a sense of competence and confidence when their world is out of balance. Staff can be intentional in introducing new colleagues to others to help them establish new professional relationships as well as personal ones.

Finally, research with SSAOs is also recommended. If a woman has relocated for a senior student affairs position, developing close friendships may be difficult for many reasons including inherent power differentials that work against developing close friendships with supervisees and a smaller pool of candidates for friendship. How can SSAOs develop vital and valuable close friendships that will support their success and well-being? Developing those relationships is challenging but important.

Denise's comments regarding the significance of friendships provides a fitting end to this article:

I used to have many, many more friends when I was younger. As I've gotten older, my circle of significant friendships or relationships has really decreased but

they're more important to me. I would have argued 20 years ago that you didn't really need significant friendships to be happy and now I would say, well, that was the [ignorance] of my youth. . . . As I've gotten older, what's become more important in life to me is the people that I love and the people who love me. . . . Physical things like material possessions become less important and relationships become more important . . . . Not that oneself is defined by others but it's more the sense of connectedness.

Without losing her sense of self, a woman's close friends are invited into her private world. Close friends were a crucial source of support and helped these women consider many perspectives to both mundane and complex issues and come to some resolution in the face of challenge. Investing in mature, mutual, and interdependent relationships with close friends can enrich and empower women's lives, and student affairs can benefit by recognizing and supporting those relationships.

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maureen E. Wilson, Department of Counselor Education and Educational Psychology, Box 9727, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762; mwilson@ra.msstate.edu

## REFERENCES

- American College Personnel Association. (1996-1997). *Annual Report*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Aukett, R., Ritchie, J., & Mill, K. (1988). Gender differences in friendship patterns. *Sex Roles, 19*, 57-66.
- Barr, M. J. (1988). Reaction: Women's scholarship. *Journal of College Student Development, 29*, 496-498.
- Barr, M. J. (1993). *The handbook of student affairs administration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Becker, C. S. (1987). Friendship between women: A phenomenological study of best friends. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 18*, 59-72.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bell, R. R. (1981). Friendships of women and men. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 5*, 402-419.
- Berzoff, J. (1989). Therapeutic value of women's adult friendships. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 59*, 267-279.
- Blackhurst, A. E., Brandt, J. E., & Kalinowski, J. (1998). Effects of career development on the organizational commitment and life satisfaction of women student affairs administrators. *NASPA Journal, 36*, 19-34.
- Bridges, W. (1991). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Brown, C. L. (1997). The chief student affairs officer and leadership effectiveness: Five areas for thought. *College Student Affairs Journal, 31*, 545-551.

- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Code, L. (1991). *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Earwood-Smith, G., Jordan-Cox, C. A., Hudson, G., & Smith, M. U. (1990). Women making it to the top as chief student affairs officers. *NASPA Journal*, 27, 299-305.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Fehr, B. (1996). *Friendship processes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Friedman, M. (1993). *What are friends for? Feminist perspectives on personal relationships and moral theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.
- Gouldner, H., & Strong, M. S. (1987). *Speaking of friendship: Middle-class women and their friends*. New York: Greenwood.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, F. L. (1996). Friendship among women: Closeness in dialogue. In Julia T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered Relationships*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Josselson, R. (1987). *Finding herself: Pathways to identity development in women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Josselson, R. (1992). *The space between us: Exploring the dimensions of human relationships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Josselson, R. (1996). *Revising herself: The story of women's identity from college to midlife*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1958). *The development of modes of thinking and choices in years 10 to 16*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine.
- Lewittes, H. J. (1988). Just being friendly means a lot—Women, friendship, and aging. *Women and Health*, 14(3-4), 139-159.
- Lunsford, L. W. (1984). Chief student affairs officers: The ladder to the top. *NASPA Journal*, 22, 48-56.
- Martínez Alemán, A. M. (1997). Understanding and investigating female friendship's educative value. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 120-159.
- Martínez Alemán, A. M. (1999). Race talks: Undergraduate women of color and female friendships. *The Review of Higher Education*, 23, 133-152.
- McHugh Engstrom, C., Andreas, R., Roper, L., & Sina, J. (1999, March). *How women senior student affairs administrators construct their experiences*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, New Orleans, LA.
- Miller, J. B. (1986). What do we mean by relationships? *Work in Progress*, No. 22. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B. (1987). *Toward a new psychology of women* (2nd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- O'Connor, P. (1992). *Friendships between women: A critical review*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Perry, W. G. Jr., (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Randall, K. P., Daughtery, P., & Globetti, E. (1995). Women in higher education: Characteristics of the female senior student affairs officer. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 14 (2), 17-23.
- Rubin, L. B. (1985). *Just friends: The role of friendship in our lives*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Sagaria, M. A. D., & Johnsrud, L. K. (1988). Mobility within the student affairs profession: Career advancement through position change. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29, 30-40.
- Sagaria, M. A., & Johnsrud, L. K. (1991). Recruiting, advancing, and retaining minorities in student affairs: Moving from rhetoric to results. *NASPA Journal*, 28, 105-120.
- Schlossberg, N. (1990). Training counselors to work with older adults. *Generations*, 14, 7-10.
- Scott, N. (1992). Chief student affairs officers: Stressors and strategies. *NASPA Journal*, 33, 108-116.
- Siebert, D. C., Mutran, E. J., & Reitzes, D. C. (1999). Friendship and social support: The importance of role identity to aging adults. *Social Work*, 44, 522-533.
- Stevens, N., & van Tilburg, T. (2000). Stimulating friendship in later life: A strategy for reducing loneliness among older women. *Educational Gerontology*, 26, 15-35.
- Straub, C. A. (1987). Women's development of autonomy and Chickering's theory. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28, 198-204.
- Straub, C. A., & Rodgers, R. F. (1986). An exploration of Chickering's theory and women's development. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27, 216-224.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Surrey, J. L. (1991). Relationship and empowerment. In J. V. Jordan, A. G. Kaplan, J. B. Miller, I. P. Stiver, & J. L. Surrey (Eds.), *Women's growth in connection* (pp. 162-180). New York: Guilford Press.
- Twale, D. J., & Jelinek, S. M. (1996). Protégés and mentors: Mentoring experiences of women student affairs professionals. *NASPA Journal*, 33, 203-217.