Perceptions of Self and Career by Administrators in a Specialized Institution of Higher Education

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Jonathan D. Jump

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This dissertation titled
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by

JONATHAN D. JUMP

has been approved for
the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
and The Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education and Human Services by

______________________________

Robert B. Young
Professor of Counseling and Higher Education

______________________________

Renée A. Middleton
Dean, The Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education and Human Services
Abstract

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Perceptions of Self and Career by Administrators in a Specialized Institution of Higher Education

Director of Dissertation: Robert B. Young

This qualitative study examined the experiences of lay administrators at freestanding theological seminaries, their perceptions of meaning related to their work, and how those perceptions have an impact on decisions about their careers. Schlossberg’s research on career transitions, and marginality and mattering, informed the inquiry. The study sought to identify the self-perceptions of lay administrators of freestanding seminaries within their workplaces, and within the academy. Analysis of interviewed participants was approached from a phenomenological perspective, using Colaizzi’s (1978) model of phenomenological inquiry. Results indicate that lay administrators focused on themes of knowledge, community, change, leadership, and the insider’s perspective when thinking about themselves and their careers.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Robert B. Young

Professor of Counseling and Higher Education
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Chapter One

Introduction

Theological education comprises a unique niche within the realm of graduate-level higher education in America. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2007), in 2004-05 the 7237 graduate degrees awarded nationwide in theology and religious vocations accounted for just over one percent of the total number of graduate degrees awarded across all fields of study. These degrees were provided by more than 250 institutions of higher learning that have a mission to educate students for service in one of a variety of forms of ministry, and most are accredited or in candidacy for accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS). Others are unaccredited schools with similar missions (Association of Theological Schools, 2008).

Within those institutions accredited by ATS, 165 are categorized as “freestanding seminaries.” Freestanding seminaries may share resources or other connections with colleges and universities, but are not under the control of any other school’s formal governance structure (Association of Theological Schools, 2008). In 2007-08, the average enrollment at a freestanding theological seminary in America was 366 students; the median enrollment was 193 (Association of Theological Schools, 2008). Thus, in terms of enrolled students, a freestanding theological seminary is comparable to a single department at a larger college or university.

Freestanding seminaries collect only about one-third of their revenue from tuition, unlike some larger institutions, and frequently lack the resources that affiliation with a
larger institution would provide (Pulley, 2006). One consequence of scarce resources in a small institution is that staff size is necessarily lean, and opportunities to hire new employees are few. In particular, administrative or professional staff employees may find themselves holding positions that incorporate an assortment of duties, because the school cannot add staff to meet its service needs.

Opportunities for continuing professional education are available to administrators in the freestanding theological seminary environment, though job demands can limit participation. Their institutions are represented by special interest groups in general professional organizations in higher education. For instance, the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) includes a “theological schools roundtable” at its annual conference, where members from these schools can gather and discuss their unique tasks within the larger context of their professional field. Freestanding seminaries, attached seminaries, and college-seminary integrated combinations participate in the round table. In addition, AACRAO has recognized the distinctive character of seminaries by providing interest groups for administrators. These groups help seminary administrators understand their membership in a professional community separate from the seminary community.

**Statement of the Problem**

Very little is known about persons working as administrators in the unique environment of a theological seminary, despite the presence of professional associations. The researcher knows many who are lay administrators who serve the mission of their institutions through their vocation, but unlike others at the seminary, might not be
members of that specific religious community. Many of their colleagues in the seminary community of faculty, students, and staff are persons whose steadfast commitment to religious traditions or principles rooted in faith has shaped the trajectory of their lives. To them, participation in such a community seems perfectly natural, if not inevitable.

Thus, the uniqueness of a seminary environment – one of academic inquiry rooted in a particular faith tradition – may be isolating for employees if they believe they are not central to the academic mission and/or to the belief system. Do these lay administrators believe that their administrative work matters to their institutions, or to their professions, or are they marginalized in both arenas?

Lay administrators in seminaries are “cultural hybrids,” and Park (1928) called such hybrid persons “marginal men” – people who live in two distinct cultural groups without a firm identity in either. Lay administrators in seminaries are members of two professional communities, their functional and institutional ones, and their institutional identification is less secure, and conceivably marginalized by their lay status.

Feelings of isolation and unimportance can lead to an overall sense of “marginality” within an organization (Schlossberg, 1989a). In contrast to marginality, “mattering” refers to feelings of being needed and valued by others (Schlossberg, 1989a). When others are concerned with an individual’s well-being, either out of empathy or because their own fortunes are affected, the individual’s sense of mattering is enhanced, which might affect his or her actions in a positive way (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore seminary lay administrators’ self-perceptions of their marginality and mattering within their institutions and profession, and the relationship, if any, of these perceptions to perceptions of the administrators’ career advancement within the professional community.

Nature of the Study

The research was a qualitative study of administrators at freestanding seminaries who are not clergy members or do not hold a recognized ecclesiastical status, and who have spent at least five years in an administrative position (as defined by ATS). The methodology selected for the study was qualitative for two primary reasons. First, there is little research about the population of interest, and second, because the nature of the experiences being examined required openness to the possibility of divergent perspectives. Quantitative study, which assumes an objective reality that is knowable in different degrees, would not accommodate this potential for variety, nor would it capture the rich detail that might characterize the lived experiences of theological seminary lay administrators (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). The present study was an exploratory inquiry for the purpose of generating hypotheses regarding the beliefs and influences of this specific cultural group. Research in the qualitative tradition held the most promise for the successful origination of these hypotheses (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell, 1988).

The research question at the heart of the study is: how do lay administrators – those members of the seminary community whose professional connection to the institution’s mission and purpose differs from many of their colleagues – develop and
manage their professional self-perceptions? A related question is: how do these same seminary lay administrators understand the dimensions of their employment at the seminary, especially as it relates to their individual abilities to move into similar or advanced positions within higher education? At the outset of the research, these major question areas were expanded in the following, tentative ways:

Research Question 1: How do lay administrators of freestanding seminaries develop and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their workplaces?

- What, if any, work experience in higher education did the lay administrators have prior to beginning work at a freestanding seminary, and what reasons motivated their decisions to work in this environment?
- How do the lay administrators understand and internalize their value to the institution?
- How do the lay administrators come to perceive their status within the profession while working at the seminary?
- How have any of these perceptions changed during their time at the seminary?

Research Question 2: How do lay administrators of freestanding seminaries develop and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their larger professional communities in higher education?

- How do the lay administrators understand and internalize their status within the larger professional community of higher education?
• What are the lay administrators’ perceptions of the status of seminary education generally, within the larger community of higher education? What, if any, reasons do they offer for this perception?

• What are the lay administrators’ perceptions of their abilities to effectively network within the larger higher education community, and the impact of these perceptions on career mobility within their fields?

• How do these relate to any of the lay administrators’ decisions about whether or not to seek employment elsewhere in higher education?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the body of literature about theological seminary education, about leadership in higher education, and it adds to literature about the significance of perceived mattering in the vocational context.

Broadly speaking, much of the literature on employees in higher education aims to be as applicable across as many contexts as possible, and thus there few studies that deal directly with specialized, idiosyncratic institutions such as freestanding theological seminaries. Lay administrators of freestanding theological seminaries constitute a small and often overlooked population of study within the higher education literature, but they are key to the success of their employing institutions, and thus worthy of study. Additionally, though their prevalence has diminished over the years, theological seminaries played an important role in the development of higher education in America. Seminaries and divinity schools in the nineteenth century expanded education throughout
the country, as alumni of these institutions proceeded to establish a variety of educational institutions, including many leading colleges and universities (Naylor, 1977).

Prior studies address mattering as a construct in the vocational experience of employees in a specialized vocational group, such as school counselors (Dixon Rayle, 2006). This study adds another group context and augments the body of literature on mattering at work by adding information about the experiences of the participants. This study might provide helpful insight for higher education institutions that are interested in attracting and retaining talented administrators for long-term positions. In addition to the potential benefit to institutions, however, lies the psychological benefit to administrators who want to better understand their own work and improve its quality.

**Research Concerns Related to Conducting this Qualitative Study**

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument of choosing questions, gathering information, and interpreting the information he or she gathers. Bias can affect both the questions presented to participants and the interpretation of the responses, so the quality of the results is inextricably linked to the interviewing skills of the researcher and on the diligence of the researcher’s analysis. However, the researcher’s experience can also facilitate and inform the execution and outcome of the study. I present information about my participation in the process later in this chapter.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to lay, middle management administrators at freestanding theological seminaries. It focused on a very specific subset of membership within the higher education community and a specific area of concern. I did not aim to
identify the reasons that seminary lay administrators may or may not be able to advance within their professions by securing employment at traditional institutions. Rather, my research interest involved perceptions of mattering or marginality that might be generated and the impact of those perceptions on the participants’ experience of working at a seminary. Finally, the study addressed only employees at the administrative or professional staff level. It did not have implications for any other employees at theological institutions, such as faculty members, who may also consider employment in traditional institutions for future employment.

**Definition of Terms**

**Seminary.** A seminary in this study refers to an institution of higher learning, usually at the graduate level, which specializes in educating students for religious vocations.

**Freestanding.** A “freestanding” theological seminary is one that is not associated with a larger university (a divinity school). Participants in this study were selected on the basis of their employment at a freestanding theological seminary.

