Academic Affairs Professionals: An Identity Perspective

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

by

Brydin Banning Eckert
Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2009

Director: Jaime Lester, Professor
Department of Higher Education

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

For my momma, my favorite editor and the woman who made me the writer I am.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey to this point has been anything but timely and linear, and there are a number of people who merit recognition for their patience and support throughout this process.

To Dr. Jaime Lester, I truly would have been lost without you. Thank you for introducing me to higher education as an academic field, guiding me through this process, and believing in me.

To Dr. Solon Simmons, it was through conversations with you and my experiences in S-CAR that led to this research. Thank you for listening and validating the worth of this research in its early stages.

To Dr. Linda Schwartzstein, I have no doubt that my professional experiences that informed this work are a result of you and your service to Mason. Thank you for championing academic affairs and contributing your wealth of knowledge to this project.

To both the Higher Education and MAIS departments, I am eternally indebted to both programs for allowing me the flexibility to take classes from around the university and to finish my degree remotely.

To my participants, you were vital to the completion of this research. Thank you for your time and honesty. I hope I’ve done your profession the justice it deserves.

And to my friends and family, I wouldn’t be finishing this degree without you. Thank you for your feedback and motivation to keep going.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution of Academic Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Roles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity Theory</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational identity</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity in Higher Education</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The development of faculty professional identity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplines</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locals and cosmopolitans</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalized populations</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of faculty identity</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs Professionals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The development of professional identity in student affairs</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student affairs identity</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the student affairs identity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Level Administrators</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification of the Methodology</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling and Recruitment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position of the Researcher</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge of Identification</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Academic Affairs Identity</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrids</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solvers</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencers of Identity Development</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate education</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional organizations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational boundaries</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix a</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Values from student affairs literature</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Sample job titles</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: Participants</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis seeks to acknowledge and understand the professional identity of academic affairs professionals: the staff and administrative faculty who support the academic enterprise at colleges and universities from within academic departments. Grounded by literature pertaining to relevant proximal populations, including faculty, student affairs professionals, and mid-level administrations, this study employed a phenomenological approach and considered professional identity through the lens of social identity theory. Twenty-one self-identified academic affairs professionals employed by a large Mid-Atlantic university were interviewed, and the analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that there may be a common identity reflected by academic affairs professionals that is characterized by a hybrid, problem solving, and consultative nature that values service and relationships. However, this identity is not generally considered to be a
collective identity in that it is not acknowledged within the population to be universally shared amongst academic affairs professionals. The premise that there may be common but not collective identity suggests that academic affairs professionals form a distinct group within the higher education landscape but could benefit from efforts to codify and organize the profession.
CHAPTER ONE

They are not faculty, but they sometimes teach. They are not provosts nor deans, but they may work in those offices. They are not at the top of the organizational chart, but they are not at the bottom either. They are not student affairs professionals, but they too care about student success and well-being. They oftentimes have the knowledge to inform decisions but not the authority to make them. Who is this population of university staff?

As evidenced above, academic affairs professionals, in the absence of a codified definition, are often defined by what they are not. There is a growing body of research regarding university staff, but much of it focuses broadly on mid-level administrators across all functions (Hazel, 2012; Rosser, 2004; Szekeres, 2004) or student affairs professionals specifically (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovel & Kosten, 2000). Based on a review of the literature, there appears to be no existing research that focuses solely on academic affairs professionals, those individuals who work in academic units and are hired not with the primary responsibility to teach but rather to serve as administrators who manage and support academic programs.

Evolution of Academic Affairs
The work of academic affairs, or academic administration, consists of “a variety of programmatic and budgetary responsibilities for managing and enhancing areas like
curriculum, teaching, and learning” (Bess, 2002, p. 1). The nature and structure of academic affairs may be influenced by state regulations, institution type (public versus private) and size, and external accrediting bodies (Bess, 2002); however, while the specific division of labor may be different between institutions, academic affairs work generally occurs in three organizational levels within higher education institutions. At the top of the hierarchy resides the chief academic officer who generally holds the title of provost and/or vice president for academic affairs. The provost’s office “exercises overall leadership for academic issues and generally has a significant role, with the president, in setting the mission of the institution” (Bess, 2002, p. 2-3), as well as spearheads the assessment of student learning (University of Wyoming, n.d., para. 2) and accreditation (University of Wyoming, n.d, para. 2). Additionally, academic affairs functions are performed at the college and school level by deans and their offices, who manage budget and resource allocation (Portland State University, 2016, para. 1) and create and uphold academic policies and standards (Fincher, 2011) for their respective academic domains. The work is further delineated by academic department, where department chairs oversee academic programs and curriculum development as well as tenure and promotion policies (Bess, 2002).

Historically, provosts, deans, and department chairs have ascended to their administrative positions through the faculty ranks and have shared the primary oversight of academic affairs with their faculty colleagues. Over time, however, non-faculty employees have assumed some of these responsibilities as faculty have shifted their time away from administrative work to individual research endeavors (Massy & Zemsky,
1994; Milem, Berger, & Day, 2000; Ortmann & Squire, 2000). Because of this academic ratchet and administrative lattice (Ortmann & Squire, 2000), a new kind of higher education professional has emerged: one who helps to administer the educational mission of the institution but does so from a staff, rather than faculty, role. Although such professionals exist at all levels of the academic affairs hierarchy, the present study focuses on those who work within colleges, schools, and academic departments due to the presumed high levels of interaction such individuals have with various institutional constituents, such as students, faculty, administrators, and staff from departments outside of the academic areas.

**Purpose of the Study**

Academic affairs, as a whole, lacks definition and falls well short of where other higher education occupations are in the professionalization process. The literature on professionalization suggests there are four integral steps for occupations to become professions: 1) performing the work as a full-time occupation, 2) establishing a training program, 3) forming professional associations, and 4) creating a code of ethics (Wilensky, 1964). The occupations most closely related to academic affairs professionals, faculty and student affairs professionals, have, arguably (Bloland, 1992), accomplished these requirements to varying degrees. Tenure-track faculty and student affairs roles are generally full-time occupations, and each field has a prescribed, or at least suggested, minimum educational credential to perform the work. Professional associations abound for both faculty and student affairs professionals. Faculty may turn to their disciplinary professional associations or the Association of American University Professors (AAUP).
for guidance regarding the mission and core values of the profession, best practices, and code of ethics while student affairs professionals have associations such as Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) that provide comparable functions.

In contrast, while the higher education community may have a general sense of what is and is not within the purview of academic affairs, there is no codified, universal definition to reference. Presently, there is no professional organization dedicated to academic affairs; perhaps the closest entity is the Commission for Academic Affairs within the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), although the commission does not offer a definition of the function of academic affairs (ACPA, n.d.).

With no universally recognized definition of their job function and no professional association to provide a unified voice, academic affairs professionals appear to be lost in the sea of higher education professionals. While there is literature examining the most proximal professions, namely faculty, student affairs professionals, and mid-level administrators, which will be detailed in the next chapter, there is a dearth of knowledge pertaining specifically to academic affairs professionals, who they are, and what they do. It could be argued that academic affairs professionals are marginalized within the context of higher education, or at least within higher education research, considering how they have been “peripheralized on the basis of their identities, associations, experiences, and environments” (Hall, Stevens, & Meleis, 1994, p. 25) within their institutional environments and within the higher education literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how academic affairs professionals
come to an understanding of their individual and collective professional identities within the context of a given institution of higher education. This research seeks to explicitly acknowledge the existence of academic affairs professionals and work towards developing a better understanding of academic affairs professionals through the analysis of how they identify themselves as professionals within the context of the higher education organization.

The inaugural nature of this line of inquiry into academic affairs professionals presented many possible directions and approaches to take in the production of scholarship pertaining to this population. An identity perspective was adopted in this research due to its focus on the fundamental underpinnings of what constitutes a group, as the question of cohesion within this population has yet to be answered. The establishment of a collective identity “‘names’ the group – it gives it an identity that is meaningful to its members and its stakeholders – and is shared, in the sense that members collectively engage in the discursive practices that produce and reproduce it over time” (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005, p. 62). This concept of collective identity as a way by which to recognize a given group is important for the population studied here because such a signifier does not currently exist in the higher education literature and therefore merits inquiry to see if there is a basis to refer to academic affairs professionals as a distinct group. Additionally, collective identity can “affect the way in which members interpret and react to issues facing the organization…by influencing the importance that members attach to them” (Hardy et al., 2005, p. 61), which can contribute to action taken by members of a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The ability for a shared identity to
serve as a basis for collective action could ultimately serve as a powerful resource for the acknowledgement and advancement of the profession of academic affairs.

Producing scholarship focused solely on academic affairs professionals may help elevate the status and value of these individuals within the university setting. While performing the important function of supporting or managing the administration of the academic enterprise, academic affairs professionals are rarely recognized as such. The perimeters of their work are bordered by faculty and student affairs professionals, and occupying the liminal space between these two much more well-defined professions results in a lack of cohesive identity for individuals involved in this work. Considering the outcomes associated with a strong professional identity, such as “greater job satisfaction, higher motivation, and higher levels of physical and emotional well-being” (Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, Christ, & Tissington, 2005, p. 192), the ramifications of lacking any concept of professional identity appear, at least in theory, to be detrimental. However, with only research examining other, albeit related, populations to reference, it is presently impossible to infer anything about the actual experiences of academic affairs professionals given their absence in the literature and the unique space that they occupy within the higher education institution. The goal in initiating a line of inquiry into academic affairs professionals is to determine if, despite sharing responsibilities with both student affairs professionals and faculty, academic affairs professionals embody a unique identity and, if so, what that identity is. Given this orientation, social identity theory, a concept from social psychology that suggests identity is partially developed by the social groups in which individuals interact with and belong to, will be utilized as a
guiding framework for the study. By investigating this population, this research aims to provide a voice to an under-recognized subset of university employees who may be ideally and uniquely situated to advance university initiatives, such as improving student outcomes like retention and graduation rates.

**Methodology**
This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the professional identity of academic affairs professionals. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews with current academic affairs professionals were conducted and transcribed. Participants included classified staff and administrative faculty from nine different colleges and schools within a large, Research I university located in the Mid-Atlantic region. An analysis of the interview transcripts using the constant comparative method produced exploratory findings regarding the identities of academic affairs professionals.

**Defining Roles**
With the numerous variations in how to define roles and functions in today’s pluralistic higher education environment, it is important to specify the terms that will be used throughout the remainder of this research. While the functions and identities of these groups will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review, an initial description is merited here. Unless otherwise noted, *faculty* will refer to full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. While faculty in these categories no longer make up the majority of faculty positions (Kezar, 2012) part-time and full-time non-tenured faculty have less involvement with other faculty in the department and department administration (Levin
& Shaker, 2011; Thirolf, 2012) and therefore are less likely to be imbued with a strong departmental identity.

*Student affairs professionals* refer to staff who work in “any advising, counseling, management, or administrative function at a college or university that exists outside the classroom” (Love, 2003, para. 5). Student affairs professionals occupy roles in various non-academic units, such as residential life, career services, and orientation. Although student affairs professionals may teach, particularly first-year seminars or related courses pertaining to student development, they are distinct from faculty and academic affairs professionals because they are not housed within academic units.

*Mid-level administrators* “may be either academic or nonacademic support personnel within the structure of higher education organizations. Usually, they are not classed as faculty but rather as a nonexempt, noncontract group of administrative staff” (Rosser, 2000, p. 5). Mid-level administrators generally work in one of four areas within the university: student services (admissions, registration, financial aid, counseling, advising, and other aspects of student life); academic support (media, library, learning skills-center services, cooperative education); business and administrative services (fiscal management, accounting, human resources, operations, maintenance, information technology, planning and budgeting); and external affairs (public relations, alumni affairs, communication, and fundraising) (Rosser, 2000, p. 6). Academic affairs professionals are likely to be considered one subset of mid-level administrators.

*Academic affairs professionals* have yet to be defined in the literature on higher education administration. For the purposes of proposing a working definition, academic
affairs professionals are university employees who work within academic units and who perform administrative functions, such as academic advising, curriculum development and management, enrollment management, student retention management, academic policy administration, academic exception adjudication, and academic program review and accreditation management. Like student affairs professionals, academic affairs professionals may also have teaching amongst their job functions, but they differ from faculty in the sense that teaching is not generally one of their primary responsibilities nor is there any possibility of tenure.

The remaining chapters in this thesis will use these terms as points of reference for the present study. The second chapter will provide a deeper look into these populations through an overview of the existing literature, as well as orient the study from a social identity theory perspective. The third chapter outlines and justifies the use of interviews as the chosen method for this phenomenological qualitative study while the fourth chapter presents the findings from the data collection. The fifth and final chapter situates the findings within the existing literature and contains a discussion of implications for future research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the following chapter presents the theoretical framework for the study and the literature most proximal to the subject at hand: academic affairs professionals. Social identity theory has been selected as the guiding theory for this study due to its capacity to aid in the understanding of identity from the context of identity development through interaction with various social groups. Given how academic affairs professionals are situated within their institutions, at the intersection of faculty and student affairs professionals, social identity theory, which will be described below, is well-suited for grounding this specific study.

The remainder of the literature reviewed in this chapter will pertain to the available research of faculty, student affairs professionals, and mid-level administrators as a proxy for the absence of research on academic affairs professionals. Each of the three aforementioned groups are closely related to academic affairs professionals, and an enhanced understanding of those populations may provide a glimpse into what may be uncovered through this study. While the current study adopted a social identity perspective, the literature discussed in this chapter extends to other identity-based research to provide as robust of a foundation as possible.
Social Identity Theory

In the 1970s, British social psychologist Henri Tajfel sought to explain human behavior in and between groups as more than a response to individual personalities and interpersonal dynamics extrapolated to a larger scale. Fueled by his research and personal interest in understanding prejudice as a Polish Jew living through World War II, Tajfel and collaborator John Turner formulated social identity theory (Hogg, 2006).