**Lay administrator.** In this study, “lay administrator” refers to an employee of the seminary who is not a member of the clergy by ordination, and whose position as the seminary is at the administrative level as defined by ATS. Lay administrators in this study do not hold faculty status at their institutions. Examples of position titles common at this level would include registrars, admissions directors, financial aid directors, controllers, public relations directors, and development officers.
Marginality. Marginality refers to feelings of isolation or lack of importance (Schlossberg, 1989a).

Mattering. Mattering refers to feelings of being needed and valued by others (Schlossberg, 1989a).

Transition. Transition refers to an event or nonevent resulting in changed relationships, routines, structures or roles (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

Reformed tradition. The term “Reformed tradition,” as it is used in this study, refers to Protestant church denominations whose history and doctrines are rooted in the teachings of John Calvin. Reformed churches express their beliefs through historical faith statements called confessions, of which there are many. There is great variety among churches that may all call themselves “Reformed,” as not all denominations accept the same sets of confessions.

Contextual education. The term “contextual education,” as it is used in this study, refers to part of a theological school’s curriculum designed to integrate practical experience with classroom study. This is often accomplished through the student’s engagement in a year-long church placement or other ministry setting, complemented by concurrent enrollment in an academic course intended to enhance and illuminate practical experiences from the ministry setting.

Epoché

This qualitative study was phenomenological in nature. Phenomenology is concerned with description of the essential nature of a subjective experience (Van Manen, 1990). As such, the phenomenological researcher must explore his or her own
experiences as a starting point for research. As Van Manen (1990) explained, one’s own life experiences are accessible to the researcher in a way that the experiences of others are not. Beginning research with attention to one’s own experiences at the start serves at least two important purposes that enhance the quality of the study. It establishes the researcher’s level of familiarity with the topic and informs the reader about presuppositions that might affect conclusions, and it helps the researcher explore any prejudices, viewpoints and other assumptions that, if left unaddressed, might have an undue impact on those same conclusions (Van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

The process of self-examination is called epoché, a procedure by which the researcher seeks to elucidate and remove pre-conceptions prior to beginning the study. The process of epoché is the foundation of a rigorous phenomenological analysis because it fosters a “phenomenological attitude shift” within the researcher that allows for personal biases or predispositions to be identified and set aside, or at least make them more clear and understood (Patton, 2002). Because my own career experience as a seminary administrator mirrors that of the participants I intend to study, epoché may best be achieved through personal narrative at the beginning of the analysis. In the remainder of Chapter One, I describe my own perceptions and experiences that result from my occupation as a seminary administrator, in an effort to identify biases and avoid their undue influence on analysis.
My Experience as a Seminary Administrator

When I began working at a seminary in May 2000, I had no prior work experience in higher education. I had been unemployed for six months because my previous position at a computer services company was eliminated through restructuring. Even though I knew that I was not responsible for the loss of my job, the period of unemployment affected my confidence and feelings of self-worth. I could not escape the notion that they would have kept me on in some capacity if I had really been good enough.

I was so naïve about religion that I found myself terrified when the president’s assistant from a local seminary called me for an interview in response to my application for their opening for a registrar. My childhood home was not religious, and my understanding of faith was minimal at best. At that point in my life, if I learned that someone was religious, I would have most likely avoided him or her on the assumption that we would have little in common. Even though this prejudice has not been supported by my adult experience – my wife, for instance, is from a devout Roman Catholic family – however, I expected to address questions about my own positions on faith, or even to sign something to that effect in an interview at a theological school about my own positions on faith. I did not know how I would react to that. I did not think I could pretend to be sincere about having religious faith. I also knew that I needed the job desperately, and it was unlikely that my experience would warrant consideration from another college, at least for a mid-level position.

So my first experience inside the walls of a seminary was one of profound relief. My interview with the search committee was not much different than any other interview
I had faced. The chief difference was the portion of the interview that was a conversation with about 20 other students, staff and faculty members, but religious topics never came up. They were simply interested to know more about someone who sought to become part of their community. My interaction with them put me at ease, and the rest of the interview went very well. About 10 minutes after arriving home, I received a call from the school’s president who offered me the position.

Working in a seminary environment has made me acclimate to an unfamiliar cultural group. I knew very little about the school prior to my employment, because I was not interested in religious leaders. My beliefs about basic human rights and decency were affirmed outside Christian traditions, or at least were not acknowledged as such. So, the idea that I would work at a seminary was humorous, if not preposterous, to me when I first took the job.

I have learned to function very well within this cultural group, even though my own understanding of religion has remained shallow. I have learned which version of The Bible is preferred by a majority of our faculty and students; I have learned the appropriate response to vaguely familiar words like “hermeneutics”, “evangelical” or “fundamentalist”; and after nine years I know that the Old Testament (called Hebrew Bible at my school) has “Books” and the New Testament has “Gospels,” and when presented with these books and gospels by name I can identify which are which with nearly one hundred percent accuracy, even though I know nothing of their content. However, during the time I was acquiring my limited base of knowledge, I recall feeling somewhat like a fraud, and that one day my ignorance could cause embarrassment to the
school and to myself. That feeling has never completely gone away, though it has dissipated over time and is no longer prevalent in my day-to-day experiences.

There have been a few times when I have been embarrassed by my deficits in religious knowledge. Although they rarely come to the forefront on a typical day, I am always aware of these deficits. In addition, I have grown accustomed to expressions of faith that are uncommon in most workplaces, such as when meetings begin with prayer. But I have nothing to offer if a meeting opens with the chair asking for participants to share their favorite Bible verse. This is uncomfortable because so many people are there for the explicit purpose of pursuing theological questions, and it is often assumed that everyone in the community has a baseline knowledge of Biblical and theological principles that is greater than the general public’s. Perhaps this assumption is reasonable, even though my own presence in the community contradicts it.

I have held three different positions and titles at the seminary – Registrar, Director of Admissions and Public Relations, and now Vice President of Administrative Services. My value to the seminary is not related to my knowledge of religion; it is due to my work as a dependable and knowledgeable administrator. The hiring practices for staff over the years at my school are, I am told, very similar to those of a church. Agreeableness and other personal qualities of candidates for a position are more important than their skills to fulfill job duties. Thus, key positions can be filled with people whose competence can be questioned. A reliable, knowledgeable employee stands out in many workplaces, but even more so at my school. By simply working hard and well at my basic job duties, I have earned a reputation for making positive contributions.
In my current position I oversee several functions of the school because of its small size. I have no prior experience with or specific education about these functions, and even the new things I learn how to manage in my position are so affected by my environment that I am not sure I could claim them as proficiencies in a different context. I am haunted by the notion that I could not have achieved a vice presidency in a more traditional school, and since my experiences are not likely to be qualitatively different at the seminary in the years to come, I am not sure that I will be able to get past this notion. I cannot go any further at the seminary, since the presidency requires United Methodist church membership and connections that I will never have. My best option for career progression is with another college or university, and I believe my experience is beginning to limit my ability to pursue this avenue, even as I learn to do my own job more effectively. This is a troubling paradox.

It has been my experience that many staff members and some faculty members at traditional colleges and universities are vaguely suspicious of church-based higher education institutions in general, and this suspicion is more pronounced when the institution is a seminary or divinity school. This is based on my interactions as an admissions director with recruiting contacts from both small liberal arts colleges and medium-to-large universities. My recruiting staff colleagues and I have been cautioned not to expect much of a turnout at our table if we go to a recruiting fair, or set up a time to be on campus to meet with students individually, even at schools where we have had recruiting success before.
My experience with recruiting suggests that educated people in America are steadily moving away from religion as a foundational belief system. When religion is a central component of current events, its representatives often appear fanatical, buffoonish, naïve, hateful, or some combination of all of these. At best, faith might be seen by some educated persons as quaint and traditional, without any particular meaning, but religion is acceptable to the extent that it provides some structure to life that is probably not harmful in moderation. This perception causes me some internal tension, because I understand it, though it makes my task as a seminary recruiter more difficult. It might be the view I would hold, had I not spent several years at work in a seminary.

And yet, my employment at a seminary has enriched my life. Because of my interactions with seminary students, I became interested in a church in the city where I live, and after a few visits my wife and I have become active members of this church. While my own concepts of God remain vaguely defined, I have come to realize that this is not so uncommon, even for those who profess faith and commit their lives to it. I have come to view participation in a faith community as a way to collectively celebrate our journey through life. I have also realized that many thinking persons of strong faith reject the tenets of popular religion that I find most troubling, such as the idea of personal salvation. I believe that we honor the God presence in our lives through what we achieve in community, more than as individuals. It has been gratifying to discover that so many smart, interesting people agree with me on that point.
Chapter Two

Introduction

This chapter is a review of literature pertinent to the research. It begins with a discussion of seminary education in the United States, with special attention to what distinguishes it from other areas of professional education within the academy. This section is followed by a review of the literature about mid-level administrators and managers in higher education. Marginality and mattering are then discussed as key constructs related to job satisfaction, followed by career satisfaction and transitions among adults.

Institutional Types in Higher Education

Contemporary higher education in America is characterized by the diversity of its institutional types. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2009) differentiates institutions by the types of degrees offered by the various institutions, and research literature on higher education commonly refers to issues in public research or comprehensive regional universities, private liberal arts colleges and universities, community colleges, or the growing field of for-profit colleges and universities.

Within these institutional types, an even greater variety of educational emphases exists. For example, The Carnegie Foundation differentiates doctoral-granting universities by their emphasis and level of activity committed to research. The category of associate’s colleges contains many further sub-categories, for example, whether the school serves a rural, urban or suburban community; whether it is a single or multi-campus institution; whether it is primarily a two-year or four-year institution, or whether
it is public or private, and non-profit or for-profit (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009).

A smaller and less-examined category in the Carnegie classification scheme is the special focus institution, defined as an institution “awarding baccalaureate or higher-level degrees where a high concentration of degrees is in a single field or set of related fields” (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009). Most prominent in the special focus category are schools of medicine, law, business, and engineering. Among the nine Carnegie subdivisions of special focus institutions, one will find a subcategory titled “Faith.” This simple description is used to encompass “theological seminaries, Bible colleges, and other faith-related institutions” (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009). Though it is a useful and purposeful description for the data-collecting needs of The Carnegie Foundation, its simplicity masks significant diversity between the institutions that comprise the classification.

**Seminaries in the United States**

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as the national accrediting organization for graduate theological education. In the fall of 2006, there were 253 member schools accredited, awaiting accreditation, or in an associate status with ATS; 217 of these schools were in the United States (Association of Theological Schools, 2007). Accreditation through ATS currently provides the only available access for a graduate theological school to participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs; in the field of theological education, this advantage is thought to provide legitimacy to the ATS
imprimatur. However, there are many other avenues for the training of prospective ministers in the United States, such as Bible institutes, Bible colleges, and correspondence schools. These institutions may be accredited by other national accrediting organizations such as the Association for Biblical Higher Education, or they may be unaccredited.

There is great variety of opinion among American religious denominations on the value of graduate theological education. Many mainline denominations insist on graduate level education for their church leaders, while some find training at or below the baccalaureate level to be satisfactory. Still other denominations place more emphasis on an individual’s personal leadership qualities or demonstrated spiritual gifts than on any particular level of education. It is in this context that education for the ministry exists today, in sharp contrast with the perceived significance of the discipline at the time of America’s founding.

The need for education of ministers served as the rationale for the establishment of nearly all of the colleges in seventeenth century colonial America (Naylor, 1977). The first graduate seminary in the United States – specifically for post-baccalaureate training in divinity studies – was founded in 1807 in Andover, Massachusetts. In the early nineteenth century, the establishment of higher education institutions committed to a singular vocational purpose was common. The seminary at Andover was one such product of the era, which also saw the founding of the United States Military Academy in 1802 and the Rensselaer School in 1824, committed to the application of the sciences. Seminary education quickly became not only the conventional model for the professional
preparation of clergy, but served as a precursor to the liberal arts college in American higher education, meeting many of the societal educational needs that would later be addressed by graduate schools of arts and sciences in the modern university (Naylor, 1977).

Andover, as well as Princeton in 1812 and the 15 additional seminaries or divinity schools that would be established by 1825, came into existence in a transitional era in American history. The dawn of the movement toward urbanization in American society brought with it a trend toward the secularization of beliefs. Where local church pastors had been the dominant purveyors of theology and enlightened thought, with commensurate political influence in their communities, professor-scholars began to assume the responsibility for shaping the nation’s understanding of theological principles (Hiestand, 2008). Ironically, the emergence of academies for the disciplined study of theology and divinity was coinciding with cultural shifts that contribute to the dwindling authority of religious influence in local communities. Population growth meant that towns became too big to be served by a single church, and local ordinances mandating church attendance became impossible to enforce (Hiestand, 2008). The historical background on theological seminaries describes a tension between the academic study of theology in seminaries and the communities that seminaries serve has existed since the very origin of the seminary in America.

Kezar (2001) proposed that insights on institutional culture in higher education may be found through examination of unique attributes of institutions and how they facilitate or inhibit change. One distinguishing feature of theological education is that its
curricular structure of four primary divisions – Biblical studies, church history, theological studies, and practical theology – has not changed significantly in over 100 years (Oliver, 2001; Handy, 1982). Such a curricular structure is essentially uniform throughout all seminaries. This is perhaps unsurprising for a field of study which exists to pursue an understanding of truth as it is derived from stories and texts that are over 3500 years old. Seminaries remain distinct in the academy, however, due to the uniqueness of their purpose and the constancy of how that purpose is pursued. Curriculum serves as a dominating influence on the culture of individual seminaries, and thus contributes mightily to the ethos in which seminary employees make decisions related to their jobs.

Seminaries are also unique within the academy due to their small size. In 2008, the average headcount enrollment of all ATS-member schools in the United States was 337 students (Association of Theological Schools, 2009). Freestanding seminaries comprise over 70% of ATS-member schools, and are primarily tuition-dependent but typically have lower enrollments than the ATS average.

There are 22 administrative positions at seminaries for which The Association of Theological Schools regularly compiles salary data as part of it annual data collection. The administrative positions identified by ATS capture some but not all of the mid-level positions eligible for participation in the present study. Examples of eligible mid-level positions are development professional staff, dean of students, director of student services, director of graduate studies, director of Doctor of Ministry, director of field education, director of continuing education, director of formation, librarian professional
staff, information systems manager, admissions officer, recruitment officer, registrar, and alumni officer. Not every one of these positions is filled by a single individual at every seminary; indeed, some of the positions identified by ATS would have an overlapping set of responsibilities at many seminaries with other positions on the list (for example, few seminaries may have both a Dean of Students and a Director of Student Services). An even more common occurrence is for some of the positions on this list to function as “add-ons” for another faculty or staff member, in addition to other duties; for example, a single staff member may serve as both admissions officer and registrar, or a member of the teaching faculty may also serve as director of field education or Doctor of Ministry. Finally, ATS does not track salary data on a number of other mid-level positions common to many seminaries, and who participants in this study may hold; examples of such positions are financial aid officer, public relations director, and director of purchasing/controller.

**Mid-level Administrators in Higher Education**

A significant body of literature exists on mid-level managers and administrators in higher education. There are few scholars who commit to researching this group, though those who do this research have become relatively prolific. As a consequence, those who hold executive leadership roles in institutions, as well as other higher education scholars, are likely to speculate more about mid-level administrators than they actually know about them (Young, 2007).

Scott (1978) identified three essential functions of mid-level managers in higher education. They are the institutional intermediaries for financial, human and material
resources from external suppliers; they govern internal procedures for allocation of resources and control certain activity in the institution, especially activity related to external compliance matters; and they acquaint students with the norms, procedures, and standards of the institution, as well as the opportunities available, through their work with co-curricular programming and student activities (Scott, 1978).

Rosser (2004) conducted a seminal study on midlevel leaders in higher education, who she identified as the academy’s “unsung professionals.” As the administrative workload in higher education has expanded in recent years, midlevel leaders have been a growing personnel segment. However, they have also been a segment with a high rate of turnover (Rosser, 2004; Rosser and Javinar, 2003; Johnsrud, Heck and Rosser, 2000). A study by Johnsrud (1996) recognized three major areas of concern that affect job satisfaction for midlevel leaders: the midlevel nature of their role, lack of recognition, and limited opportunity for growth.

Given the general characteristics of a midlevel position in higher education, there would appear to be ample opportunity for these leaders to experience feelings of both marginality and mattering as distinguished by Schlossberg (1989a). Midlevel leaders are frequently enforcers of institutional policy, or even gatekeepers of admission, in their respective communities. These can be inherently powerful roles. However, the administrators who hold them may be constrained by the lack of authority to alter the directives that define their functions, or to assist in the development of those directives (Rosser, 2000).
Enhanced feelings of mattering, on the other hand, may have a positive effect on job morale, satisfaction, and even retention. Prior research on mid-level administrators in higher education has revealed that both individual and organizational variables are influential on decisions about whether or not to stay in a position, and that these variables may be structural or perceptual (Johnsrud and Rosser, 1999). Thus, one’s perception on the value and significance of his or her own work contributions to the institution, along with the perception of validation and affirmation one receives from the workplace, affect a mid-level administrator’s desire to stay in or leave a position. Research indicates that perceptual factors such as lack of recognition may be better predictors of turnover or actual intent to leave than structural or organizational concerns (Johnsrud and Rosser, 1999). The power of perception is clearly an important variable.

A study of community college administrators by Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2008) suggests that many mid-level administrators at the institutions they studied have minimal desire to move into more advanced positions in their institutions or elsewhere in the academy. A high turnover rate at community colleges provides urgency for leadership at these institutions to make executive leadership roles more appealing for mid-level leaders, by recognizing the diverse career paths that lead to their mid-level roles and considering mentoring programs (Garza Mitchell and Eddy, 2008). Years earlier, research by Fey and Carpenter (1996) identified fiscal management as the most critical skill for advancement that a mid-level administrator could acquire. They encouraged mid-level administrators to astutely observe their institutions’ greatest needs and continually pursue professional development opportunities.
Many mid-level administrators in higher education work in student affairs positions, and prior research addresses this group of professionals and their career advancement and professional development (Bryan and Mullendore, 1990; Carpenter, 1990; Winston and Creamer, 1997, 1998; Sermersheim and Keim, 2005; Kimbrough, 2007). Kimbrough (2007, p. 275) identified the student affairs profession as “one into which many seem to stumble without a clear sense of purpose,” and as such, ascension within the profession can follow a similar trajectory. Those mid-level administrators with higher career aspirations may find the pursuit of graduate-level education in their professional areas, including earning a terminal degree, as an effective and appropriate strategy for advancement. In addition to enhancing one’s content knowledge and broadening one’s perspective outside an already-established area of expertise, the pursuit of an advanced degree signifies a desire for professional growth beyond what can be accomplished as a practitioner, and is commonly listed as a preferred qualification for positions at the highest levels in student affairs. But aside from the educational value, the decision by a mid-level professional in student affairs, or by mid-level professionals in other areas, may be motivated by the perception that their work is undervalued by the academy and by their own institutions (Kimbrough, 2006). This tension is underscored in institutions where a chief student affairs officer is appointed directly from the faculty, without any experience or background knowledge specific to the role. Earning an advanced or terminal degree, therefore, becomes a mark of legitimacy for inclusion and membership in an academic community (Kimbrough, 2006). To the extent that there is a
perceived need to establish legitimacy in this manner, related perceptions of marginality and mattering may also be present for mid-level administrators.