According to the theory, a person’s social identity is defined by “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004, p. 40). Social categories can span from broad demographic categories, such as gender and nationality, to micro level identifiers such as one’s family or sports team affinity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theory suggests that we develop these identities for two main reasons: organization and self-enhancement (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). First, social identities help us make sense of our social worlds and dictate our behavior. For every group, there is a set of prototypical member attributes that individuals who affiliate with that group aim to emulate in order to distinguish themselves from relevant out-groups (Hogg, 2006).

Second, as individuals constantly strive to maintain a positive self-image, group membership becomes a medium through which to enhance oneself (Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004). By the creation of a group, which consists of three or more people with common bonds to one another and/or a shared identity (Hogg, 2006), boundaries are developed, which inherently creates an in-group and various out-groups. Members of the in-group will strive to enhance the status of the group (and by extension their individual statuses) by depersonalizing the out-group (stereotyping) and emphasizing positive
distinctiveness, “a belief that ‘we’ are better than ‘them’ in every possible way” (Hogg, 2006, p. 120).

Values play a significant role in identity development (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hitlin, 2003). Values have been defined as “conception[s], explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection for available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kluckhohn, 1951, as cited in Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p. 362). Values are both an antecedent of identification, meaning that individuals assess a group’s values for congruence with their own to deem a good fit, as well as an outcome of identification, as an individual may internalize the values of the social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Values are integral to one’s identity (Hitlin, 2003) and are one mechanism for how an individual or an organization communicates its identity (Aust, 2004). This may serve as an explanation as to why much of the literature discussed in this chapter pertains more directly to the different professions’ values as opposed to identities due to the relative ease of communicating the former over the latter.

**Organizational identity.** As Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest in their seminal work, organizational identity is a form of social identity. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) define organizational identification as “a psychological attachment that occurs when members adopt defining characteristics of the organization as defining characteristics of themselves” (p. 242). Individuals may develop organizational identities based on memberships in various subgroups within the organization, including work-group, department, employer, and occupation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Situational cues may result in different identities becoming more prominent within the hierarchy of an
individual’s identity due to the circumstance or interaction (Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006).

Organizational identification has substantial consequences for both the individual and the organization. For the individual, organizational identities may hold more significance for individuals’ sense of self than demographic characteristics such as gender or ethnicity (Hogg & Terry, 2001), and, according to Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, Christ, and Tissington (2005), stronger organizational identification is “positively related to such variables such as job satisfaction, motivation, and well-being” (p. 212). For organizations, heightened organizational identification correlates to lower absenteeism and turnover and improved performance (Van Dick et al., 2005).

In an environment such as the university, where numerous professional cultures exist simultaneously, social identity theory may help to explain the identity development of academic affairs professionals. The theory suggests identity is a social construct in that an individual comes to an understanding of his or her identity through interactions with various groups and evaluating the salience of such groups’ prototypical attributes with his or her own. For academic affairs professionals, who work closely with faculty and student affairs professionals, they encounter two distinct social groups amongst their institutional colleagues, and social identity theory can be used in understanding how these individuals either adopt one of these identities or navigate a unique one.

Organizational identity, and particularly the multiplicity of nested sub-identities, may prove to be a useful concept in understanding the identities of academic affairs professionals. As individuals who may consider themselves members of multiple
subgroups within the university setting, such as academic department, committee, and occupation, academic affairs professionals’ social identity may “consist of an amalgam of identities, identities that could impose inconsistent demands upon that person” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 29).

Identity in Higher Education
Because of the limited research pertaining to academic affairs professionals, the following section details the identity literature pertaining to the three groups that may share the most overlap with them: faculty because they share employing departments, physical space, and the commitment to the academic mission of the institution; student affairs professionals due to their similar classification of employment and job functions pertaining to student service; and mid-level administrators as a likely overarching employment category of academic affairs professionals. For each group, a description of the role, the development of the identity, and prototypical values will be provided to the extent that the information is available in the existing literature. Although this study adopts a social identity perspective, other concepts from the identity literature, such as the notion that performing roles reinforces one’s identity from role theory (Burke & Reitzes, 1981) and the centrality of values in one’s identity (Hitlin, 2003), are incorporated in order to fully elucidate the different professional identities within higher education.

Faculty
Historically, the core of faculty professional activity consists of the sacrosanct trinity of teaching, research, and service. The prototypical concept of faculty work
prioritizes research, generally done independently, as the most important amongst the three, followed by teaching graduate and undergraduate courses and then the service component of participating in department and university governance.

Kuntz (2012) described how faculty perceive ownership of these various aspects of their professional roles:

Faculty rhetorically took possession of research and writing activities, to which they referred to as their ‘own work’, and placed them in off-campus environments - their home offices, conferences and academic journals. Conversely, faculty rhetorically distanced their professional identities from what they termed ‘administrative work’, placing these tasks in the on-campus environments of their campus offices. (p. 774)

Faculty in Kuntz’s study also aligned teaching with other administrative work, distancing it from their perceived core function and identity and relegating preparation to their campus offices. As Kuntz (2012) summarized, his participants “strove to minimize their on-campus presence - their administrative work time - in order to maximize the production of their work, the individualistic and solitary pursuit of traditional scholarship” (p. 776).

**The development of faculty professional identity.** According to Wilkins (2007), “faculty identity is learned by being a keen observer of culture and behavior in a given institution and subsequently behaving in appropriate ways until one internalizes the existing system” (p. 34). The development of a faculty professional identity begins in graduate school. Sweitzer (2009) identified two distinct categories of students by the end
of their first year in a doctoral program. Those who demonstrated the strongest congruence with the program and university goals, labeled Perceiving Fit, were more apt to identify themselves solely in terms of their intended profession and viewed success of the program as resulting in employment at top research institutions. Students who had demonstrated less congruence with the goals, described as Assessing Fit, integrated more personal characteristics into describing their identities and considered learning and personal growth successful outcomes of the program.

This assessment of doctoral students’ identities is further delineated by the five archetypes that Reybold (2003) developed through her interviews with doctoral students and new faculty. From her analysis, the anointed sees his/her doctoral education as a pipeline to the professorate, directed by strong bonds with mentors. Like the anointed, the pilgrim also has concrete plans to become a faculty member but does not appear to rely as heavily on the direction of a mentor but more so on his/her own strategic goals. The visionary has goals to impact social change and considers obtaining a faculty position one way to accomplish that. The philosopher has a visceral connection to academe and sees his/her doctoral education as a path towards intellectual growth. The drifter does not demonstrate any of the aforementioned qualities and keeps his/her options open for careers outside of the academy.

Rosch and Reich (1996) picked up the faculty identity development chronology where Sweitzer (2009) and Reybold (2003) left off in their study on new faculty. They found that the values and norms the new faculty developed in graduate school impacted their predispositions related to assuming their first professional role. In addition to
learning how to balance their new responsibilities with limited direct supervision or
guidance, new faculty also needed to navigate the cultural landscape of their new home
department, which was done through informal mechanisms of observing other faculty,
their conversations, and what caused conflicts. In the final stage of their entry into the
organization, new faculty members blended the values and norms they had established in
graduate school with those of their new departments, solidifying their professional
identity and niche within their departments.

**Disciplines.** While faculty identity is shaped by a number of factors, academic
discipline is arguably the most formative. As Austin (1990) wrote, “the disciplines are
value-laden cultures that frame the beliefs and behaviors of faculty members” (p. 64).
Clark (1985) continued: “Once internalized, a subject becomes an inner faith” (p. 41).
Each discipline has norms, language, and traditions (Austin, 1990), perpetuated by a
graduate education system that, unlike medicine or law, begins with a specialization,
rather than a common foundation (Love, Kuh, MacKay, & Hardy, 1993). Because the
distinct attributes of each discipline are so deeply ingrained through socialization into the
academy, faculty often identify more closely to their discipline than their institution of
employment (Love et al., 1993; Wilkins, 2007). This insular identification may be
accentuated due to the primacy of disciplines as the organizational structure within the
university setting (Austin, 1990). Faculty are housed within departments, which are
generally grouped by academic discipline, further entrenching sociocultural distinctions
by superimposing organizational boundaries, resulting in deepening silos and the
potential for friction between different departments (Wilkins, 2007).
There is some research (Biglan, 1973b) that suggests that faculty with different disciplinary backgrounds have distinct preferences pertaining to their work. First, Biglan (1973a) codified the disciplines along three continua: hard (guided by a common paradigm; physics)-soft (nonparadigmatic; humanities), pure (theoretical or conceptual; philosophy)-applied (concerned with application to practical problems; engineering), and life systems (pertaining to living or organic objects; biology)-nonlife systems (deals with inanimate objects; math). He then explored the differences amongst faculty in different disciplines based on these dichotomies. Along the hard-soft continuum, he found that faculty in hard disciplines collaborated more on both teaching and research projects than their peers in soft areas (Biglan, 1973b).

Additionally, faculty who work in hard subject areas prefer to conduct research as opposed to teach while faculty in soft areas prefer teaching. For the pure-applied dimension, faculty on the pure side like research more than colleagues in applied subjects. Applied area faculty like service more than faculty from pure subject areas, and applied area faculty enjoy working with more people on teaching and research than faculty in pure areas. For the life systems dimension, faculty in life system subjects prefer to work with more people than their nonlife system colleagues (Biglan, 1973b).

Combining dimensions, Austin (1990) claimed that the culture of hard-pure sciences is “characterized by competition, teamwork, long periods of initiation (for example, postdoctoral appointments), fast publication rates, and frequent contact with national and international colleagues” (p. 64) while the culture of soft-pure disciplines is represented by individual work and authorship, resulting in fewer publications that
colleagues in the hard-pure disciplines. Different disciplines also seem to result in differing levels of liberalism; Ladd and Lipset (1975, as cited in Love et al., 1993) demonstrated that faculty in professional fields were more conservative than their counterparts in the social sciences.

**Locals and cosmopolitans.** Gouldner (1957) first presented the dichotomy of local and cosmopolitan faculty identities. Based on his research, locals have high loyalty to their employing institutions and are more likely to use their employing institutions and/or departments as a frame of reference. He further subdivided the locals into four categories: the true believers who are deeply committed to the values of the organization and seek to maintain the status quo; the true bureaucrats who are concerned with sustaining the institution through more tightly regulated policy; the homeguard who are bound to the institution as alum or spouses of alum; and the elders who have simply been at the institution the longest (Gouldner, 1958). Conversely, cosmopolitans are less loyal to their employing institutions and are more likely to look beyond their employing institutions and/or departments as they shape and maintain their professional identities. Gouldner (1958) identifies two sub-identities of cosmopolitans: the outsiders who have little loyalty and connection to the institution and the empire builders whose commitment lies with their discipline and will follow the opportunities that such commitment brings. Through his work, Gouldner (1957, 1958) found that cosmopolitans were more research-oriented, more likely to seek intellectual stimulation from sources beyond their institutions, and more likely to leave their employing institution than their peers who aligned with a local identity and that locals are more likely to be administrators. Using
Gouldner’s (1957) schema, Wilkins (2007) found that faculty at baccalaureate institutions were more likely to identify as locals whose identities are most shaped by academic unit and institution while those at Master’s and research institutions were more cosmopolitan in nature and viewed academic discipline as the most salient aspect of their faculty identity.

Values. Due to the numerous differences in individuals’ personal characteristics, educational backgrounds, and institutions of employment, as well as other factors, a singular faculty identity is a myth. However, throughout the literature on faculty, two broad themes pertaining to prominent faculty values are evident: a commitment to scholarship and the preference for self-direction.

The first pertains to the purpose of higher education; faculty tend to view the primary function of higher education is a mechanism through which knowledge can be created and disseminated (Austin, 1990; Love et al., 1993). Individuals pursue a faculty career often because of their interest in these scholarly activities (Rosch & Reich, 1996). A related belief is that the work of creating and disseminating knowledge stems from a commitment to benefit society (Austin, 1990).

A recurrent theme throughout the literature on faculty is the autonomous nature of the work. Faculty frequently report that seclusion is necessary for their research (Kuntz, 2012), and this quality attracts “insistent individualists” (Bennett, 1998) who thrive in environments that reward individual accomplishment. This preference for being self-directed is seen in the primacy of academic freedom to faculty work. Liberwitz (2007) explained that the concept of academic freedom arose from faculty resistance to their
work being controlled by university administrators and trustees in the early 1900s. The resulting academic freedom has allowed faculty the opportunity to pursue their own research and teaching interests while maintaining job protection through tenure (American Association of University Professors, 1970). Such autonomy is a hallmark of the academic career and worth foregoing more financially lucrative careers for many (Corson, 1979, as cited in Austin, 1990).

However, this predisposition for individualism can have a negative consequence: isolation (Bogler & Kremer-Hayon, 1999; Gizir, 2014). In at least two studies (Bogler & Kremer-Hayon, 1999; Gizir, 2014), faculty reported experiencing isolation and loneliness due to the cultures in which they work and the limited working relationships with other faculty in their departments and institutions.

Another often-cited value of faculty that is related to maintaining control over one’s work is the preference for collegial governance of university matters (Austin, 1990; Love et al., 1993). Rather than operating in a hierarchical environment, faculty generally prefer self-governance, in which they work together as a community of scholars to govern the institution (Mortimer & McConnell, 1978, as cited in Austin, 1990).

**Marginalized populations.** As of 2013, women occupied almost half of the faculty positions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), yet many experience a climate where being a woman is disadvantageous. For one, the credibility of women faculty is questioned more frequently, by both students and peers alike (Kardia & Wright, 2004; Lester, 2008). Kardia and Wright (2004) noted that students were quite explicit in the biases: 83 percent of students surveyed held higher
standards for women faculty. The authors also found that 82 percent of women faculty in their study had been mistaken for a graduate student or secretary while their colleagues were unaware or dismissed the challenges they faced to maintain the professional faculty identity. Women faculty also encounter specific expectations of the roles they are to play within their departments. Women are to be the nurturers of both students and peers and feel compelled to take on larger advising caseloads and service responsibilities than their male counterparts (Lester, 2008). Being positioned as a marginalized population may be motivating women faculty to adopt an alternate faculty identity. In addition to, or perhaps instead of, the dominance of a disciplinary identity, women faculty may be opting to identify as just that: women faculty. Love and colleagues (1993) shared their findings from the literature that “beliefs and assumptions by female faculty include being an outsider to the dominant faculty culture, highly valuing the ‘soft’ subjects (e.g., history, anthropology, education), appreciating various methodological approaches, and assuming personal responsibility for balancing personal life and professional responsibilities” (p. 43). As evidenced from the aforementioned research, gender, while more generally associated with personal identity, is inextricably linked to professional identity for women faculty.