Winston and Creamer (1997, 1998) identified some potential causes of ineffective professional development activity in student affairs; among them were a lack of integration of these activities with other staffing practices, and poor supervisory habits exercised by the administrators who oversee mid-level managers. Rather than simply arranging time for development activity consisting of workshops, professional conferences, etc. for mid-level professionals, the authors proposed a philosophy of supervisory practice they called synergistic supervision, achieved by synthesizing institutional and individual goals and enhancing communication and cooperation between student affairs managers and their supervisors (Winston and Creamer, 1998). The significance of the supervisor to the career outlook and trajectory of the mid-level manager has thus been held for some time in prior research as an important variable.

Marginality and Mattering

The work of Nancy K. Schlossberg is fundamental in the study of marginality and mattering. These two constructs have been identified in prior research for their importance for college students in building community, facilitating greater involvement, and inspiring leadership potential (Schlossberg, 1989a; Komives, Lucas and McMahon, 1998; Cheng, 2004). Marginality and mattering are also relevant in the study of adults in transition with their careers and in other parts of their lives, and Schlossberg also employs these ideas in her own research on transition, which is significant to this study and discussed later in this chapter.
Marginality, as a matter of individual perception, may be described as a state of dissonance between the role or status one anticipates for oneself in a particular context and the role that is actually experienced within that context. In contrast to mattering, marginality is characterized by an absence of belonging or feeling central or important. Schlossberg (1989a) used herself as an example to demonstrate how individuals may perceive that they matter a great deal in certain settings but can feel marginalized in other, even closely related settings, citing her sense of significance as a university faculty member in her office building as opposed to when she visited the campus dining hall. In some respect, this dissonance speaks to the familiarity with or command of the norms and customs of varying contexts, or the presence or absence of this familiarity or command. Periods of transition in one’s relationships, work, and other activities can further exacerbate this dissonance and tension (Schlossberg, 1989a).

Marginality in this sense is often a temporary experience, but has also been studied and described as having more permanent dimensions. Persons who become members of two distinct groups with differing traditions, norms, and expectations may have difficulty achieving a sense of full membership in either group (Park, 1928; Schlossberg, 1989a). For these persons, this tension can result in over-identification with the source of the marginality, to the point that “marginality . . . becomes their dominant mode of thinking and behaving” (Schlossberg, 1989a, p. 9). In addition, marginality that is culturally-defined may engender an even greater perception of permanence for an individual (Schlossberg, 1989a). Marginality in one’s higher education career as a function of gender or race has been a topic of interest for several scholars (Bar-Haim and
Generally, this research substantiates an assumption that achieving a sense of success, peace or comfort within higher education as a person marginalized by gender or race requires a certain amount of masking or even surrendering aspects of one’s personality.

Mattering, by contrast, is a perception of belonging and inclusion within a group that has been studied by Schlossberg (1989a, 1989b) and others (Connolly and Myers, 2003; Dixon Rayle, 2006; Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981). Schlossberg (1989a) interviewed 24 individuals at various life stages in an effort to discern their perceptions of mattering in their interpersonal relationships, their work, and their community activities. Her study was rooted in a framework established by sociologist Morris Rosenberg which assumed four aspects of mattering: attention (the interest or notice of others), importance (the belief that other’s care about one’s fate), ego-extension (the belief that others will experience happiness or sadness based on one’s success or failure), and dependence (the belief that one is needed by others). The results of the study led Schlossberg to add a fifth dimension of mattering to Rosenberg’s original model, appreciation (the belief that one’s contributions are both necessary and viewed in a positive light) (Schlossberg 1989a).

Mattering has also been related to job satisfaction. A study of business employees by Connolly and Myers (2003) suggested a positive relationship between job satisfaction and the belief that one matters to others in the workplace. Dixon Rayle (2006) studied the relationship between school counselors’ sense of mattering, job-related stress and job
satisfaction. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between both mattering and job-stress on the dependent variable of job satisfaction.

**Career Satisfaction and Transitions**

Seminary administrators with multiple years of service in their positions may be thought of as being at or near points of transition in their careers, where decisions are necessary about their futures within their professions and whether those futures will be lived inside or outside their current institutions. Questions of personal satisfaction with one’s current position influence these decisions, along with consideration of external factors that have an impact on both stability and satisfaction. Career transitions have been a salient area of inquiry for researchers in counseling and adult development over the years. As Kanchier and Unruh (1998, p. 127) stated, “adulthood is not a plateau,” and points of transition along the career cycle “allow adults to question who they are and where they want to go.”

Prior research on the topic of career transition suggests that there are a multitude of options for approaching them effectively. A study by Brown (1995) promoted the identification and inventory of personal values as a foundational step in addressing both planned and unplanned workplace transitions. Adams and Spencer (1988) proposed a seven-stage model that traced an individual’s trajectory through the transition process, which included early phases of destabilization, minimizing and questioning, leading to a turning point of letting go, and then shifting toward testing, searching for meaning, and finally integrating the new experience. The authors encouraged training and development
professionals to help persons in transition understand how the process unfolds so they may come to terms with it more easily.

Miles (2002) studied 15 senior executives who were involuntarily terminated from their positions but responded with greater resiliency and without loss of self-esteem that may be expected following surprising and unplanned transition. Results of this study indicate that enhancing self-awareness, improving coping skills, and actively planning for career alternatives are strategies that assuage the stress of unplanned transitions for the senior executives who participated. The generalizability of these findings may be questioned, however, given the public image and publicity that surrounded senior executives in the study, the reluctance of some participants to fully disclose their personal experiences, and the narrow focus of the research that discounted potentially salient variables such as gender, age, and personal health.

Schlossberg’s significant scholarship with attention to adults in transition provides both an extension and a practical application of her scholarship on marginality and mattering. Schlossberg’s (1984) book *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice with Theory* introduced frameworks for analyzing transitions that were refined and updated in later editions through advancement of her own scholarship and her collaboration with other scholars (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Transitions have many dimensions. They may be anticipated or unanticipated, elected or surprise, caused by an event or a non-event, variable by context and in their impact, and the beginning or end of the transition may be indeterminate (Schlossberg, 1989b). What is common to transition regardless of context or dimension is that they change
relationships, routines, structures, assumptions or roles (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

**Schlossberg’s 4-S System for Managing Transition**

Schlossberg’s 4-S System for managing the transitional experiences of adults is a fundamental model for understanding this process and its many dimensions. In Chapter Five of this study, the model is employed as part of the analysis of the experiences of two particular participants.

In her book titled *Overwhelmed: Coping with Life’s Ups and Downs*, Schlossberg (1989b) introduced the idea of the 4-S System for managing personal transitions. This approach requires assessment of one’s situation, self, support, and strategies as steps in coping with transition. Each of the four variables may be characterized in terms of assets and liabilities, or resources and deficits. An individual possesses a certain ratio of assets to liabilities at the point when transition occurs, but that ratio is fluid rather than fixed, and thus is influenced by adjustments within the individual and as the situation changes (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

**Situation**

Situation in the context of the 4-S model includes the components of trigger events, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, familiarity, and assessment. Among the questions to ask oneself in assessing situation are: what prompted the transition? How does the transition relate to one’s personal life events timeline? Can aspects of the transition be controlled? Does the transition bring about a change in roles? Will the transition be permanent or temporary? How have
similar transitions been handled? What other stresses are being faced now? Is this a positive, negative, or benign change? (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

**Self**

Self, in the 4-S model, refers to the personal characteristics or qualities that the individual brings into the encounter with transition. Of the four variables comprising the 4-S model, self addresses most directly the significance of the resources vs. deficits inventory inherent to the theory. Assessment of self in transition may include examination of demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, age, physical and psychological health, outlook, values, and spirituality (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Spirituality, in particular, has been held in prior research on career satisfaction as a quality that provides an individual with greater perspective, promotes individual moral development, reduces work-related stress, and allows for a vision of success that goes beyond oneself (Cavanagh, 1999).

**Support**

Support in the 4-S model refers to the other people in one’s life who can assist an individual in times of stress and transition. These may be people with whom one shares an intimate relationship, a family unit, a network of friends, or other institutions or communities with which one is associated (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Kahn and Antonucci (1980) identified three functions of support: affect (an expression that an individual is admired, respected, liked, or loved), affirmation (an expression that one’s action is appropriate or understandable), and aid (an expression of tangible assistance in the form of an exchange of resources to help one through a time of crisis).
Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson (2006) later added a fourth function of support, honest feedback (an expression of positive or negative reaction to a particular tactic for dealing with transition).

**Strategies**

Within the 4-S system, strategies refer to coping mechanisms a person employs to modify, redefine the meaning of, and/or manage the stress induced by a transition (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978; Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) hold that there are two orientations for coping -- changing oneself through palliative behaviors that minimize emotional stress, or changing the situation through problem-focused behavior. Though there are many coping options available to individuals, research has indicated that coping strategies are not effective across all settings. In matters of interpersonal relations, situation-changing strategies that focus on individual problem behaviors and signify a strong commitment to the relationship are useful. The opposite may be true in coping with work-related stresses, where strategies emphasizing detachment and a reduced personal investment in one’s role are more likely to alleviate distress (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).

**Summary**

Seminaries are a unique institutional type in American higher education. The first higher education institutions in America were founded for the purpose of producing an educated clergy, and from the very beginning a tension between institutions teaching theology and the communities in which they serve has existed and persists to this day.

While American higher education in general has seen numerous and significant shifts in
curricular focus over the years, the basic curricular structure of a seminary education has remained relatively constant by comparison, and this structure is influential to the culture of the institutions where it is employed.

Mid-level managers in higher education, a sub-category of higher education employees to which the participants in this study belong, have grown in number over the years given the increased administrative workload in the academy. It is also a segment of the academy with significant turnover. The mid-level nature of these professional positions, a perceived lack of opportunity for growth, and overall lack of recognition are cited in research as the greatest frustrations for mid-level managers. There are both individual and organizational components to a mid-level manager’s intent to leave, and those components may be structural or perceptual. Perception, therefore, is an important dimension to job satisfaction.

It is common for a mid-level manager to not have a desire for advancement in his or her profession. Research suggests a variety of causes for this phenomenon, some of which are related to organizational structure and a lack of meaningful outlets for professional development and advancement opportunity. However, it is also true that many mid-level professionals enter into their fields without a clear sense of purpose.

Mattering and marginality, as identified by Schlossberg (1989a), are foundational constructs for understanding the perceptions of persons who identify with more than one distinct cultural group. Inability to achieve a full sense of belonging in one’s cultural setting, based on reasons that may be internally or externally focused, can have negative
consequences. On the other hand, a positive connection between mattering and job satisfaction is suggested by the results of prior research.

Transitions change relationships, routines, structures, assumptions or roles (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg’s (1989b) 4-S system for managing transitions, focusing on situation, self, support and strategies, is a useful model for understanding transitions, in their many dimensions, and for analyzing the experiences of some participants in this study.
Chapter Three

In this study I sought to discern and understand the perspectives of lay administrators at theological seminaries on the mattering or marginalization of their vocational contributions within their institutions. A related interest was how these lay administrators perceive any impact of marginalization on their ability to progress within their careers. Sample selection, data collection, and analysis are described in this chapter.

There are several reasons why this study is suited for a qualitative design. While there is extant research on seminary education that addresses curriculum and its impact on student experiences and the clergy profession (Veling, 1999; Finke and Dougherty, 2002; Johns and Watson, 2006; Hiestand, 2008), employees at theological seminaries have been generally understudied in the higher education literature. This is also true of mid-level staff members in higher education (Johnsrud and Rosser, 1999). Many of the extant studies on mid-level higher education staff make use of quantitative methodologies which provide generalizations about the experiences of these staff members, but the research interests of this study focus on how seminary lay administrators experience perceive and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their workplaces, and within their larger professional communities in higher education. These interests involve subjective human experiences which are more meaningfully assessed through qualitative than quantitative means.

Creswell (1998) identifies eight essential characteristics of the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. First, research questions that ask how or what, as opposed to why, are generally well-suited for qualitative inquiry. Second, a topic that
needs to be explored, rather than explained, suits a qualitative approach. Third, when the research question calls for a detailed view of the topic, qualitative research will accomplish this better. Fourth, the desire to study individuals in their natural setting is better achieved through a qualitative design. Fifth, a qualitative study allows for more freedom to write in a narrative, literary style, thereby making the research more personal. Sixth, the ability to use sufficient time and resources on extensive data collection and detailed analysis make qualitative study a good choice. Seventh, an audience that is receptive to a qualitative approach reinforces the rationale for qualitative design. Finally, a study in which the researcher is an active learner, rather than a detached authority figure, calls for qualitative inquiry.

This study of freestanding seminary administrators did not attempt to explain the reasons for their feelings about their positions and opportunities. Rather, this study explored these perceptions in order to gain insight about this unique group in higher education. The purpose was to provide a detailed view of lay administrators in the context of their roles at a freestanding seminary, which is their “natural setting.” The findings are explained in a narrative writing style, just as my personal experience was explained. Time for in-depth data collection was available, and the study is likely to be better understood by its likely audience through a narrative description that resulted from this concentrated, extended effort. Finally, as a professional peer among the participants of the study, I was less likely to be viewed as an authority figure distanced from the themes of the study.
The goal of this study was to gain insight into the meanings that laypersons working as administrators at seminaries make of their experiences, and how those meanings inform their understanding of their identities within their workplaces and in the higher education community. As a member of this small sub-group within the higher education community, my own experiences and identity influence my motivations for research in this area. A methodological approach that allows for taking my own experiences into account is necessary to enhance the quality of the findings.

**The Phenomenological Perspective**

Merriam (2002) wrote that all interpretive qualitative research is informed in part by a phenomenological perspective, in that people’s experiences are shaped by their understanding of the meaning that those experiences have for them. One of the particularly appropriate uses of phenomenological research is to address “transitions that are common or of contemporary interest” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). This study examined career transitions of long-term administrative employees in a specialized setting of higher education.

In conducting a phenomenological study, the researcher must set aside, to the extent humanly possible, presuppositions that are rooted in his or her own experiences when conducting the phenomenological analysis. As Ashworth (1999, p. 2) wrote, the lived experience of the researcher is part of a “transcendental realm” that need not be regarded as disengaged from the world or the subject of study, but research with a phenomenological perspective requires a “return to the pre-reflective life-world, putting out of play the various interpretations and prejudices which would cloud its analysis.” It
is therefore of central importance to phenomenological analysis that the researcher must simultaneously acknowledge and suspend his or her own various beliefs on the topic to be studied, in order to make room for the essential nature or structure of the research questions to be revealed independently. This process of suspension of beliefs is known as bracketing, which is a mathematical term first used in this context by philosopher/mathematician Edmund Husserl, who is considered the father of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990).

And yet, while taking care to keep one’s own presuppositions in check, the researcher employing a phenomenological method begins with the assumption that there is a commonality underlying shared experiences – an essential nature that is mutually understood (Patton, 2002). Along with this assumption, the phenomenological researcher holds that each person’s subjective and singular lived experience constitutes truth as it is understood by that person. Through detailed, comprehensive description and careful analysis, the phenomenological researcher seeks to discover and advance essential facets of an experience that are commonly shared among individuals in similar circumstances or settings (Creswell, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990).

**Sample Selection**

This study involved participants who shared the characteristics of being laypersons and administrators with five or more years of service at a seminary. Current lay administrators with five or more years of experience at a seminary seemed likely to be at (or have already gone through) critical stages of their careers where decisions about career transition are important. Their perspectives on those decisions, against a
theoretical backdrop of marginality vs. mattering, are unique from the perspectives of others because of their place on the career continuum.

Purposeful sampling, therefore, was used to identify potential participants who met these characteristics. Purposeful sampling is consistent with qualitative methodologies and used as a way of selecting cases for a qualitative study that will “offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Criterion sampling was also used, since all participants were required to have been in their positions for a minimum of five years and be non-clergy members as conditions of participation (Patton, 2002).

Homogenous sampling was also employed, in order to reduce variation among participants and isolate the phenomenon of interest. Individuals in this sample were identified through the researcher’s professional contacts and affiliation with professional organizations. Homogenous sampling was particularly useful in this study because the participants matched my professional characteristics as a seminary lay administrator. Individuals are frequently more comfortable sharing personal thoughts and ideas with persons who they perceive to be like them (Patton, 2002).

**Data Collection**

Two sources of information provided the data for the study, autobiographical data and interviews. Potential participants in this study were asked to complete a brief autobiographical questionnaire prior to their interviews. Autobiographical data can be a valuable resource in a study that aims to explore human experience in its complexity and depth (Given, 2008; Van Manen, 1990).
Semi-structured interviewing was used in data collection, and achieved by using an interview guide technique. Protocols for both the initial interviews and follow-up interviews are provided as Appendix B and Appendix C at the end of this study. A semi-structured interview method had the advantages of allowing me to systematically frame the interview topics in advance, while also providing enough flexibility to pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry as they came to light (Patton, 2002). Participants knew the topics and issues to be covered in advance of their individual meetings with the researcher.

This method of data collection was appropriate for providing comprehensive, organized and efficient coverage of the themes that the study seeks to address. The interviews could be conversational in tone using this method, and there remained some room for contrasting perceptions to come to light, both on the basis of the participants’ prior consideration of topics and at the time of the interview, as new considerations emerged.

The interview guide approach helps ensure that the same essential lines of inquiry are followed with each participant, which strengthens conclusions drawn from the study (Patton, 2002). Participants received a written transcript of their interview from me at the completion of each interview, with the opportunity for feedback or explanation.

A total of 11 interviews were conducted – seven initial interviews with all the participants, and follow-up interviews with four participants. Field notes were taken during the interviews in order to provide a rich, descriptive record of the setting and environment which, in combination with the verbal data captured in the interviews,
comes as close as possible to re-creating the experience of the interviews for those reading the study’s findings (Patton, 2002). I also recorded each interview for the purpose of review shortly after the interview took place, as a safeguard against inaccurate interpretation of data. Recorded interviews were reviewed, with relevant information from the recordings extracted and noted.

**Data Analysis**

Because this is a qualitative study, data analysis took place concurrently with data collection. This allowed me to make adjustments to questions or style as new themes emerge from the interview processes or preliminary analysis (Merriam, 2002). The progressive nature of analysis is one of the uniquely beneficial attributes of a qualitative study.