Another marginalized population within the faculty environment are those who are not tenured or on the tenure track. For the purposes of this literature review, this includes both full-time non-tenured faculty as well as part-time faculty; although there are several differences in the identities each espouse, there are powerful similarities amongst those outside of the tenure track. Primarily, they experience dissonance
pertaining to their professional identities as faculty (Levin & Shaker, 2011; Thirolf, 2012). Generally, they have a strong affinity for teaching and find immense satisfaction in working with students. However, since teaching is perceived as less prestigious than research in the traditional faculty culture, these faculty feel subjugated within the faculty culture and therefore find that they are employed in an “occupation in which the work is satisfying but the conditions are not” (Levin & Shaker, 2011, p. 1480). They see themselves as apart from the tenure-track establishment; whether by personal choice or based on negative interactions with other faculty, they consider themselves as detached outsiders (Levin & Shaker, 2011; Thirolf, 2012). This results in dissonance within their professional identities, in which they meet and accept certain aspects of the stereotypical faculty, such as possessing a terminal degree and teaching at a postsecondary level, yet they lack the autonomy and security of tenure to fully adopt a traditional faculty identity in totality (Levin & Shaker, 2011).

**Summary of faculty identity.** As is seen in the literature, there are many factors that influence the faculty professional identity. Different orientations and experiences in graduate school may give way to different foci of professional identification, with faculty falling on a continuum of strong identification with their academic unit or institution (local orientation) to strong identification with the profession or discipline (cosmopolitan orientation) (Gouldner, 1957). Academic discipline and its accompanying cultural norms play a pivotal role in faculty professional identity and may shape the degree to which a faculty member identifies as a teacher or researcher (Biglan, 1973b). Demographic characteristics, such as being a woman, and employment
characteristics, such as being off the tenure-track, also directly impact professional identity for faculty (Kardia & Wright, 2004; Lester, 2008; Levin & Shaker, 2011; Thirolf, 2012), distancing these faculty in some respects from the prototypical faculty archetype while establishing a potentially more congruent professional identity (Love et al., 1993). Despite these disparate influences, the common thread for faculty professional identity appears to be the shared values of the profession, including the commitment to create and disseminate knowledge and the preference for autonomy and self-direction. This characterization will serve as a point of comparison for academic affairs professionals; as two groups who work closely together in the management and administration of academic departments, the present research may find that the professional identity of academic affairs professionals may include similar qualities to their faculty colleagues.

**Student Affairs Professionals**

The role of student affairs on a college or university campus is to deliver services beyond the classroom that enhance the experiences of college students (Love, 2003; Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs, 2010). Functions include residence life, orientation, student activities, multicultural student affairs, student conduct, counseling, and career services (Mader, 2012). The staff who perform these duties are often referred to as student affairs professionals, and considerable attention has been given to whether student affairs is, in fact, a profession. One of the often-cited determinants of the existence of a profession is the required completion of a specialized education program (Moore, 1970, as cited in Bloland, 1992; Wrenn & Darley, 1949, as cited in Bloland, 1992). For student affairs, “the masters degree in college student personnel or a related
field has been accepted as the required credential for entry into the student affairs profession” (Komvies, 1993, as cited in Helm, 2004, p. 92). However, there is presently no accreditation or licensing process for the field (Helm, 2004), and some individuals who work in student affairs do not have graduate degrees in such fields or have not pursued graduate education at all (Crim, 2006; Love et al., 1993). While this may present some challenges due to the potential lack of cohesion in values and knowledge (Love et al., 1993), Stamakos (1981, as cited in Cutler, 2001) remarked that even graduate programs in student affairs contain enough inconsistency that professional identity development for the field is stunted. Other scholars (Bloland, 1992; Penny, 1969, as cited in Helm, 2004) agreed that student affairs is too variegated of a field to constitute a profession. Yet there are some scholars who contend that student affairs is a profession (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007), and student affairs professionals is by far the preferred terminology in the literature. Perhaps Bloland (1992) explained this phenomenon best: “It is the exhibition of professional behavior that marks the practitioner in the field as a professional, that justifies the use of the term, ‘professional,’ when we talk about student affairs services and staff” (p. 4). Therefore, while there remains inconsistency amongst scholars whether student affairs meets the criteria to be considered a profession by historical definitions, this research will continue to utilize the dominant usage of profession and professionals in the context of student affairs.

The development of professional identity in student affairs. Carpenter and Miller’s (1981) stages of professional development are frequently cited in the student affairs literature following its publication. They identified four stages through which a
student affairs professional progresses over the duration of his or her career. The first stage (formative) begins when individuals begin to prepare for careers in student affairs (Carpenter & Miller, 1981). Crim (2006) referred to the moment that individuals realize that student affairs is a profession and a career path option as the realization point.

Individuals reach this realization point at different times. Some, referred to as typicals in Crim’s study, followed a rather linear process into the field, beginning with meaningful experiences with student affairs as undergraduate students (Cutler, 2003), such as being involved in student activities or serving as resident advisors (Crim, 2006). Alternatively, they may have entered the field to address problems they encountered in college (Hunter, 1992, as cited in Cutler, 2001). Graduate education in college student personnel or higher education often followed and built upon those experiences (Crim, 2006). Others, described as atypicals (Crim, 2006), realized a viable career path in student affairs coincidentally, often after taking a job in the field. Their educational backgrounds varied, but they often did not enter the field having completed graduate education directly relating to student affairs.

For individuals who do pursue Master’s degrees in fields directly related to student affairs, such as college student personnel or higher education, the experience plays a significant impact on their socialization into the profession (Bureau, 2011). In her study, Crim (2006) found that there were three interrelated processes that graduate students of student affairs experienced that impacted the development of their professional identities: interaction with faculty, which was the precursor to mentoring; engagement with peers, which helped develop a sense of community; and learning about
the history and current trends and developing the skills of the profession through the
curriculum of the program (p. 101). The result of such experiences was that her
participants who obtained a graduate degree related to student affairs were more
certain identifying as a student affairs professional.

The second stage (application) generally coincides with an individual’s first full-
time position in student affairs and may be accompanied by additional education
(Carpenter & Miller, 1981). The boundaries between the formative and application stages
may be blurred for many student affairs professionals who are concurrently enrolled in
graduate school while working, often in a full-time capacity, as graduate assistants
(Helm, 2004). Such a structure indicates that graduate education in student affairs is not a
total institution as described by Goffman (1957) and presents additional barriers to
professional identity development that are not found in other professions such as law or
medicine (Helm, 2004).

The third stage of student affairs professionals’ development (additive) is defined
as “intermediate-to-upper level practice with policy making responsibility and increased
professional sharing” (Carpenter & Miller, 1981, p. 3). Crim’s (2006) research on student
affairs administrators provided some valuable insight into the identities of those in the
additive stages of their careers. Those with a more traditional progression through the
profession, the typicals, tended to be more cosmopolitan in nature, holding stronger ties
to the field than a given institution, which resulted in changing jobs and institutions to
advance in their careers. Conversely, student affairs administrators who had an atypical
entry into the profession had a more local orientation and were more likely to rise through the ranks at one institution.

The fourth proposed stage (generative) applies to student affairs administrators in the highest levels of the field through retirement. While Carpenter and Miller’s (1981) study did not result in a large enough population of student affairs professionals in this stage to confirm their assumptions, they assert that those in the generative stage may shift from a more active practice into mentoring roles and impacting the profession at broader levels.

**The student affairs identity.** Identifying as a student affairs professional is not monolithic for all of those employed in traditional student affairs functions. Some individuals may identify more closely with their specialization within the field, such as career services (Cutler, 2001; Love et al., 1993), while others perceive a broader connection to higher education that extends beyond student affairs (Crim, 2006). Like faculty, student affairs professionals have differing foci of professional commitment, with some prioritizing commitment to the institution (locals) and others giving primacy to the profession (cosmopolitans) (Love et al., 1993).

Research suggests that student affairs professionals embrace multiple roles (Crim, 2006; Cutler, 2001). Rickard (1988, as cited in Cutler, 2001) claimed that for student affairs professionals, “one’s identity is tied to being able to wear the hats of an administrator, a counselor, and a student development specialist” (p. 41). Crim’s (2006) research on student affairs administrators expanded on that notion and found that, in
addition to identifying as administrators, participants also saw themselves as social transformers, teachers, servants, and counselors.

One of the most prominent themes in the literature on student affairs professionals’ identities is the notion that they consider themselves natural helpers (Cutler, 2001, 2003). This trait drives student affairs professionals to seek transformative human interaction (Crim, 2006) by serving as student advocates (Evans & Reason, 2001) and helping students cultivate cognitive skills (Banta & Kuh, 1998).

Professional associations have the capacity to contribute to professional identity development as well. Given the purpose of professional associations is “to advance understanding, recognition, and knowledge in the field; to develop & promulgate standards for professional practice; to serve the public interest; and to provide professionals with a peer group that promotes a sense of identity” (Nuss, 1993, as cited in Helm, 2004, p. 96), it is not surprising that multiple studies on student affairs professionals identified professional associations, primarily the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), as having an impact on professional identity and embodiment of the ascribed student affairs values (Crim, 2006; Hirschy et al., 2015).

Individual characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, also have the ability to impact professional identity. Such characteristics may motivate individuals to pursue a career in student affairs and may have continuous impact by serving as the lens through which they see the world and the work of student affairs (Bureau, 2011; Crim, 2006). Additionally, age appears to have a unique function as it pertains to professional identity.
Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, and Pasquesi (2015) found that older professionals demonstrated a stronger congruence with typical student affairs values while participants in Cutler’s (2001) study found that their younger age benefitted their work by being able to tap into their own recent college experiences.

**Values.** There is no shortage of literature detailing the values of the student affairs profession (see Table 1 for an overview). With values constituting the core of one’s identity (Hitlin, 2003), a review of the values of student affairs professionals is useful in lieu of extensive literature directly pertaining to identity. While there is no standard code of ethics or universally agreed-upon values (Love et al., 1993), across the literature, which includes empirical research (Bureau, 2011; Love, 1990, as cited in Love et al., 1993; Mader, 2012), text analyses (Evans & Reason, 2001), and professional observations (Love, Kuh, MacKay, & Hardy, 1993; Young, 2003, as cited in Bureau, 2011), five themes stand out amongst the values espoused: maintaining a holistic perspective to student development, valuing individual differences and diversity, collaboration, being service-oriented, and caring.

**Summary of the student affairs identity.** Despite many espoused differences between student affairs professionals and faculty (Love et. al, 1993), the professions share some commonalities. Akin to the faculty experience, graduate studies (or the lack thereof) play an invaluable part in shaping the student affairs professional’s professional identity and socialization into the field (Bureau, 2011; Crim, 2006). Student affairs professionals also display varying degrees of local and cosmopolitan orientations (Crim, 2006) and commitment to specific “disciplines” (i.e., career services, multicultural
Table 1: Values from student affairs literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Values mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bureau (2011)</td>
<td>“diversity and inclusion, collaboration, learning, student centeredness, change and responsiveness, ethics, holistic student development, intentionality, community, service, professional development, caring, and responsibility” (p. xvi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter et al. (1980, as cited in Cutler, 2001)</td>
<td>“concern with the values and moral development of students” (p. 40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans &amp; Reason (2001)</td>
<td>“a holistic perspective, attention to individual differences, student agency, an interactionist perspective, consideration of context, intentionality, empirically grounded initiatives, a role in instruction and learning, collaboration, functional focus, education for citizenship, and accountability” (p. 62); “Respect for individual differences is a second long-standing value of the profession” (p. 370); “the ‘whole’ student must be considered in every educational endeavor” (p. 370)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love (1990, as cited in Love, Kuh, MacKay, &amp; Hardy, 1993)</td>
<td>“student service, willingness to innovate, accessibility to students, and autonomy” (p. 47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, Kuh, MacKay, &amp; Hardy (1993)</td>
<td>“a commitment to the development of the whole student including basic and developmental needs, active learning and participation, and the importance of accepting and celebrating human differences” (p. 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mader (2012)</td>
<td>“getting to know students as individuals, developing the whole student, and supporting student success through out of class involvement” (p. 56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandeen (1985, as cited in Helm, 2004)</td>
<td>“aesthetics, altruism, community, equality, freedom, human dignity, justice and truth” (p. 26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tull &amp; Medrano (2008, as cited in Bureau, 2011)</td>
<td>“honesty (70 percent), fairness (53), caring (49), commitment (49), compassion (45), cooperation (38), empathy (32), imaginative (29), reflective (24), tolerant (20), rational (19), independent (19), courageous (15), generous (13), altruistic (11), and hopeful (10)” (p. 41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young (2003, as cited in Bureau, 2011)</td>
<td>“individuation, caring, service, community, equality, justice, caring-based ethics, and student contribution” (p. 45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like faculty, however, there are some common uniting values that constitute the core of the student affairs professional’s professional identity, although they are markedly different from those of faculty. The motivation to serve and to fulfill the innate instinct to help others is a driving tenet of this population’s identity (Cutler, 2003). Additionally, student affairs
professionals profess to value collaboration and inclusivity as parts of their professional identities.

**Mid-Level Administrators**

In the absence of literature focused specifically on academic affairs professionals, the research available on mid-level university administrators, the umbrella employment category in which academic affairs professionals likely fall, may provide additional boundaries and understanding of the population at hand. Unfortunately, unlike the literature on faculty and student affairs professionals, the literature on mid-level administrators is less robust, particularly in regards to identity.

However, several articles provide useful insights and perspectives on mid-level administrators. Mid-level administrators “are the advisors, analysts, counselors, specialists, technicians, and officers on whom faculty and students have come to rely and trust” (Rosser, 2000, p. 7). Scott (1980) wrote that mid-level administrators “are by and large oriented to the service of faculty and students, committed to a career in the institution, and satisfied that they are competent and can achieve desired results in challenging work” (p. 390). Rosser (2000) added: “Many midlevel administrators are promoted because they emerge as the informal leaders within their work units, display strong interpersonal skills, hard work, have the technical skills to perform well in the position, and are dependable” (p. 7).