The progressive nature of analysis is also important to the trustworthiness of data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided four components by which to measure the trustworthiness of qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to whether a researcher’s interpretations constitute a believable construal from the data provided by the participants. Transferability refers to the potential application of findings in settings beyond the scope of the current study. Dependability is an evaluation of the processes used to collect data, analyze data, and draw conclusions. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the data collected supports the conclusions drawn.
A model of interpreting qualitative data introduced by Colaizzi (1978) served as the guiding framework for data analysis in this study. Colaizzi’s (1978) model is comprised of seven steps, paraphrased as follows:

1. Each participant’s verbatim transcript is read to acquire a feeling for the respondent.
2. Significant statements and phrases relevant to the phenomenon being studied are identified from each transcript.
3. From the significant statements or phrases, meanings are articulated.
4. Common meanings from different participants are clustered and organized as themes.
   a. Clusters are validated through reference back to the original transcript.
   b. Discrepancies between clusters are noted, in an effort to avoid ignoring data that does not fit.
5. The results provide the foundation for a deep and thorough description of the phenomenon being studied.
6. The essential structure of the phenomenon is described as unequivocally as possible.
7. Validation is sought from the participants to compare the researcher’s descriptive results with their lived experiences. Modifications of the researcher’s description are employed, when necessary, to achieve congruence with the lived experience of the participants.
Verification

A process of verification was undertaken to ensure the accuracy of the information and preliminary analysis of the interviews. Member checking in this study was achieved by providing transcripts of the interviews to the participants, in order to safeguard against misinterpretations by the researcher. Follow-up communication with participants included the categories and themes identified, with the opportunity for critical feedback from the participants. Following these initial levels of analysis, follow-up interviews with four of the original seven participants explored themes that emerged from the previous interviews.

These processes comprised a form of data triangulation – the original interview, verification of the written data from the interview, and follow-up interviews with selected participants – that helped ensure the reliability and dependability of results, as well as provide checks and safeguards for accuracy (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) recommended the use of more than one method of data gathering, and in this study I used interviews and written data provided through an autobiographical sketch. The use of more than one method strengthened the study, since “different types of inquiry are sensitive to real-world nuances” (Patton, 2002, p. 248).
Chapter Four

This chapter provides case presentation and analysis for each of the seven seminary administrators who participated in the study. These data are presented in two sections. The first section provides descriptions of the initial interviews with participants. Each of the initial interviews was conducted in person at the seminary where the participant was employed. Conducting these initial interviews on-location allowed me, as the researcher, to collect useful data not only from the content of our discussions but also to gather important information from other sources such as nonverbal cues, the overall affect of participants, and my general sense of the environment in which each participant carries out his or her responsibilities. The second section of the chapter consists of follow-up interviews with four of the original seven participants. I selected the four participants who were interviewed a second time on the basis of the quality of the information and themes generated from their first interviews. These follow-up interviews were more content-focused with an interview protocol generated from a first level of analysis of the initial interviews, and with location-specific data already collected. Therefore, three of the four follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, and one was conducted in person at a professional conference that both the participant and I attended.

The Initial Interviews

Each of the seven interviews described in this section was conducted in person at the seminary where the participant was employed. Conducting these initial interviews on-location allowed me, as the researcher, to collect useful data not only from the content
of our discussions but also to gather important information from other sources such as nonverbal cues, the overall affect of participants, and my general sense of the environment in which each participant carries out his or her responsibilities.

**Melanie**

The city that is home to Melanie, my first interviewee, is synonymous with Middle America. The campus is an island of tranquility in depressed surroundings, and seems to be respected as such within its neighborhood. In my two days visiting this seminary, a number of people were observed wandering the sidewalk along the major thoroughfare on which the campus resides, but none were observed wandering the campus itself, in spite of its open nature, inviting beauty and comfortable appearance.

Melanie is the director of communications and marketing at a small seminary, and has been in her position for 10 years. She was neatly dressed in a business suit for our interview. Her style of dress stood out among her colleagues at the seminary. Unlike other participants, Melanie preferred that our interview take place in her office, which was very tidy. It was clear that she was more comfortable with formalities than is true of many higher education staff members, in my experience. Melanie sat behind the desk in her office during our discussion. I suspected from the beginning that she approached all aspects of her job with a high degree of professionalism.

Melanie was raised in a religious household, attending church regularly in the denominational tradition that is the same as that of the seminary where she works. As an adult, Melanie has continued to worship in the same tradition, and she attends a large church whose pastor is well-known in nationwide theological circles. Melanie is in her
mid-30s and holds both bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Her bachelor’s degree is from a small college founded in the same religious denominational tradition she has maintained throughout her life. She earned her master’s degree through evening courses at a nearby institution, and while she worked at the seminary. Melanie cited the variety of work responsibilities and the closeness of her staff colleagues as her favorite aspects of her job, while lamenting the lack of time to commit to planning and goal-setting – “big picture work,” as she describes it.

**Familiar Surroundings**

Melanie’s seminary is in the denominational tradition that she has known since childhood. It is also the same as her undergraduate institution. Thus, there is a familiarity to the ethos of her work environment that she finds comforting.

I grew up in a religious household. Attended regular Sunday services every Sunday and was very involved in the church. Small town, about 7500 people, was very involved in the church, even was on the Pastor/Parish committee in my teens and that sort of thing. They just really kind of empowered us at the church to take some leadership roles. Was able to start a puppet ministry there, choir, etc. Did a lot of volunteer work, Meals-on-Wheels, lots of things within the community, 4-H, etc. So then, went to [her undergraduate school] which is also an institution [in this denomination]. Got my undergraduate in education and communications, was the features editor of the newspaper there, kind of very involved on campus. It was, again, a small campus. So it didn’t seem that much of a transition to me to come to a small campus setting here and know every student that you see.
Because, I don’t know, it just felt a lot like the undergraduate that I came from, I guess, in many ways.

Although a familiar theological setting may have been a factor in drawing Melanie to working at the seminary, the overall work environment has played a role in keeping her there. Melanie’s position in public relations has allowed her to draw on her creativity and resourcefulness to the benefit of her institution and keep herself fulfilled. She attributes this in part to the absence of other staff in her area, a characteristic shared in other offices of the seminary as well. Melanie works fairly autonomously at her seminary, and interprets this as a measure of respect for the quality of her work, which is the source of some pride for her.

I think in an institution like this, you say it is a department, but it may be one person, maybe one and a half people. If you can be reliable and responsible and innovative, I think that is what is going to be important in a seminary because you don’t have someone who can be checking in on you at all times. Let’s say you report to the president. I go in, I have my agenda, I tell them everything that is going on. He really saw me as the expert coming in.

**Networking**

I asked Melanie about her internal networks, or the group of peers at the seminary with whom she relates on vocational matters. Melanie focused on her interactions with students and alumni, as opposed to faculty members or staff colleagues. Her role as a public relations director may naturally generate more extensive working relationships with the two constituencies she emphasized. Melanie identified several personal
characteristics she strives to embody, which she believes also typify the values of her seminary and are important for a staff member to succeed there.

[As far as] other qualities, I think some compassion as well. You are going to be working with all types of individuals. Whether it [is] setting up a photo shoot, whether it be working with the video. I’ll be talking to donors who win the President’s Award and going up there and videotaping them. The incoming students and making them feel comfortable as I am taking their photo for the ID tags, or whatever. Also, having some compassion and maybe a little personality, [being] personable I guess you would say.

Outside her seminary, Melanie has found it fairly easy to integrate into a network of higher education communication professionals. When the former president of her seminary moved to another school on the East Coast, he contacted her about consulting work, as his new school did not have a communications director. From that connection, Melanie has gained exposure to higher education contacts in a different region. Her experiences in higher education networks have been generally positive – “they don’t pooh-pooh me necessarily because I am at a seminary,” she explained. “A lot of the issues are very similar. I haven’t found that to be a problem or issue.” There are differences between Melanie’s position and that of her counterparts at larger institutions, but in her experience those differences have more to do with scale and size than distinctiveness of mission. “You can always learn things from the larger institutions but they have larger budgets. I hear some of the things they do and I just smile. There is no way we could do that,” she believes. Some of these differences have been emphasized
for Melanie as her seminary has entered a partnership with a larger institution in the region. But out of that experience, Melanie has also realized the need for strategic planning in her own position.

When we work with our new partner school . . . I have worked with their communications department. There is someone for advertising, and there is someone for PR, and there is someone . . . it is very departmentalized. So, I mean, I guess maybe they are more specialized and the director would have meetings with each of those groups, not be as tactical as well as seeing the full picture. I find that that can be difficult sometimes. Really trying to step back and say, ’I need a goal meeting.’ I need some time… you have to carve out that time. I’ll take [my assistant] with me and we’ll go and reserve some time at the library and just have like a goal setting meeting, planning, a calendar out. There [are] always going to be things from different departments coming at me, coming at both of us. But, these are the things that have to happen, no matter what. This is going to get done and these are the things that are most important, or these are the things we want to change. We just have to set that aside because I can get so engrossed in, this is what we do and this is the newest version of Pagemaker or InDesign or Photoshop or whatever and trying to learn all that. I have to do that as well as plan.

In addition to these higher education contacts, Melanie has made several contacts with individuals in other types of non-profit organizations. Most of these contacts are local.
Sarah

Out of all the respondents to my request for participation in this study, I was most eagerly anticipating my discussion with Sarah. On her biographical statement, Sarah identified herself as a nearly 10-year employee of her small seminary, holding an influential position title along with advanced degrees in higher education, and as an atheist. The possibilities this discussion held were intriguing to me.