A common theme in the available literature is the relational nature of the work of mid-level administrators (Hazel, 2012; Rosser, 2000; Szekeres, 2004). Whether their responsibilities pertain to working with faculty, students, the external community, or each
other, mid-level administrators spend substantial time on (Hazel, 2012) and value (Rosser, 2000) developing and maintaining relationships that facilitate their ability to do their work.

While mid-level administrators are generally dedicated and satisfied with their work (Rosser, 2000), that does not mean their work does not come with its fair share of frustrations. First, these staff members face challenges due to the very nature of their mid-level positions; for example, they are tasked with regulating policy without having the authority to develop it (Rosser, 2000; Scott, 1980). Second, mid-level administrators feel that they lack the recognition merited for their contributions to their universities (Scott, 1980) and are referred to as “invisible” (Szekeres, 2004) and “unsung professionals” (Rosser, 2000) due to the discrepancy between their contributions and acknowledgement. Third, this group lacks a well-defined career path (Rosser, 2000; Scott, 1980). Their supervisors are typically top-level administrators, such as deans or provosts (Rosser, 2000), and upward mobility may be prohibited due to lacking the necessary credentials.

**Conclusion**

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides an overview of the relevant social groups that academic affairs professionals may encounter and derive components of their professional identities from. In lieu of having any dedicated literature to recount pertaining to academic affairs professionals, the populations discussed here provide boundaries by which to evaluate and juxtapose the similarities and differences amongst these different groups and the academic affairs professionals interviewed as part of this
study. The literature on faculty, student affairs professionals, and mid-level administrators provides a glimpse into what may be learned about academic affairs professionals, such as the formative nature of graduate education, a hybrid set of values that includes the academic commitment of faculty and service-orientation of student affairs professionals, and an emphasis on relational work.
CHAPTER THREE

With the desire to explore the experiences of academic affairs professionals through their own words, this type of study is well-suited for qualitative inquiry. In order to initiate a line of research that develops a more robust understanding of academic affairs professionals, this study adopted a phenomenological approach, and the sections to follow outline the methods utilized.

Justification of the Methodology
This study arose from my deep personal investment in bringing recognition to academic affairs professionals, and this autobiographical genesis of the research lends itself to phenomenological research processes (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the aim of phenomenological research is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). In a quest to bring to light the experiences of academic affairs professionals, there is no better source of information than those who occupy those positions and can share their lived experiences. The goal of phenomenological research is not to impose analysis on or create theory from the data but rather to find commonalities amongst individuals’ lived experiences (van Manen, 1990), which aligns with the proposed outcomes of this study as an initial exploration into the topic. Additionally, considering that this study is particularly interested in the
organizational identities of academic affairs professionals, phenomenological inquiry is a fitting methodological lens given that “how identity is achieved…has been a continuing theme in transcendental phenomenology” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 75).

**Methods**
This study relied on semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to gather data. Interviewing is the primary source of data in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990) and was the most appropriate method for this study to provide participants a safe space to share their experiences as academic affairs professionals. While interviews may produce some challenges for the researcher, such as developing rapport with the participants in order to elicit more open responses (Green & Thorogood, 2014), those impediments were generally mitigated because of my existing relationships with the participants.

**Sampling and Recruitment**
Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Academic affairs professionals at Central University, a pseudonym for a large, public Research I university in the Mid-Atlantic, were targeted for this study. Central University was selected as the target site due to my pre-existing knowledge of the institution. A list of potential participants was compiled from two sources: a listserv maintained by the Central Academic Advising Network (CAAN) and a review of Central University’s employee directory. CAAN is a grassroots organization comprised of academic advisors and other university staff whose work pertains to supporting students. The listserv contained 251 members, and in addition to names and titles, the list included advisor type (i.e.,
professional advisor, faculty advisor, graduate student who advises, etc.), employment status (full-time or part-time), and employing department. The list was reviewed, and graduate students, faculty, individuals who work outside of the academic units, and part-time advisors were removed. This culling resulted in 128 potential participants from the CAAN list.

Additionally, the directory available through Central University’s website was reviewed to ensure the inclusion of potential participants who were not affiliated with CAAN. Directory entries for each of Central University’s 76 undergraduate majors and nine colleges and schools were reviewed; inclusion for potential participation was based on job title. Individuals with job titles that appeared to be related in some capacity to academic affairs were included while those with titles that did not appear to be directly related to academic affairs, as well as faculty positions, were excluded. A sample of job titles is included in Table 2. For ambiguous job titles, such as Program Manager or Associate Dean, additional research was conducted using departmental websites and publicly-available state employment data to ascertain more information about the positions and the employment status (faculty or staff) of the position. Those individuals who did not meet with inclusion criteria based on the information available were removed from the list. The review of the directory produced 194 potential participants. Upon combining the CAAN listserv with names from the directory and removing duplicates, the final list was comprised of 207 potential participants.
Table 2: Sample job titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included</th>
<th>Excluded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Advisor</td>
<td>Administrative/Office Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising Director</td>
<td>Graduate Research/Teaching Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Student Services</td>
<td>Term/Assistant/Associate Professor; Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Budget/Finance/Human Resources Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Academic Affairs Coordinator</td>
<td>Instructional Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Grant Coordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The potential participants were emailed in batches of 20 determined by a random number generator. To be included in the study, participants needed to meet the following criteria, which were included in the email: 1) They must be employed full-time by Central University in a classified staff or administrative faculty role, 2) They must work within an academic unit, 3) The primary focus of their role is/are students and/or academic programs, and 4) They must perform at least three of the following functions as part of their work: academic advising, curriculum development and management, enrollment management, student retention management, academic policy administration, academic exception adjudication, and academic program review and accreditation management. If an individual self-identified as meeting the criteria and demonstrated interest in participating by responding to the email, he/she was included in the study.

Participants

The participants for this study included 21 full-time employees who worked in academic affairs at Central University (see Table 3). While only three of the participants were male, the proportion of men was close to that of the proportion in the pool of
potential participants (14.2 percent of the participants, 15 percent of the potential participants). Eight of the participants held administrative faculty positions, with the remaining 13 considered classified staff. Nine different schools or colleges of employment were represented.

Participants had between three and 23 years of experience in higher education, with an average of 12 years in the field. They held titles such as academic advisor, program coordinator, director of advising, and assistant/associate dean, and their work spanned a range of different functions. To provide some context for the work that participants did, on the forefront of their responses was providing academic advising to students, which included working directly with students by building degree plans to meet their educational and career goals, communicating policies, and referring to appropriate resources. Additionally, they developed and utilized systems to monitor retention and degree compliance. Several participants also coordinated advising efforts or trained advisors within their units.

Nearly all participants also had something to do with the recruitment and engagement of prospective students. Related responsibilities included supporting marketing efforts by contributing to print and web materials, hosting and attending prospective and new student orientation events, and reviewing and evaluating admissions applications.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in higher education</th>
<th>Undergraduate degree subject</th>
<th>Master's degree subject</th>
<th>Doctoral degree subject</th>
<th>Job family</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Employment status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Arts; Higher Education</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Enrollment Specialist</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Assistant Dean</td>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Assistant Dean</td>
<td>Government and Policy</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Human Development</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Government and Policy</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Years in higher education</td>
<td>Undergraduate degree subject</td>
<td>Master's degree subject</td>
<td>Doctoral degree subject</td>
<td>Job family</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Employment status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary Education</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marissa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Performing Arts Higher Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Social Sciences Social Sciences Higher Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12 Years</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment Specialist</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Social Sciences Social Sciences Social Sciences</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Professor/Director</td>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Social Sciences Higher Education</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Speech Pathology Higher Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Classified staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>Administrative faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within their units, many participants served as adjudicators for students’ requests for exceptions to policies (i.e., course substitutions, adding or dropping a course after the deadline, overriding probation or suspension, etc.). This was commonly referred to as processing or reviewing academic actions. Participants in this study also engaged closely with the curriculum of their programs by serving on curriculum committees, managing internship programs, and teaching within their programs.

Program support constituted a final component of the participants’ functions, which included a variety of responsibilities such as course scheduling, serving on hiring committees, planning and hosting departmental events, creating reports, and providing support to faculty. A frequently-noted part of these departmental responsibilities was serving as liaisons for their unit to other offices throughout the university.

**Procedures**

Upon agreeing to participate, each participant was emailed a brief online questionnaire that included the informed consent form and a place to provide an electronic signature. The online questionnaire also included questions regarding age range, gender identity, years of experience in higher education, current job title and responsibilities, professional background, educational background, and professional organization membership. Each participant was given the opportunity to schedule a phone interview at a time of his/her choosing. Upon beginning the interview, the content of the consent form was reviewed and confirmation that the participant was willing to continue with the interview was attained. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60
minutes. The interview script template is included in Appendix A. Each interview was audio recorded, and every participant was assigned a pseudonym.

**Analysis**

The audio recordings were transcribed, and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for coding the interview transcripts. Each transcript was read several times in order to gain familiarity with content. Excerpts in each transcript that were relevant to understanding the essence of academic affairs professionals were then identified through open coding (Creswell, 2007) and captured in Dedoose, a cloud-based mixed methods research platform, by applying a narrowly-focused code that described the content of each excerpt, such as “connection to non-job-related group” and “professional competence.” New codes were identified as more transcripts were reviewed, and transcripts analyzed prior to the introduction of a new code were re-reviewed for any excerpts pertaining to the new code. This process resulted in 31 codes and 487 excerpts. Patterns emerged through the excerpt coding process, and subsequently, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was utilized by reviewing all codes that were developed through the open coding phase and their corresponding excerpts and organizing them into initial themes, including “affinity” and “defining characteristics.” Finally, through selective coding (Creswell, 2007), the most relevant themes and subthemes were identified, resulting in the typology presented in the following chapter.

**Validity**

Ensuring validity for this study was especially critical due to its autobiographical origin. Although acknowledgement of researcher bias regarding this topic (Creswell,
2007) is detailed in the next section, several other validation mechanisms were employed in this study. In the data collection phase, the initial goal for the sample size was 20 participants to strive for thematic saturation. In the analysis of the interview transcripts, the consistency of participants’ responses suggested that thematic saturation was reached. When presenting the findings, verbatim transcription and thick description were relied upon heavily to demonstrate authenticity of the lived experience (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The findings and discussion were then shared with the participants to confirm that the study’s findings accurately depicted their perspectives through member checking (Whittemore et al., 2001).

**Position of the Researcher**

Before moving forward, I must acknowledge my position as an insider in this world. As an academic affairs professional at the same institution, I worked alongside my potential participants for several years. I became interested in better understanding academic affairs professionals collectively as I found that I occupied the liminal space between a number of disparate groups within the university setting, primarily faculty, administration, and student affairs. I worked closely with all three communities, yet I did not identify with any of these groups as defining my professional self within higher education. Because I felt that there was a lack of knowledge pertaining specifically to academic affairs professionals, I decided the research needed to start somewhere, and this study is the result of that decision.

As I progressed through the study, my insider status served much more as a benefit than a hindrance. I was able to gain relatively easy access to my participants, and
I perceived that they were more open with me than they might have been with an outsider due to our shared experiences. While it was impossible for me to fully suspend my personal experiences while playing the role of researcher, I made a conscious effort to keep an open mind throughout the research process. At the outset, I acknowledged that my experiences in academic affairs may have been unique, allowing them to inform my interview questions but not result in posing questions that may lead participants in a certain direction. When interviewing, I referenced my professional knowledge of the institution and its inhabitants when participants referenced certain people or acronyms. However, I attempted to avoid making assumptions when they discussed their impressions, opinions, or concerns to allow their thoughts – not my own – to be represented in the interview data. Throughout the analysis of that data, I remained impartial when assessing the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, whether they aligned with or differed from my own. As the goal of this research was to simply elucidate the lived experiences of academic affairs professionals, I did not approach this project with specific outcomes in mind, which permitted me to represent the data from a macro-level perspective informed by micro-level personal experiences.
CHAPTER FOUR

This study sought to investigate the professional identity of academic affairs professionals and the development of that identity from the perspectives of those who perform academic affairs work from non-faculty positions. The interviews produced rich data, and the following chapter details the identity that emerged from them. Additionally, this chapter posits four primary entities which influence identity development for academic affairs professionals.

The Challenge of Identification

When asked directly if a collective professional identity exists for academic affairs professionals, participants often hesitated before answering. After contemplating the question, many responded that the backgrounds and responsibilities of those involved in academic affairs work varied too greatly for a cohesive identity to develop. However, the interviews considered as a whole suggest otherwise. Despite the differences alluded to by certain participants, a professional identity for academic affairs professionals did emerge, although certain complexities may have challenged its cognizant adoption by the participants and may have also contributed to the participants’ hesitation when asked about the subject.

As social identity theory suggests, we formulate our identities through our interactions with perceived groups and subsequently assess the congruence of our own
values with those of the various groups we encounter. If there is adequate congruence or
desire to be affiliated with a group, we claim membership to the group, either internally
or through tangible measures, and attempt to emulate its prototypical characteristics,
which include “the attitudes, beliefs and values, affective reactions, behavioral norms,
styles of speech, and other properties that are believed to be correlated” (Stets & Burke,
2000, p. 225), as a signifier of our membership.

The challenge with this particular population is that, in practice, an individual
who meets the definition of an academic affairs professional put forth here often
identifies in another way because academic affairs professional is not terminology that is
currently used. Participants in this study spend ample time interacting with others who do
similar work as well others within the campus community with different functions, and
through these interactions, they, whether knowingly or not, assess the roles and values
associated with proximal identities to determine if or how their own roles and values
align. However, since the broader category of academic affairs professionals is not
presently used in the lexicon of higher education, many participants acknowledged that
they identified more closely with their job titles, such as academic advisor, or with a pre-
existing adjacent identity, such as a student affairs professional.