Sarah is employed a small Midwestern seminary. At the time I scheduled our interview, she had recently given notice to her employer that she would be leaving her position in order to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education in a prestigious program at a university in the eastern United States. While this changed the complexion of our discussion somewhat, Sarah also was very eager to discuss her experience, and it is possible to imagine that she was less encumbered in speaking her mind that she might have been if she had been staying in her job. Because she was entering an academic program similar to the one I was part of, Sarah may have also seen our discussion as a good experience for her in a way that other participants may not have.

Sarah was born and raised in Mexico, and received her Bachelor of Science in higher education administration from a Mexican university. Her master’s degree, also in higher education administration, was earned at a large state university in a city close to the seminary where she was employed. Sarah was able to earn this degree during the time she was a seminary employee, and spoke with great appreciation for this opportunity.
Sarah was an administrative assistant at first, and over the years was able to achieve positions of increasing responsibility. She experienced several title changes, although there were occasions she described where her title may have changed without a change in responsibilities or duties. Sarah’s final title at the seminary was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and the Doctor of Ministry Program. This change reflected responsibilities that Sarah had been fulfilling for several years, similarly as she described.

Sarah’s workspace was packed up by the time I arrived at her campus, and we conducted our interview in a conference room. She made a special trip to campus to meet with me at our chosen time, and I was grateful to her for this. Prior to our discussion, I had learned a little bit about Sarah from our previous correspondence – she was raised in a religious household in the Roman Catholic tradition, but now was not only not a church member and did not attend church services, but identified herself as an atheist. The opportunities for continuous learning and growing were her favorite things about working at her seminary, along with the people and the relationships. Her greatest frustration about her job was the limited influence that staff members have on the overall policies and decision making at the seminary.

**Recognizing Common Values**

For Sarah, attraction to the Christian mission of a seminary was not an incentive for seeking employment there. She arrived as someone who simply needed a job. But it did not take long for Sarah to find points of common ground with the values of her new employer, despite her atheist beliefs. Specifically, the values of her supervisor made the seminary environment comfortable for her.
There [are] the values of [this seminary]. There [are] the values that your supervisor has for you or for the team. Then there [are] the implicit values that you just learn when you are learning how to play the game. I will say that openly we value a simple [belief]: the sense of community. The respect for each other’s beliefs -- that is openly what we are about. We take pride on those things, community and respect for others, creating leaders, being very ecumenical. [And also] in my team, the academic team that I work with, especially with my last supervisor who is a dean now . . . she will find ways to make sure there were values oriented toward student growth. So, since she knew my beliefs or lack thereof, she would always find academic things for me . . . she would orient me towards those goals. She would be like, ‘What we value in this suite is not necessarily religious growth.’ Every year she will find things for me to grow into. So, for me, that was something that she valued. She valued the growth in her staff, very explicitly. She would always find ways to make us expand our experience and our horizons. She is one of the reasons I am going for a Ph.D. She said, “Your time is up and I think you should move up.” She is my mentor, obviously. Personally, I will always try to be true to what I believe regardless of religion or not belonging. You know, some people call it moral or ethics or other stuff or being Christian. For me it is just being a good person, being respectful, being friendly, being who you are and not sacrificing who you are. Being respectful, not imposing yourself on others, but not letting others impose on you.
**Marginality**

In many work environments, one’s theological beliefs might be irrelevant or at least secondary to vocational pursuits, but the mission of a Christian seminary identifies belief in God and Jesus Christ as the normative experience for students and employees alike. Sarah’s personal theological stance puts her in contrast with nearly everyone she encounters in her workplace, but she has found that this does not mean she has to be at odds with them. She has found it advantageous, however, not to be outspoken about her position on the existence of God.

I told you I am an atheist. I don’t like calling myself atheist because it is such a loaded question and scares some people thinking I have orgies everyday or something, or I’m a bad person or something. So the people that I work the closest with here knew, but I didn’t go announcing it, especially to the students. I made that mistake the first year and some of them really tried to save my soul. So, with the people that needed to know, that I considered they had to know, it was a transparent relationship and I didn’t want to feel that either I was closeted or was lying. I never have a problem, ever. And this includes staff, all the way to the top. The occasional times that I [have gone] to chapel, it was because it was a person that I care about, a professor, a student, and I guess that I care about the lecture. I would just not participate during the communion part, for instance, or the liturgy part where you are responsive orally. They never pressure me . . . . We have community lunch up the hill with students, staff, and faculty on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There is usually prayer before meals and I will just stand still.
It never bothered me, but I also was very careful not to give the wrong assumption to other people about my beliefs. I never saw it as a conflict as long as I kept the boundaries where I felt they should belong.

Perhaps Sarah’s ability to succeed as an atheist in a community of believers has relevance for her aspirations for success in the larger field of higher education. When I asked about the perceptions of theological education within higher education at large, Sarah stated that her experience at professional conferences in higher education has taught her that there are advantages to not being completely forthright about the background that brought her there, and she has also learned that acceptance within higher education comes a little easier for one who is able to identify with a group other than the seminary.

We are not equal to other higher institutions in general. That is the perception I get. That’s because I went [to professional conferences] as a staff member of [my seminary], I did not have the same stature. Because the last couple of years I also went as a student of [the university] where I completed my Master’s while working full-time here. Once I also introduced myself in these conferences as a student of [the university], I felt a bit more respect from other peers. A lot of times [they] would be like, ‘Why are you still at [the seminary]?’ ‘Because I am still learning, I am still growing, I still like it.’ But, yeah, I felt and I hope I don’t do the same when I move back into a flagship institution into thinking that the freestanding seminaries are lesser. I hope I don’t do that.
Sarah believed that the sources of this perceived disparity involve dissimilarities of size, scale and specificity of mission between the seminary and other institutions.

I do understand why . . . being an Associate Dean of a freestanding seminary does not equate to being an Associate Dean of [a large state university], because the structure is very different. We have 300-350 students here whereas [the university] has 30,000. The responsibilities don’t match. If I were to look for another job, I know I couldn’t be an Associate Dean in any school that I wanted to. I would have to go back and start down the ladder. So, it is, yes, that we are perceived as a lesser institution. On the other hand, I think it happens because the complexity of the institution is not comparable . . . We are lacking the whole student affairs programs that any residential [university] campus would have. We are hoping they come mature, or a different age. Our standard students in a seminary are non-traditional.

Sarah has managed differences in her personal beliefs compared to others at her own institution. She has also managed differences in the complexity and responsibilities compared to her colleagues at other higher education institutions. Additionally, Sarah has the distinction of being a native of Mexico who learned English as a second language. Her educational background in Mexican higher education studies, intelligence, and good judgment helped her grasp her job responsibilities within the specialized institution of the seminary, and eventually flourish in that environment. But Sarah recalled some of the difficulties she faced when she began at the seminary as an administrative assistant.
I started here in 2000, late 2000. I had been in the States two years or so. So my language skills were very, very rusty. I could understand but it took me more than a second to formulate an answer in my brain and blurt it out. So, I had not learned about American culture, American universities, and higher education systems by then as much as I do now. So, when I first got my job here, I didn’t even understand what an administrative assistant was supposed to do for the registrar and the dean. I mean, I was almost clueless to that point. I knew I knew how to support the dynamics in the institution, I just didn’t know what it was that I was supposed to do. And a funny story, they told me that I was going to take care of commencement. I didn’t know what commencement was, until somebody said graduation. In my brain, commencement means to commence, to start. It was like, why are you calling the ending commencement? They just used terms like regalia or here in the seminary, didache, or diakonia, kerygma. I was like, ’Um, I do not understand half of the interview.’ But I impressed them and I know that I competed with other people for the position. They let me in; they gave me the opportunity. I just started growing tremendously. I did not know the difference between a freestanding seminary and any other institution of higher education when I first got the job. My only experience had been with Mexican institutions. In Mexico we don’t have student affairs at all, at all, zero. So the whole thing was very different for me, learning English, learning the curriculum of seminary, which doesn’t compare with [a] liberal arts curriculum. Trying to get a sense of how I was going to support the deans. Thankfully, they gave me
enough projects that I was familiar with from Mexico, like scheduling, doing the course schedules, transfer credits, all those kind of things that I was familiar with from Mexico. So I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, I can do this.’

Brianna

I was grateful to Brianna for all of her assistance in coordinating my visit to her seminary. She was an early and eager responder to my request for participation in the study, and thus I anticipated that she would have a lot to say. Upon arrival at her seminary, I was impressed by her tidy office and began to feel self-conscious about the appearance of my own, back in Ohio. I took some comfort in the fact that this was a break week at their school, and not as busy as it would be if they had been in session.

Brianna continued as my de facto host during my two day stay at the seminary, introducing me to colleagues and arranging group lunches. Brianna’s friendliness and hospitality reminded me of some of my own colleagues at my workplace. She is thoughtful and unassuming, and seemed to take some responsibility for seeing that my stay at her campus was both comfortable and successful.

Brianna holds a bachelor’s degree in communication from a state university in a neighboring state, and also completed one year of study toward a master’s degree in philosophy. She once served as Associate Dean for Student Services at a then newly-opened extension campus of her seminary, and is currently the Assistant Director of Contextual Education at her seminary. She has had the same core responsibilities for 10 years, but as is the case with others at her seminary, a variety of titles have been used to describe them.
Brianna described her parents as infrequent church attendees; however, her grandparents were deeply religious and brought their grandchildren to church with them regularly. As an adult, Brianna is a regular attendee, but not yet a member, of a local church in the same denominational tradition as her seminary employer.