However, in aggregating the interview responses, a set of prototypical
characteristics transcended specific job titles and appeared to apply more broadly to
individuals whose work existed within the realm of academic affairs. In essence, this
phenomenon of a demonstrated set of professional qualities and competencies without a
recognized group by which to identify those who embody them is the genesis of this
research. While the participants may not have been able to articulate the existence of a collective professional identity for academic affairs professionals due to the group lacking a way to identify itself, as discussed above, the consistency of the interview responses allowed three interconnected properties and two values to emerge as prominent and consistent markers of the academic affairs professional’s identity.

**The Academic Affairs Identity Hybrids.** One of the challenges, but also one of the uniting attributes, for academic affairs professionals is that they generally identify with multiple groups within the university setting. When asked if they identified with the commonly recognized groups of administrators, faculty, staff, and/or students, a vast majority of participants (18) said that they identified with at least two of those categories. The combination of identities varied from person to person. Sarah said, “I identify as an administrator. The university calls me staff. I am a student, so I also identify as a student.” Helen shared:

> For me, my official position is administrative faculty, so I see myself as a mix between faculty and staff. So between those worlds are something that I identify with. And then I do have a teaching responsibility with the internship course, that’s definitely a faculty role, but most of my role is in a staff capacity, like my academic advising responsibilities. So if I had to choose, both faculty and staff. The strength of identification also varied, with some identities garnering a greater salience than others:

> I actually, technically, can be considered all of them, but I identify with administrator and staff, probably more so staff than administrator. And then
student because I am a student as well. So yeah, those three, but primarily staff though. (Ginny)

I definitely identify with staff and with administrator. I do supervision as one of the things, I do have other academic staff in our office. I have been a student at Mason, and I think in that respect, I’m probably a student as well with the HR training and development that they have available. But not so much with faculty. (Victoria)

For participants employed as staff (as opposed to administrative faculty), the faculty identity seemed to be distinctly outside of the concept they held of themselves. Echoing Victoria’s sentiments, Ophelia said, “I am a staff person, and sometimes I function as an administrator, so it’s all kind of overlapping. But definitely not faculty, I’m not at all in that realm.” Even Alex, who had a teaching responsibility, only marginally identified as a faculty member because, in his words, “the more and more I claim to be a faculty member, the more resistance I think I’d get from some more traditionally-minded faculty.” It is interesting the ease at which these participants can integrate the staff, student, and administrator identities as their own but are inhibited from doing so with the faculty identity.

Given that these different groups may, at times, have competing goals, it was not surprising that some participants experienced internal tension in trying to balance multiple identities. Diane, an administrative faculty member who came into her current role from a teaching faculty background, shared her experiences:
I think there is a rub because I strongly wear the faculty role. I know what it’s like to work with students, I know what it’s like to be in the classroom, I know what the struggles are of those in my profession, and it is at times hard...I do think the administrative and faculty [sides] have been at odds. It’s taken time and intentionality to...feel like I have a legitimate foot in both. (Diane)

This struggle to integrate different identities may be a unique challenge for academic affairs professionals; as opposed to other inhabitants of the university setting who may identify squarely with one group, participants like Diane consciously work to both obtain membership to multiple groups and balance those memberships in times that they may conflict.

Other participants described the relationship between their multiple identities as complementary. Penny, who was once a student for the department she now works for, explained the benefits of identifying with different populations:

For the most part, I think it has been good. Since I was a student here, I think the students, once they know that fact, they see me differently. They come and confide more. And at the same time, I think the faculty, because I’ve been a student, are nicer in a way, and I can push them to do stuff, and I can make demands of them. So I think I make a good bridge between the students and the faculty, like I can present both sides of the equation to each party.

Similarly, Quinn, both a professor and advisor in her department, addressed the added value of her multiple roles:
I think there’s absolutely benefit to being able to hear about what a vast majority of our students are doing, what classes they like, where they struggle, what they wished we offered, what they could do, and I get that through advising, and I know that it has made me a better teacher.

It appears that many academic affairs professionals are able to reconcile the potential challenges of identifying with different groups to create a synergy amongst them.

This pluralistic way of identifying may contribute to the lack of openly recognized, unique identity for academic affairs professionals. As Fallon pondered, “I wonder if that also gets at the challenge of developing a professional identity within academic affairs because, in a sense, it’s the combination, there’s no clear-cut box you can put us in.” Although this amalgamated identity may make identification more difficult, both in the sense of acknowledging this set of characteristics as an identity in and of itself as well as individuals acknowledging their membership to an amorphous group, perhaps this hybridity is, in fact, a distinguishing characteristic of this population.

**Problem solvers.** Academic affairs professionals see themselves as problem solvers. Many participants equated their work to a puzzle: “It’s like putting a giant puzzle together, and you have a bunch of pieces that don’t fit. How are you going to make them fit? It’s strategic, it’s challenging, it’s a puzzle, it’s fun” (Quinn). Diane elaborated:

It is looking to see what exists, what are the constraints, where are we given latitude, and what are some of the creative things we can do to solve problems, that’s highly rewarding for me. I feel like it’s a big puzzle in that way.
Several participants spoke not only of the puzzle-like nature of the work but also of the enjoyment they felt when they solved the problems they encountered throughout the course of their work days:

I guess one of the things that I really like about this job is that I’m challenged every day, there’s something new to do every day. This is not a stagnant position, so there’s always something different to be working on, there’s always a new project or problem to be solved or managed, and, for me, that keeps things interesting. (Sarah)

As Sarah described, academic affairs work requires a notable degree of analytical thinking to navigate the ever-changing landscape, which appears to both attract and professionally fulfill individuals interested in engaging in problem solving.

Throughout the interviews, two primary types of scenarios emerged when this strategic mindset was engaged: when helping others and when helping themselves. Due to the service-oriented nature of their positions, participants recounted how primarily students, but faculty and staff colleagues as well, turned to them for help resolving issues. Quinn recounted a situation with a student she was scheduled to see later in the day she was interviewed:

[A student] said, ‘My life is a complete mess,’ and I’m pretty sure that once we sit down and we look at what’s going on in her life, we’ll be able to make some sense of it so she can move forward. So I do find it really rewarding when I’m given a challenge, and a student walks out of here with a sense of direction or feeling better about what’s going on in their lives.
These academic affairs professionals utilize their existing knowledge and their strength in navigating the university, its resources, and the networks that exist within it to obtain resolution to whatever challenges that are brought to them, whether it be helping a student in crisis, like Quinn described, or developing course schedules that meet the needs of the faculty, students, and department priorities.

Academic affairs professionals also utilize a strategic mindset when faced with challenges in their own professional circumstances. In reflecting on transitioning into a new role, Alex shared:

I really had to sit down and think about how I could achieve the same level of autonomy in a different environment. What do I need to do to prove myself to them quickly so that I can just continue to do what I’m doing without having to butt heads with folks that are territorial of specific aspects of the program or specific aspects of their teaching responsibilities?

Ginny explained her pursuit of a doctoral degree was to set herself up for the kinds of positions she wanted to hold in the future. Both of these participants, and several others, described potentially problematic circumstances that were neutralized because they were able to tap into their well-developed propensity for problem-solving.

**Consultants.** Because academic affairs professionals demonstrate a knack for solving problems, they are able to position themselves as resources for those with whom they work. In their interactions with students, they are an invaluable asset to navigating the university. In their work with faculty, Alex described it as “instead of being the expert in [an academic discipline], I’m the expert in making things work.” Helen described her
relationship with the teaching faculty as consultative, saying that “sometimes professors will contact me and say, ‘A student hasn’t been attending class, what should I do?’ They’re free to connect with me on any procedural questions having to do with students.”

Their expertise in certain administrative aspects of their institutions are respected and valued by colleagues.

Often, however, this consultant role is not assumed instantaneously. Ingrid described her efforts with the faculty of her department:

I’ve been in this position for a year, and I think over time, I’ve tried to advocate for myself during staff meetings and just letting them know that I am a resource if students are having issues, they need to be referring them to me. In the beginning, they weren’t… Sometimes they also see me as an administrative assistant, and so making copies for them when I should not be doing that. (Ingrid)

The initial misunderstanding of academic affairs professionals’ functions and what they can contribute to their departments can lead to frustration, as alluded to by Ingrid. With persistence and a continued demonstration of what they are capable of, academic affairs professionals can find their appropriate places within their departments and amongst their faculty colleagues. Marissa described her journey with her department:

When I started here, I gave the weight to the position that in needed to be given at the time…[The faculty] trusted me to take that position and allow it to grow, and I think that, with my communication skills, I was able to use those in a way that allowed me to build relationships with the faculty and administrators…[Now,] with my institutional knowledge, they trust me to be able to weigh in on a
decision from an objective standpoint to be able to help guide them along that way.

Many participants spoke of sharing their expertise on matters pertaining to areas outside of their faculty’s realm of familiarity to better inform the innerworkings of the department. Celeste elaborated:

Being involved with the program decision makers in the department, the chair and the undergraduate director, helping advise them and inform their understanding as they’re making decisions based on what I actually experience with students and what I know and hear about policy and other programs and policy around the university…That kind of collaborative, advisory role with the actual administrators for the department is also something I enjoy.

This quote from Celeste addresses an important limitation placed on academic affairs professionals. Although they may be called on to provide their perspective, they may not be able to enact change. Robin captured this sentiment: “Even though I may not necessarily be the decision maker, the approver on certain things, I do feel as though my input is welcome and a lot of the time solicited.” This distinction between consultant and decider, although not impenetrable, is consequential in the development of boundaries between academic affairs and faculty, which will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

Values. In addition to the characteristics that define an identity, a prominent component of any group’s identity is the values its members hold in esteem. Through the interviews, two values stood out as being quintessential to the professional identity of
academic affairs professionals: a dedication to service and a commitment to relationship-building.

*Service-oriented.* First, academic affairs professionals value the ability to serve others. To them, their work is not simply a means to an end; they see their roles as having a greater purpose beyond their own livelihood. As Ophelia explained:

If you work in a university setting, yes, we make money, but there’s also the underlying customer, which is the student, and [we work] to help them get to another goal in their lives...If it gets hard or tedious or tiring, [I] always think that we’re working for something additional and not just ourselves.

As alluded to by Ophelia, academic affairs professionals see the profession as mission-driven and are motivated to engage in this work in order to help others. Penny elaborated on this subject:

You really want to be able to help…You have to have that kind spirit to be able to go above and beyond the call of duty in some respect and go beyond the boundaries and to think outside the box. And just that need to help students, that feeling, that drive to help students. And not just students because I help faculty members from time to time. Just to be that one go-to person that anyone can come to.

The notion of helping others is prevalent throughout the interview responses. In fact, identifying as a helper appears to be central to the academic affairs professional. As Larry succinctly put it, “Honestly, I identify myself as ‘I help people.’ That’s all I say. Or, ‘I
help students,’ and that’s how I identify myself.” When stripped of specific job responsibilities, helping others is the core function of the academic affairs professional.

While this service orientation is not unique amongst the helping professions, the context in which they choose to apply this mentality may be. All 21 participants discussed the satisfaction they feel from supporting college students. Tabitha shared:

I would say the parts of my job that are most rewarding are the ones that are useful to students, so that isn’t always working with directly with students though. Developing curriculum or processes that support students through their progress into their degree and learning or working directly with students. That focus on students is what I find most rewarding.

While working directly with students is one way to serve the population, Tabitha points out that there are other tasks that academic affairs professionals perform in order to support college students. Many participants described the satisfaction of seeing their work with and for students pay off, such as being present for graduation or from hearing about the success of alumni they worked with. Through the consistency of these responses, it became evident that academic affairs professionals are primarily interested in supporting college students in their academic pursuits. While interest in their overall development is not negated, it is clear that they feel their purpose is to specifically support student academic progress and success.

Although students were referenced as the primary recipients of their support, academic affairs professionals also support the faculty and their academic departments, seeing their administrative responsibilities as necessary for sustaining the academic
experience. Several participants admitted to getting involved in tasks that were beyond the scope of their jobs and did so because it was necessary to sustain order in their departments, as if their desire to serve could not be thwarted if they felt that they could positively contribute to students’ academic experiences, even if said task was beyond the expectations of their jobs. This commitment to service appears to be the academic affairs professional’s primary motivator, and other elements that comprise the identity ultimately support this driving desire.

**Relationship-oriented.** Second, academic affairs professionals value relationships. Being able to interact with others and build and maintain relationships is one component of the profession that draws people to this work:

One of the reasons I really enjoy advising with students and some of the conversations I have with colleagues or, again, the directors or department chair is I really like listening in conversations…to listen to what’s in between the lines, to try to be sensitive to what’s being felt and communicated beyond what’s being said or beyond what’s obvious at a glance or on the surface. (Celeste)

While participants valued the relational nature of the work, embodying this value also seems to be a necessity for this profession. Diane explained, “I think somebody having the skillset to engage in that collaboration, that is a given. If you don’t have it, it’s just not going to work, and I think people struggle who don’t uniquely and authentically feel that.” Relationships appear to be the oil that keeps the gears in the realm of academic affairs working smoothly. Academic affairs professionals recognize this and work to sustain relationships with a wide range of campus community members. As can be
ascertained from the previous section, connections with students are both numerous and a high priority for the academic affairs professional, as highlighted by Marissa:

The most important aspect of my job is really being able to get to know my students, develop those personal connections. I sort of pride myself on being able to know three facts about each of my students [and] getting to know them on a level where they know that my door is open, [and] they can approach me for anything that they may need, whether it be university resource referrals or a concentrated question within the major.

The benefit of developing relationships with students is two-fold. On one hand, positive relationships with students may make their work easier, as students may be more inclined to reach out to them with questions, rather than the academic affairs professional attempting to initiate that conversation. Additionally, interactions with students can help better inform decisions pertaining to programs, policies, and procedures. On the other hand, academic affairs professionals also find the connections with students to be rewarding and experience positive emotions (described by one participant as the “warm fuzzies”) as a result of those interactions.

In addition to students, academic affairs professionals have numerous connections to colleagues. In terms of fellow employees, their primary interactions are with faculty and staff within their academic unit, colleagues across academic units who have similar responsibilities, and staff who work in departments that support the operation of the academic units. Academic affairs professionals consider the ability and desire to collaborate to be essential to the work that they do. In Ginny’s words, “If you can’t build
relationships with others, you will not get anything done.” Because so many of their responsibilities require engaging others, academic affairs professionals spend a majority of their work days interacting with others. When asked, most participants reported between 60 and 90 percent of their days were spent working with others in some capacity. This magnitude of collaborative work suggests that academic affairs professionals may have both an innate inclination for relational work as well as ample opportunity to fine-tune such skills.

**Influencers of Identity Development**

The prototypical identity for the academic affairs professional described above is not without its nuances and is informed and influenced by interactions in various settings and with various groups. The following sections will detail how graduate education, professional organizations, organizational structure, and organizational boundaries impact professional identity for academic affairs professionals.

**Graduate education.** Graduate education has been known to be a powerful socializing mechanism for other occupants of the higher education landscape, creating a sense of community and identity for faculty and student affairs professionals alike (Bureau, 2011; Love et al., 1993; Reybold, 2003; Wilkins, 2007). It appears that it too serves a socializing function for academic affairs professionals. All but one participant were pursuing or had completed a Master’s degree, but the degree to which their graduate education related to their current work in academic affairs varied. The participants, like those in Crim’s (2006) study of student affairs professionals with typical and atypical progression into the field, tended to fall into two categories: the lifers, who pursued
graduate education related to higher education administration with the intent to make
their careers in this field, and the coincidentals, who studied subjects unrelated to higher
education administration and for which academic affairs work aligns with their values but
is not a finite career path.

The lifers. The lifers are those academic affairs professionals who are committed
to careers in higher education administration. Many identified higher education as a
career field of interest as undergraduate students and went on to complete graduate
education in a field directly related to higher education immediately or shortly after the
completion of their undergraduate educations. Ingrid captured this trajectory:

I was a student leader in college, so I had different clubs and organizations, I was
a resident advisor, I was a peer mentor, I did a lot. And that brought me straight
into going to grad school for my Master’s in higher ed and student affairs.

Similar to participants in Crim’s (2006) study of student affairs professionals, some of the
participants, like Ingrid, realized they wanted to pursue careers in higher education
administration after being exposed to the field as involved undergraduate students. Other
participants ultimately identified higher education as a career field of interest after being
exposed to professional positions. Regardless of initial point of exposure, however, the
lifers chose graduate programs in student affairs, higher education, and related helping
professions because they perceived those kinds of programs aligned with their interests
and values and would best situate them for administrative roles in the university setting.
Alex, who completed his graduate work in higher education while concurrently serving
as an academic advisor, explained how he perceived the value of his degree:
The Master’s in Higher Education, I viewed it as a great way to merge two areas: one, keeping up with the professional development that I needed to keep up with the current practice and then in turn getting a degree out of it was a no-brainer for me. I feel like it really did help me frame what I’m doing, at least provide a language to use to describe what I’m currently experiencing in my job then being able to take it to the next step and further define it, so I think that, in tandem to doing the job, it helped me define how I existed within the role and how to make it more efficient, which I think would have taken more time if I had not done it.

After working in the field, Alex realized that a graduate degree in higher education would not only give him deeper insight into his current work but could also garner him more and/or better opportunities within the profession. Ginny, more bluntly, stated, “I feel like if I didn’t have a basic or foundational level, if I didn’t have a Master’s degree, of course I couldn’t do the work that I do, I just wouldn’t be hired.” The lifers, understanding the significance of credentials within the university setting, perceived that graduate education would be necessary in the pursuit of their career goals and opted to study the field in which they intended to work, as opposed to alternate academic disciplines.

By enrolling in higher education graduate programs, the lifers began their initiation into the culture of the profession of higher education administration through interactions with their faculty, peers, and learning environments. As detailed in the literature on faculty socialization, through their graduate programs, the lifers were exposed to and then assumed and perpetuated the norms, values, and expectations of the profession, one of which being the unparalleled preparation provided by graduate
education in the field. When asked if she felt if she would be any less successful in her 
current work without her studies in higher education, Ingrid responded:

I would think so, yes. Because, for instance, for professionals in this role 
who…decided to go into it straight out of undergrad, they don’t have the context, 
they don’t have the understanding, they’re not able to incorporate student 
development in their conversations or understand where other students are coming 
from. Yes, they were a student themselves, but that’s their own experience, they 
don’t see how it all ties together. And there are definitely different trends going 
on, different methods, and yeah, I think getting the experience I’ve gotten so far 
and the education has definitely improved the way that I interact with students 
and how I interact with the university.

This response highlights two outcomes that many of the lifers discussed in reference to 
their graduate education: their enhanced knowledge of the context and organization of 
higher education and their preparedness for working with students through their 
understanding of student development. The value assigned to these topics in graduate 
programs is metabolized by students of higher education, who then consider their own 
knowledge of the subjects as valuable assets for their profession. Because of their 
immersion into the professional culture and their subsequent internalization of it, the 
lifers are more likely to identify with some variant of higher education professional than 
their colleagues with more varied backgrounds.

The coincidentals. Unlike the lifers, the coincidentals followed less direct paths to 
their current professional roles. While eight of the nine had completed at least a Master’s
degree, their fields of study were not related to higher education administration nor the helping professions. However, they generally did not feel disadvantaged for deviating from the prototypical background of a higher educational professional and did not shy away from their otherness. Eleanor explained:

I don’t necessarily feel at a loss for not having had a degree in higher ed administration. The nice thing for me is that I feel like I can access that information and that expertise in different ways...I think there is some strength or there is some benefit to coming in a little bit from the outside because there’s a different way I can take a look at things.

Fallon echoed this sentiment:

I think the challenge is that sometimes there’s a sense in the field that you need that particular educational background, that you need the higher ed training, or you need the leadership training, or you need the psychology or the counseling or whatever it might be. And I think those things can help, but I think to think that other backgrounds can’t contribute would be a mistake.

As social identity theory suggests, the perception of an in-group also delineates an out-group. In this instance, the lifers may be perceived as the in-group due to their closer alignment with the prototypical entry into and progression through the field, and therefore, anyone who does not share such a background becomes the out-group or “the other.” However, social identity theory also suggests that we will find ways to enhance our self-esteem via group membership, which we see playing out with the coincidentals. While the lifers discussed the importance of the theories and skills they learned through
their graduate programs, the coincidentals were equally as fervent about what they contribute to their positions precisely because they are “the other” and do not have a background in student development or higher education administration. Penny spoke directly to this point:

I’m very proud of my background. I didn’t expect to be an advisor, so my background isn’t in higher ed at all…I’m an engineer, I have my Master’s in engineering, but I feel like I bring this unique perspective because I’m advising engineering students.

The coincidentals have varied educational backgrounds, ranging from the humanities to engineering, and many had professional experiences outside of the university setting. As Penny described, these experiences are not interpreted by the participants to be detrimental but instead were seen as positively contributing to their current work.

The coincidentals, less likely to have been socialized to the professional cultures in higher education administration due the different foci of their graduate work, appeared less likely to identify as higher education professionals. Rather, they found the work that they did, which just so happened to be in a university setting, fulfilled larger personal values and desires.

I am not super identified with my professional identity... It’s more like I look for ways in my job to live by principles that I care about deeply in other ways, like trying to show compassion and give people that opportunity to feel deeply listened to. (Celeste)
I don’t really worry so much about my professional identity…I identify myself more with the processes, projects, and the way that I’m serving the students than this larger professional identity. (Tabitha)

It is not to say that these participants with a nontraditional progression to academic affairs work are less dedicated to their current jobs or that there is a notable distinction in how they embody the primary tenants of the academic affairs professionals’ identity, but they are less prone to outwardly identify with either higher education or academic affairs as a profession. Instead, they appear to be more interested in pursuing professional opportunities that are personally fulfilling and aligned with their values and less fixated on a career as higher education administrators.

**Professional organizations.** As prior research on faculty and student affairs professionals suggests that professional organizations play a role in professional identity and its development (Crim, 2006; Reybold, 2003; Wilkins, 2007), this study sought to ascertain if the same could be said for academic affairs professionals. Eighteen of the 21 participants belonged to at least one professional organization. Most of this group (15) were members of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), and four participants held concurrent membership with the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) or the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), popular organizations amongst student affairs professionals. Others (5) opted to join organizations based on academic disciplines related to either their own academic background or that of the program they serve, either as their sole focus or in tandem with NACADA.
For participants who were members of professional organizations, the degree to which they engaged with the organizations varied, ranging from maintaining an annual membership and reading articles published by the organization to attending conferences and holding leadership positions within the national organization or local chapters. There were two participants, Diane and Eleanor, who were highly involved with professional associations pertaining to the academic fields in which they studied and worked. A board member of several professional organizations, Diane described how her participation has influenced her professionally:

Some of these other [organizations] have been important to me because I’ve learned current research in how people behave and how people engage and what contributes to sense of belonging which is a research interest of mine, and to me, that ties in so closely when we talk about developing the student or faculty or staff affinity, so I would say [professional organizations] have helped frame…the way I think and collaborate and think about my work with others, what’s motivating [to them].

Diane depicts what Gouldner (1957) would refer to as a cosmopolitan orientation, using entities external to the employing institution as a frame of reference. Eleanor also referred to how her professional organization membership allowed her to stay up-to-date with the research in her field and network with peers. Given this insight, it is not surprising that both Diane and Eleanor were administrative faculty with teaching responsibilities and more strongly identified with their disciplines than academic affairs administration. In line with the research thus far, these factors may contribute to their professional
organization membership more closely resembling that of faculty than higher education administrators.

Of those with extensive involvement with professional organizations pertaining to higher education administration, it is interesting to note that all four followed the typical progression in the profession, pursuing graduate education in fields directly related to higher education administration with the intent to make a career within the field. Ingrid described her involvement in NASPA, which extended back to her undergraduate days:

My mentor back in undergrad, she was actually the regional vice president for NASPA for region 6 in California. And I was a part of that undergraduate fellows program…so just by going to those professional experiences, I found a connection to people, I found a home professionally, and met other undergrads through that, we were all a part of NASPA.

Ingrid’s early participation with NASPA made a lasting impact and influenced her desire to join NACADA as her role within higher education changed:

With NACADA, I didn’t realize until I was in my academic advising role…that there was a national association for academic advisors, so once I found that, I knew I wanted to be a part of it because it offered that instant network. The professional development, the journals that I could read and stay up to date on…yeah, I knew from undergrad that it was such an important part of my professional identity, part of my learning process that I wanted to make sure I was a part of another national organization.
With these quotes, Ingrid epitomized the pattern of exposure and sentiments shared amongst those who were heavily involved with higher education professional organizations: after an introduction to the organization by a mentor, these participants remained involved with professional organizations as they progressed through their careers due to the value they perceived by their continued participation. Although the participants’ responses suggest a connection between graduate education in higher education and subsequent engagement in professional organizations pertaining to higher education, the nature of the relationship is unclear but could be a function of early exposure to the organizations, actualizing norms set in their graduate programs, or seeking involvement in groups that mimic the camaraderie and professional development experienced in graduate school.

Outside of the six participants with high involvement, the remaining participants who held memberships in professional organizations were less active in them. However, simply maintaining a membership is not insignificant, as it appears as though membership in NACADA may be seen as a prototypical attribute for this profession. Several participants, like Alex, acknowledged joining the organization because others in their perceived or aspirant group were members:

I decided to join [NACADA] mostly because...a little bit of following the lamb to slaughter in a way in that my colleagues were members of the association, and I felt like it was important for me to also be a member of the association.

Alex portrayed the sentiment that many participants had, that interest in being a member of the organization was initiated by knowing that others in his professional peer group
were members. From a social identity perspective, membership in NACADA specifically is a way for individuals to assert their status as a certain type of higher education professional, distinct from those who are members of the student affairs organizations as well as the academic discipline-based organizations. Although only the participants with high involvement in the organizations acknowledged their overt impact on their professional identities, the published values of the organizations, such as being responsible to advisees and their institutions and involving others when appropriate (National Academic Advising Association, 2005), permeated participants’ responses, suggesting that these higher education administration professional organizations appear to serve as a mechanism, in addition to graduate programs, that perpetuates the values and expectations of the profession.

Although a majority of participants belonged to at least one higher education professional association, the existing organizations did have their limitations. Jessica, who had been a member of several higher education professional associations, identified the lack of focus within the organizations on the administrative aspects of academic affairs work:

More organizations need to recognize that [administrative work is] a huge part of what’s going on. Especially for someone new into the field, say they come right out of grad school and they never have any [exposure] to this, and they suddenly have their first job and are like, ‘Oh my gosh, I didn’t realize how much paperwork there is; I don’t even know what to do with that.’ We’re doing them a disservice.
While many participants acknowledged the value of the organizations’ offerings pertaining to student development and academic advising, Jessica alluded to gaps in their coverage of important aspects of academic affairs work. Tabitha shared a similar sentiment:

My job is such a mess of all of these different things. NACADA obviously is a professional organization, but some of the stuff that I do doesn’t have a professional organization associated with it. So it was a nice choice in that it exists and it’s a big chunk of my job, but advising is not my complete job.

This quote identifies one of the quintessential challenges faced by academic affairs professionals. Academic advising is indeed a component of academic affairs, but it is not the totality of the work. Even those with the title of academic advisor perform several functions beyond those related to engaging with students and supporting their academic success. Yet a professional organization “doesn’t really exist for academic affairs” (Fallon), and therefore, many, like Tabitha, join organizations that pertain to some aspects of their work but often find that they do not provide direction or professional development opportunities that encompass the full breadth of their roles.

**Organizational structure.** Based on the literature reviewed, the preceding identity-influencing factors of graduate education and professional organizations were, to some degree, expected to be addressed by the participants. However, the element of organizational structure was not anticipated to be acknowledged as having a profound impact on the way in which they identified, yet it was noted by a number of participants. The academic affairs professionals in this study contended that their professional identity
was shaped by where academic affairs is housed at this particular institution. Ginny described the various areas that her work could be housed:

I think that academic advising can straddle both student affairs and academic affairs, depending on what institution you’re at. Currently, I think, at [Central University], it’s really in academic affairs, there really isn’t a lot of crossover. I think in a number of other different institutions, academic advising is a student affairs area.

Because academic advising, a central component of academic affairs work, is primarily done within academic units at Central University, those who engage in advising at this institution feel a departure from student affairs that might not be as pronounced at other institutions. Jessica elaborated:

I think it depends a lot on how the university is structured. So at [Central University], a lot of the individual departments are doing academic advising for their students, so I think when you have professional academic advisors who are living in departments, I feel like you get more of that separation…But I think universities…where advising is more of a centralized effort and advisors are coming together and working together throughout the university, I think I could see more of that student affairs coming into it.

For Ginny, Jessica, and some of their colleagues, the structure of the institution and where academic affairs fits within that structure play a sizeable role in not only the nature of their work but also how they identify professionally, suggesting that professional
identity for these individuals may fluctuate depending on the situation. Alex provided an example of this thinking:

I would identify myself as an academic affairs professional, and I think it’s purely because I’m on the academic side of the house. I think that if I worked for [Student] Life, I’d feel different. I think that even if I worked for [the centralized advising office], I’d feel like I was more student affairs than I am academic. So I think that that’s a direct result of working for an academic unit, that is part of being an academic affairs professional.

If what Alex described can be extrapolated to the broader population of academic affairs professionals, the basic foundation of the student affairs and academic affairs identities is interchangeable, and the distinction between identifying with one over the other is a result of where one’s position is housed within the institutional structure. Even if the extent of this fluidity is not applicable to all academic affairs professionals, it seems reasonable to suggest that, at a minimum, the institution’s decision to house certain student support responsibilities within academic units has some impact on the professional identity of those who do said work. In this study, the structure of Central University resulted in the development of boundaries that helped further refine the academic affairs professional’s identity, as detailed in the subsequent section.

**Organizational boundaries.** As proposed by social identity theory, participants’ professional identities are influenced by the groups they interact with within their institutions. The participants identified several different types of groups on campus that they felt an affinity for, including peers in their graduate programs and groups of
individuals who shared interests in non-work-related topics. However, three groups stood out as serving as boundaries for the overarching professional identity of academic affairs professions: the academic unit, student affairs, and the Central Academic Advising Network.

**Academic units.** The academic department and/or college serves an interesting function for academic affairs professionals. Of the 21 participants, six were working in departments in which they had direct experience with the associated academic subject as either undergraduate or graduate students. For example, Marissa had an educational background in the performing arts and now serves as an advisor in that department. An additional seven participants worked in departments of subjects related to the ones they studied. Robin studied sociology as an undergraduate and now works with students in other social science disciplines. The remaining eight participants did not have any link between their educational backgrounds and the departments in which they worked.

Social identity theory suggests a few possible outcomes in regards to how academic affairs professionals may relate to their employing academic units. In other studies on identity within the workplace, employees often identify with their department over the larger organization due to greater perceived similarities within the work group (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), and this pattern may extend to academic affairs professionals. If an affinity to the department does exist, those who have a background in the subject may feel a stronger affinity than those who do not due to more perceived similarities between themselves and the faculty, who constitute a majority of the members of the group. Conversely, the academic affairs professionals may feel alienated...
from their departments because they do not share similarities in background nor work
function with the faculty majority and therefore perceive themselves not to be members
of the in-group within their departments.

The interview data suggest that former is more true in this circumstance:
academic affairs professionals express feeling a part of their academic departments.
Celeste said, “I feel that [connection] very much with this department…because of the
people who are here and because of what I’ve come to understand through them and
about the value of the content of what’s taught here” while Eleanor shared that “certainly
the internal staff and the program community is something that I’m very attached to.”
From sharing the same physical space to participating in departmental meetings to
engaging in more social endeavors, a majority of the participants reported feeling an
affinity towards their academic unit, and this notion of being a part of an academic
community is a component of the broader identity of academic affairs professionals. In
line with the theoretical assumptions, those who demonstrated the strongest connections
to their departments were those had educational backgrounds in the same or closely
related subjects.

Although it appears that the academic unit serves as more of a source of positive
identification than alienation, it is important to acknowledge the challenges expressed in
regards to working in departments comprised primarily of faculty, who have different
functions, priorities, and work styles than the academic affairs professionals. Several
participants described feeling or being made to feel different from the faculty. Fallon
said, “This is kind of common…a faculty/staff divide. ‘You are staff, and we are faculty,
and we’re the important ones, and you just do what we tell you to do,’” to varying degrees.” Tabitha, who holds an administrative faculty position with a teaching component, expressed her conundrum:

Teaching and research faculty, there is generally a lack of connection. They tend not to see me as faculty, as somebody who teaches. They interact with me in my administrative role more. They don’t realize I teach, or they think that I’m staff, and so they definitely approach me differently than they do their colleagues that they see as faculty.

As Tabitha described, there is a sense that faculty occupy the in-group with the department, with academic affairs professionals, by virtue of not being teaching or research faculty, existing in the out-group. As a result of this in-group/out-group distinction, conflict or tension is prone to arise, particularly as the two groups determine specific responsibilities that align with the shared departmental mission and functions.

Eleanor summarized the conundrum:

I think the challenges come around the issue of territory...Who is responsible for this particular piece, and how do the staff and the academic advisors’ responsibilities overlay or intercede with the faculty’s idea of what they are responsible for, what they want to be able to do?

This astute observation depicts the ever-present balancing act that academic affairs professionals face. The existence of their positions stems from an overabundance of needs and responsibilities placed on academic department that exceed the capacity of the faculty, and yet there are certain undertakings deemed solely appropriate for faculty
engagement, and conflict is triggered if that line is crossed by someone outside of the faculty in-group.

To circumvent this potential for tension with faculty, academic affairs professionals employ some clever tactics. They will take on administrative tasks that faculty are not interested in dealing with, such as calling prospective students and editing the course catalog, cultivating a sense of goodwill between the two groups. They also make themselves experts in areas in which faculty are not, such as best practices for working with students or policies at the institution. Marissa summed up these efforts well:

I look at all of the faculty that I work with, and every single one of them has a wonderful terminal degree, but it’s in a performance area or in an education area, meaning specific to music...I feel like I’m able to be a very integral linchpin to the different connections across the department in order to be able to provide a little bit of that insight as a part of this team, to look at it from a higher education perspective.

By alleviating certain administrative burdens from the faculty and contributing a different perspective, academic affairs professionals and faculty are able to develop a kind of symbiosis, with each group contributing their expertise for the common goal of creating a positive academic experience for students. This complex relationship with faculty both confirms what academic affairs professionals are not while simultaneously identifying the parameters of what this population represents.
Student affairs. Similar boundaries are formed by the function of student affairs, although these boundaries appear to be more permeable. Participants in this study acknowledged their work as being connected to student affairs in some aspects but distinct in others:

I think that there’s a great deal of overlap between those two, but there probably is a certain amount of those two circles on the Venn diagram that are not intersecting. While there’s quite a bit that is, I think a lot of the work that we do happens in that intersection but not all of it. (Kevin)

While both academic and student affairs professionals support college students – the intersection of the Venn diagram Kevin described – it appears the perceived distinction between the two groups is the context in which that student support is provided:

Academic affairs seems to focus more specifically on academic issues, dealing with students, advising, how they’re accessing resources on campus while student affairs could overlap with that (perhaps Venn diagram-ish) where it focuses less on the academic aspects. (Tabitha)

When I think of academic affairs, I think of curriculum, I think enrollment, I think the catalog and things like that, and…student affairs supporting co-curricular things. They interact, they interplay, and they have to, but I think academic affairs is unique. (Robin)

The academic nature of academic affairs professionals’ responsibilities seems to be how they distinguish their work from that of their student affairs colleagues.
Although there seems to be some consensus on what constitutes the differences between academic affairs and student affairs work, there is less consistency amongst the participants with regards to identifying as student affairs professionals. When asked if she identified as a student affairs professional, Ingrid provided a decisive response:

I do, yes. That’s what I was introduced to beginning as an undergrad. I was part of NASPA since sophomore year of college … Everyone who works at a university who isn’t in the classroom with them, so student services, residence life, just everything outside of the classroom is student affairs, and so although I am in an academic role, I’m supplementing what’s happening in the classroom. I still see it in that way.

Despite acknowledging that her work may now be academic in nature, Ingrid suggests that she has maintained her student affairs identity that she developed through her education and professional organization membership, even as her role has changed. Other participants, such as Marissa, also identified as a student affairs professional, stating, “I would completely identify with that because I’m so student-centered. Absolutely.” These quotes suggest that the student affairs identity is both recognizable and accessible to those in the academic affairs community and is not necessarily bounded by specific job responsibilities or roles.

On the contrary, some participants did not identify as student affairs professionals. When asked if the question, Celeste responded:

I don’t. That’s not vocabulary I usually would use, although when I look around and think, ‘Oh, should I be doing some kind of professional development? What
is the area that would fall under?’ student affairs is the language that I see. But since I came at this from such a sideways way, that language is actually still a little foreign to me.

Celeste, who fell into the coincidentals category for her graduate study in the humanities, may not have had extensive exposure to the student affairs culture, and although she recognized similarities between her work and that of student affairs, she did not connect with student affairs as a professional identity. However, even for Sarah, who studied and worked in student affairs, her current role led her to define herself apart from student affairs:

When people ask me what I do, I say that I’m an academic administrator at a university. That doesn’t always resonate, but professionally that’s where I house myself because I’m not student affairs, although I kind of came from that background.

Here, Sarah captures the sentiment that unlike those participants who readily identified as student affairs professionals, some academic affairs professionals, rather than expressing their membership in a group, defined their identity by non-membership. From a social identity lens, these individuals assessed the prototypical attributes of student affairs professionals and deemed that they did not align with that prototype and therefore did not belong to that in-group. Although the perception of being part of the in-group for student affairs or the out-group varied, it appears nearly impossible to define the academic affairs identity in the absence of student affairs, thus constituting another boundary for this population.
Central Academic Advisor Network. Outside of the aforementioned groups, participants pointed to functional groups as also impacting their professional identities. Of those, the entity within the institution with seemingly the most influence was the Central Academic Advising Network (CAAN), which was mentioned either by name or alluded to by nearly every participant in this study. CAAN is an internal, grassroots organization founded by academic advisors to “help promote advisor collaboration, advisor development, and disseminate information to all undergraduate academic advisors in a timely fashion” (Center for Academic Advising, Retention, and Transitions, 2017), and as evidenced by the participants’ responses, it has been a powerful force in creating an advising community on the campus.

According to the participants, prior to CAAN’s inception in 2012, advisors had no reason or incentive to interact with one another. In Alex’s words, “I would say without that network, I would have no interaction with anyone outside of the physical space that I’m in right now.” This quote identifies the often isolated nature of academic affairs professionals’ work. Many participants noted that they are the only person in their departments doing the work that they did, and with no mechanism previously in place to bring together individuals across the institution doing similar things, these academic affairs professionals remained siloed within their academic units.

The three advisors who conceptualized CAAN knew there was value in connecting those involved with advising, and when they began to circulate the idea of a network of and for advisors, people were excited by the thought of being part of a
community specifically for them. Marissa, a member of the CAAN steering committee, shared:

I often think on those Friday [steering committee] meetings [days], ‘I get to go and be with my people.’ They understand what we deal with on a daily basis, and they understand the demands that are put on us in this professional role.

Academic affairs professionals may derive some aspect of their identity from the academic departments that they work, but as discussed previously, there may be some distinctions amongst inhabitants of the department that prevent them from feeling fully a part of that organizational unit. Instead, they must seek “their people” outside of their departments, and CAAN has created a more efficient way to find like-minded professionals than the happenstance connections made prior to its existence.

CAAN provides training for any interested Central University employee and advocates for advising-related issues, but perhaps the most significant outcome of its establishment is the void it filled for academic affairs professionals at the institution who lacked a sense of professional community: “We created a community with the [Central] Academic Advisor Network, now we all belong to something. We don’t belong to the university, we don’t belong to our academic unit, we belong to this network” (Alex).

Where disparate academic affairs professionals once worked in isolation from one another, there is now a means for these individuals to identify one another. The creation of this network has resulted in increased communication between members of this community, and an advising culture has emerged at the institution, one in which membership in CAAN is encouraged. Similarly to membership in NACADA, many
participants mentioned their involvement in CAAN, even if it was peripheral, as a signifier that they identify themselves with this community.

**Summary**

According to social identity theory, a collective identity is “one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common” (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Vole, 2004, p. 81). In reviewing the objective information about the participants, such as educational background, job title and duties, and employment classification, it would be easy to assume that the differences portrayed in that data would be too substantial for a collective identity to form. Indeed, most participants flatly said that those who do academic affairs work are too different from one another for a collective identity to exist. However, notable consistencies from the interviews emerged, suggesting there must be something that unites these individuals that transcends the initial perceived differences. In Diane’s words:

> As I think about my colleagues in the same role across campus, we continually remark on how different our roles really are, even though they might have the same title, how different our functions are and the breadth and the range of our functions, how personally engaged we all are with students or staff or faculty, is so varied. I think what we share as an identity is ensuring a strong university, college, or program that well serves the collective - the students are served, the faculty are served, everybody is served. But as a common identity, I think in some ways yes, I look at those people and think we can bemoan, we can celebrate, we’re all experiencing similar things. We may have come to it very differently,
but we’re all experiencing similar things. Even though the specific functions vary greatly, so our frustrations and our delimitations and things that may challenge us the most might be common, how we deal with them and how they manifest within each of our roles is different. So from an identity perspective, keeping the academic ship afloat, fighting those who will say we’re only a business these days, trying to balance the two, I think we do have some sense of a common identity.

As so eloquently stated above, the specifics of each academic affairs professional’s professional life may vary, from day-to-day responsibilities of the position to the path he or she took to reach that position, but, as Diane continued:

It really comes down to what are the inherent personal characteristics, motivators, drives, goals, methods of operating, personal goals, and then how to they manifest themselves within circles. Somebody may have studied administration, and somebody else may have been an administrator. The reason they both gravitated towards those sorts of roles, whether academic or practical, is something within themselves that’s either skilled in those areas or interested in those areas.

While the professional identity of an academic affairs professional may be influenced by graduate education, professional organization membership, organizational structure, and organizational boundaries, the values of being service- and relationship-oriented and the accompanying hybrid, analytical, and consultative nature of these higher education professionals endure despite individual differences along these dimensions.
CHAPTER FIVE

As an exploratory phenomenological study, this research set out to tell the story of academic affairs professionals and their professional identity from their own perspectives. Through interviews with individuals working at Central University who met the criteria set forth in the first chapter (i.e., classified staff and/or administrative faculty employed full-time who perform administrative functions, such as academic advising, curriculum development and management, enrollment management, student retention management, academic policy administration, academic exception adjudication, and academic program review and accreditation management), an interesting portrait of identity emerged. On one hand, the participants were not a homogenous group, and they suggested such differences were insurmountable in establishing a collective identity. They had different educational backgrounds, they belonged to different kinds of professional organizations (if they held membership at all), they maintained different levels of affinity towards their employing academic units, and they provided various, often contradictory, responses to identifying as student affairs professionals.

On the other hand, however, their collective responses suggested that, although it may not be recognized as such by the participants, a shared professional identity exists for academic affairs professionals - one comprised of a hybrid, analytical, and consultative nature with the values of service and sustaining relationships held to esteem.
This identity emerged from both the what and the how of the participants’ interview responses; not only was the description of this identity constructed from what they said they did, what experiences informed them, and what groups they connected with but also how they talked about these things. This initial depiction of professional identity presented in the preceding chapter may begin the conversation about academic affairs professionals, but there is more to their story. This final chapter attempts to situate the academic affairs professional’s identity within the context of other prominent identities within higher education, as well as suggest implications for practice and future research.

Discussion
This section returns to the question posed at the outset of this study: who are academic affairs professionals? In reviewing the findings of this study within the context of the existing literature, an answer begins to emerge. Academic affairs professionals share much in common with their faculty and student affairs colleagues. Although it manifests differently for each group, at the core of each profession is a commitment to serve. Faculty are committed to creating and disseminating knowledge for the public good (Austin, 1990; Love et al., 1993), student affairs professionals aim to support the holistic development of students (Cutler, 2003; Crim, 2006), and academic affairs professionals work to serve students and their academic experiences. While each group has different functions, they share in their desire to serve within the higher education environment.

In addition to this shared mission, all three populations are similarly shaped by graduate education and professional organizations. Existing literature demonstrated the
influential nature of both entities for faculty (Reybold, 2003; Wilkins, 2007) and student affairs professionals (Carpenter & Miller, 1981; Crim, 2006), and the findings of this study suggest similar impact for academic affairs professionals. Graduate education and professional organizations serve a similar function for all of these professionals in that they both inform and perpetuate professional culture, albeit the norms and values that are instilled vary depending on the discipline or focus of the program or organization. Although academic affairs professionals lack specificity in professional development options, there is still evidence that they are influenced by graduate education and professional associations that are accessible and suitable to their work.

Although academic affairs professionals may share similarities with faculty and student affairs professionals, the findings of this study also suggest how they contrast with these groups. Due to differences along some key dimensions, academic affairs professionals generally do not identify as faculty (at least when using faculty to represent teaching and research faculty). Even though they may feel an affinity towards the academic units that they work for, academic affairs professionals employed as classified staff seem to experience a finite boundary between themselves and their faculty colleagues. The differences between each group’s primary function and employment classification, which translate to diverging work, preferred work styles, and status, constitute much of the divide. However, this study did find that academic affairs professionals are also employed as administrative faculty, some of whom transitioned into that employment classification from teaching faculty positions. For academic affairs professionals who maintained teaching responsibilities, the faculty identity was more
accessible, but the administrative nature of their roles still separated them from feeling like they can fully ascribe to the faculty identity.

Despite being a more difficult relationship to ascertain, academic affairs professionals are also not student affairs professionals. The prototypical student affairs professional and academic affairs professional have both completed graduate education related to higher education administration (Carpenter & Miller, 1981; Crim, 2006). Both are service-oriented and particularly focused on college student success (Cutler, 2003; Crim, 2006). Many academic affairs professionals in this study even readily identified as student affairs professionals. Yet despite the significant similarities between these two groups, the organizational structures in which they work have allowed distinct identities to emerge. One of the most striking findings from this study was the notion that the participants may have identified differently if they had worked in student affairs departments as opposed to academic ones, which suggests that there may be some fundamental differences between academic units and student affairs departments that result in different identities. One possible explanation is that unlike student affairs professionals, who generally work in departments comprised of other student affairs professionals, academic affairs professionals work in environments where they are generally the minority, if not the sole non-faculty member. The intimate exposure to other identities coupled with the perpetual “otherness” seems to have given academic affairs professionals the freedom to develop their own unique identity within the higher education landscape.
In juxtaposition to defining this population by what they are not, one affirmative statement pertaining to academic affairs professionals is that they are a type of mid-level administrator. As outlined in the literature review, mid-level administrators “are by and large oriented to the service of faculty and students” (Scott, 1980, p. 390) and engage in work that mandates a commitment to building relationships (Hazel, 2012; Rosser, 2000; Szekeres, 2004). As evidenced through the interviews, academic affairs professionals shared these commitments to service and relational work, which is a defining component of the academic affairs professional’s identity. Additionally, the literature on mid-level administrators addresses the “invisible” nature of their work (Szekeres, 2004), as they are often tasked with carrying out decisions that they were not necessarily involved in making (Rosser, 2000; Scott, 1980). Similarly, the academic affairs professionals in this study commented on their ability to provide input for departmental decisions, but it was the faculty administrators that typically made the decisions. Given these parallels, the notion that academic affairs professionals are mid-level administrators seems unequivocal in comparison to the group’s standing with the other populations discussed previously.

Considering the portrait of the academic affairs professional, even if it can be argued that a common identity exists, this population does not necessarily identify as a collective group. There are a number of factors potentially contributing to this, one being the lack of consistent terminology to describe the group. Admittedly, the term academic affairs professional was used in this study to parallel a familiar term, student affairs professional, while not limiting the title of the group to a specific function (i.e., academic
advisor). However, *academic affairs professional* is by no means a universally-recognized term presently. While some participants referred to themselves by these terms, others opted to use *academic administrator* or did not have a term they used to reference their professional selves. This lack of consistency pertaining to the specific combination of words used to describe this population creates challenges in defining the group, much less unifying individuals as a group.

Another challenge is that academic affairs exhibits less progress along the path to professionalization, especially in comparison to faculty but also to student affairs. In addition to lacking a name, there are no credentials specific to academic affairs nor any national professional organizations for the field as a whole. Instead, academic affairs professionals turn to what is available: graduate programs in student affairs and higher education administration in general and the professional organizations for academic advising and student affairs. These serve as close enough approximations, in lieu of professional development opportunities specifically aligned with academic affairs, but ultimately confound the ability to recognize the unique nature of academic affairs.

**Implications**

Recognizing that this population is unique is not only significant from a social scientific perspective. In a time of uncertainty within higher education, when campuses are closing and hiring freezes are enacted, institutions may increasingly need to justify employment practices, particularly within administrative ranks. Acknowledging that academic affairs professionals perform a specific and valuable function is important for sustaining these kinds of roles. Even at Central University, many participants alluded to
the perceived encroachment of student affairs into what they believed to be the territory of academic affairs. This situation exemplifies the need for academic affairs professionals to codify their work and organize as a profession.

If nothing else, this study demonstrates a need for a universally-recognized name for this population. The lack of consistent terminology used to refer to individuals doing this work is impeding any subsequent understanding of this population. For example, one participant in this study did meet the inclusion criteria, but in the interview, it became apparent that her work was predominantly in the realm of recruitment, admissions, and enrollment. Although the other academic affairs professionals in this study often supported these functions, they were not necessarily the primary foci of their work. Without recognized parameters on what constitutes the role of the academic affairs professional, it becomes difficult to distinguish one group of higher education professionals from another, especially when certain responsibilities overlap between multiple groups. Whether it be academic affairs professionals, academic administrators, or some other variant, a name would allow individuals to recognize others who belong to the same group and share an identity and values, especially when they may be separated by job titles or professional backgrounds.

However, a precursor to recognizing colleagues who may share an identity is the ability for an individual to acknowledge and reflect upon his/her own identity. Many of the participants in this study admitted that they had not thought about their own professional identities prior to our conversations. Part of the lack of attention given to professional identity amongst this population could be the absence of a way to define
themselves that is congruent with others. The establishment of set terminology to define the population may help eliminate one of the barriers to forming and recognizing a collective professional identity. However, individuals would also need to internalize and claim said identity for it to exist beyond the personal level and truly be a shared social identity. To do so, they would first need to reflect upon and understand the tenets of their professional identities and the values they hold to esteem, and only then could they ascertain if there is sufficient congruence to adopt the collective identity of and claim membership to the group. Although patterns suggest a common identity exists for academic affairs professionals, without introspection at the individual level, there could be no assessment of congruence with the group and ultimately no collective identity. Therefore, it appears that a movement to name and claim the identity is warranted for any advancement to occur for academic affairs professionals as a group.

Another significant mechanism of establishing and proliferating a collective professional identity could be the ability to organize as a group. Again, having a universally-recognized name and definition would aid this population’s ability to come together. In this study, it was evident that the Central Academic Advisor Network played a pivotal role in the professional lives of its members. It was not only able to provide professional development to its members but also a sense of community where there once was none. These significant outcomes suggest that intra-institutional organizations for academic affairs professionals have a valuable role to play for this population. From a social identity perspective, intragroup interactions can enhance the group’s sense of identity cohesion (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005); for academic affairs professionals,
organizing could serve as a mechanism to further unite individuals and refine the characteristics of the collective identity. In turn, as the social identity becomes more finite, the lines between the in-group and out-groups take shape. Although this could lead to potential conflict between academic affairs professionals and other institutional colleagues (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), the fact that boundaries exist could actually elevate the status of academic affairs professionals, as they would be seen as a relevant out-group meriting acknowledgement, instead of maintaining their current “invisible” status.

Organizing at the institutional level may result in enhanced cohesion and recognition locally, but there may additional benefits to making a more concerted effort to recognize academic affairs as a distinct professional path within higher education at a national level. Based on this study’s findings, it is evident that there is a desire within this population for opportunities to collaborate and access professional development opportunities beyond the institution level, but the existing professional organizations and their offerings do not always meet their needs. To provide the environment and experiences academic affairs professionals are seeking, two paths emerge, one being more pronounced efforts within existing organizations to cater to the needs of academic affairs professionals, the other resulting in the development of a national professional organization solely dedicated to academic affairs professionals. Further inquiry would need to be executed to determine which option would be of most interest and value to academic affairs professionals, but either would likely further enhance cohesion within the community.
Future Research

Given this study’s exploratory nature, there is ample opportunity to advance a line of research on academic affairs professionals. For one, a substantial limitation of this study is its case study nature. Given the diversity of higher education institutions in the United States, much less globally, it is impossible to extrapolate this study’s findings to represent the professional identities of all non-faculty performing academic affairs work. Whereas this study focused on academic affairs professionals at a single institution, additional research that includes individuals doing such work at different kinds of institutions is merited, particularly given that the participants described the significant ways that the institution’s structure shaped their professional identities. For example, it would be interesting to uncover if small, baccalaureate colleges have a cadre of academic affairs professionals, similar to what was found at the Research I university studied here, and if so, if those individuals share any similarities with the participants in this study with regards to professional identity and its development.

Although beyond the scope of this study, another direction for future research on this population would be to investigate how personal identity interacts with professional identity for academic affairs professionals. Certain elements of personal identity, such as age, gender, and race/ethnic identity, may moderate professional identity. We have seen this in studies on faculty (Kardia & Wright, 2004; Lester, 2008), and studying this phenomenon in academic affairs professionals would aid in a more nuanced understanding of this population.

Additionally, the use of alternate research methods may prove to be fruitful in better understanding this population. While this study relied on interviews, methods such
as observation and participant journaling may corroborate this study’s findings or introduce different themes due the different perspectives these methods address. Of particular interest is longitudinal qualitative research, where data could be collected over a period of time to determine if or how identity fluctuates due to situations and circumstances.

**Conclusion**

While there is much more to learn about academic affairs professionals, the intention of this study was simply to begin the conversation. Absent from the existing higher education literature, it is time to acknowledge the group of professionals who perform the vital function of supporting academic endeavors from non-faculty positions. This study extends anecdotal experiences by providing qualitative data to support the proposal that the academic affairs professional occupies a unique space and identity within the higher education landscape, although the current lack of recognition presents challenges in unifying the population. With this introductory foray into gaining understanding of this group, it is hoped that academic affairs professionals garner additional attention within both the research and practice of higher education, resulting in further codification, awareness, and advancement of the profession and those committed to pursuing it.
APPENDIX A

INTRODUCTION
1. Tell me about the parts of your current job that are most rewarding.

PARTICIPANT PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND FOLLOW-UP
1. Who do you primarily interact with at the institution in your current position?
2. Do you think your education has impacted your current work? How so?
3. I see that you indicated on the pre-interview questionnaire that you’re a member of [name of professional association]. Why did you decide to join those specifically?

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS
4. How do you define the function of academic affairs?
5. Do you feel that academic affairs is a distinct professional path within higher education? Why or why not?

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY
6. Consider the following commonly recognized groups within the university setting: administrator, faculty, staff, student. Do you identify with one or more of these categories? If so, which one(s) and why? If not, how do you describe your professional identity?
7. Please describe a specific experience that either challenged or confirmed your personal concept of your professional identity.
8. What or who has been the most influential factor on your conception of your professional identity?
9. What communities within the institution do you feel a part of?
10. What communities within the institution, if any, do you experience any tension with?
11. Do you believe that there is a common or collective identity for academic affairs professionals? Why or why not?

FINAL REMARKS
12. Is there anything else that you would like to share about what defines your professional identity that we haven’t discussed so far?
REFERENCES


Brydin Banning Eckert graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from George Mason University in 2009. She has worked in higher education for over eight years, primarily in admissions and academic advising roles, and was recognized as the 2013 Academic Advisor of the Year and the 2014 Student Organization Advisor of the Year for George Mason University. A native of Virginia, Brydin currently resides in Centennial, CO with her husband Michael.