Brianna characterized her favorite aspect of her job generally as “the quality of the people she works with.” This includes a close circle of staff colleagues most of all, who are generally people she has worked with for several years and who she sees as knowledgeable and highly competent. Brianna was glad that she has earned the trust of her peers that her perspective is taken seriously, and that her judgment is respected. Another contributing factor in her satisfaction with her employer is the fact that personal and professional growth are taken seriously in the environment. Her main criticism about her position is that it requires a lot of time committed to clerical work, since such support is not available to her.

“You Prayed Me Up”

Brianna was unique among this study’s participants because, on some level, she had a goal of working for her current employer. As a student in her graduate philosophy program at a large state university, she was advised by a trusted faculty member (who was also a pastor in the denomination with which the seminary is affiliated) to “keep an eye” on this seminary, because it was a place where good things were happening. Even after securing employment at a medical school associated with a large university in the same city, Brianna continued to watch for openings at the seminary. She eventually saw
one that piqued her interest, and fondly recounted the story of how she first arrived, and how her interview almost did not happen.

They had a position come open that looked really interesting. I hadn’t really been looking, but had been at the medical school for three years at that point. They, the position, they opened it up, [I] did a resume, and they called me and said they were closing it down because they were going to revamp and redistribute the responsibilities and it was going to change and would I please call back when I saw it posted on the website again. They were interested but things were changing. When they did repost it, I called and came and interviewed, it was really amazing when they reposted it, this was to me remarkable at least. I remember very distinctly sitting in my office and I had the resume printed out and ready to put in the envelope and it was sitting in my hand -- I came within a deep breath of just putting it in the recycle pile. I almost didn’t do it. I am so grateful I did.

From the very start, Brianna seemed to forge a strong connection with her colleagues and supervisors. In particular, Brianna had a very positive connection with her first supervisor, which was important to her because of the supervisor’s long tenure at the institution and the wisdom inherent in that experience. But Brianna also gave some credit to the divine for her arrival at the seminary.

When I came here, the two people I was working under at the time . . . [and my direct supervisor] especially had been here for 30 years and done lots of different things. She was always so appreciative of what I did and how I went about things.
She was very vocal about her appreciation. I’d say, ‘Susan, you prayed me up. You prayed, I came. It was supposed to be. You prayed me up. You’re the reason I am here. Cause I know how close it was, how very, very close it was.’ This is so much a better place [than her previous workplace]. So that is kind of how I got here.

“Fingers in a lot of pies”

Brianna received validation for her years of good service, with the offer of a promotion to a leadership position at a new extension campus in a nearby city. This offer seemed to reflect an acknowledgement by the seminary administration that Brianna had acquired a broad base of experience that went beyond her specific job responsibilities.

When they decided to open the [extension] campus, I was extremely interested in that. It was a time where my kids were all out of the house. I was free to do what I wanted. Really had been in this position and done the same sorts of things for a long time. I was ready for a change up, ready for a step up into more leadership, that kind of thing. They gave me the opportunity to do that and to go to the [extension] campus. The idea was to go as Associate Dean of Student Services . . .

Even though I was in the Contextual Education office, I had a foot in the academic life office. I had been meeting with their team for quite some time. In early years in a different format of the offices, I was meeting with what is called a Spiritual and Professional Formation team, which was the admissions folks and things like that. I have regularly interviewed students, incoming and prospective students, and those things. I have had my fingers in a lot of these pies already.
So it made sense. The thing I am really good at is putting legs under something. I am not the person who I have seen that if somebody says to me, if you could just dream up anything with this program what would you do? I can’t come up with anything, but if you come up with a dream and tell me what it is and how you want to do it. I can put the legs under it and put the pieces together and put it together. That is my strength which made it a really good fit for going down to the [extension] campus and getting things started.

Mattering

At the time of our interview, Brianna’s school was in the midst of its self-study for reaccreditation. The self-study is a project that begins approximately two years before a team of evaluators from the seminary’s accrediting agencies visits the school to make its assessment. The final result of the self-study is a lengthy report in which the seminary names its own strengths and weaknesses in relation to the standards of the accrediting bodies. Few activities occupy the collective attention of a small, freestanding seminary workforce for a long period of time more than the self-study and the reaccreditation process, because the loss of accreditation would create challenges to sustainability that would probably be insurmountable – in particular, the inability to offer students access to federal student loans, and the potential loss of support from the church denomination. Knowing what is at stake, Brianna expressed pride in the level of responsibility her school had given her as a contributor in this process.

They have also given me some tasks that take a lot of trust and I am so thrilled and surprised. We are in the self-study process. So we have all these self-study
committees, five or six or whatever they are. And, all the committees are headed by other trustees or faculty, except for one, and they asked me to take the Student Services committee and be the chair for that committee, which to me was just tremendous validation. And I have worked really hard at that because I really appreciate that trust and then the opportunity to do that and it has been a really good experience. They gave me a strong committee, and that helps, but we have worked hard at it and I am really pleased with that. It meant a lot.

Brianna has typically felt as though she matters at her institution. This belief is one of the reasons she has stayed there as long as she has, and serves as the foundation of her allegiance to the school. It is indicative of the kind of respect and collegiality that manifests itself in both large and small ways.

I [appreciate] how people generally treat one another, the respectfulness . . . whether it is differences in opinions or differences in skills and things. There is still a level of respect, a sense you know what you are talking about, we trust your instincts, especially coming in new or moving into new area. If I said [something] is raising red flags for me, that was taken seriously. I think you have to prove yourself a little bit, but they take you seriously. I guess that comes down to trust of how you are responding to something and how you are handling things is really, really important. And there is just respectfulness. The previous president . . . had a very deliberate rule, I guess, [that] everyone was called by their first name, whether it was the president or the maintenance guy, everybody was on a first name basis. It was true with everybody, in the faculty and everything. That
was the outward sign of it, but underneath it was a sense of no matter what you are doing here it is important and it is valuable and you are valuable. I think that really has come through . . . It is something I really value.

_Marginality_

As much as Brianna feels valued and valuable at her own institution, however, achieving that same level of assurance about her status in the larger higher education community has been more difficult. In part, she attributes this perception to the idiosyncratic nature of her position and the lack of a direct counterpart elsewhere in higher education. During our interview Brianna lamented “if I want to go get a new job . . . what kind of job do I look for? That is the downside. This does not translate to the business world. It doesn’t necessarily translate to the educational world. It is not like being an accountant where you go and be an accountant wherever you are . . . That’s a little nerve-racking.”

Even within the realm of theological institutions, there are differences in contextual education programs between institutions.

Because [here] it is a two-person department, I have got a lot of responsibilities and things that I take care of that maybe in a larger department that wouldn’t be the case. Really, the size of the department matters so much. If you go down to [a larger seminary], they’ve got like 30 people in their field education office and plenty of money from all those endowments and everything. They do a whole different brand of field education that we can’t do; we can’t do it the way they do it.
Change on the Horizon

Questions of what comes next have a particular salience for Brianna at this point in her career and her tenure at the seminary, because she foresees changes at her seminary coming in the near future. Retirements of supervisors and turnover in both long-term and short-term staff are part of the life cycle of any institution. In the case of Brianna’s seminary, the present self-study in preparation for re-accreditation is revealing the needs for operational changes that will require a sustained effort, and they cause Brianna to consider if the time is right to consider career alternatives.

We’re losing the dean. We’re losing [a close co-worker]. We’ve got those changes going on. We’ve also got this self-study and the self-study is identifying some things that are going to have to be worked on in the next few years. So the next five years here are going to be really tough. I think they are going to be busy. I think there is going to be a lot of hard work and change. I think it is going to be a tough five years. And it is a great time to get out, if I want to . . . People are. There is this question of do I, am I bored? I was real surprised when I completed your preliminary questionnaire [for this study] because I found what I listed for the things I didn’t like about my job were really little piddly things. I don’t think I had really recognized that. The big stuff in my job I am not bored with, which was good to figure out. I have got this sense of, you know, do I want to be one of these people that has been here for 30 years? I don’t know if I want that or not. And, if I do, at least say I want to stay and work through all these changes and be here for another five years or 10 years, how do you emotionally re-up, and I have
actually asked my boss about that, because he has been here for almost 20 years. How do you emotionally re-up, reinvest? There is a piece of me that is just, you know, not quite willing to work quite as hard, quite as often. It is not that I . . . you know, I’ll get it done, but there is an edge there that used to be there that really is not there. I don’t know if I can re-up to that level or not. I have been wrestling with this a lot lately. Doing leg work is not a job category. So to find something that lets me do the things I am good at and would really benefit any place that I went to is tricky. I don’t really know other than watching for positions and seeing what is out there and seeing if there is something that might click. It would be tough to change and I don’t see a way to easily negotiate that unless something that was just a tremendously good fit kind of fell into my lap. I really don’t see it right now. If I need to actively chase it down, it is going to be a tough chase.

Annie

I was familiar with Annie’s seminary, which is located near the center of a large Midwestern city. Earlier in my career, Annie and I corresponded regularly over work matters, and I was glad to get back in touch with her. All of the activity at Annie’s seminary takes place in one building, and yet I was struck by how quiet the building was. Perhaps this was not so unusual for a Friday in springtime, though.

Annie is the registrar at a seminary of about 225 students, roughly the same size as my own, and it is associated with a mainline denomination. Annie has been in her position for seven years. Her educational background is impressive, with a bachelor’s
degree from a well-known liberal arts college in the northern U.S. and a master’s degree from a large coastal university, where she completed the coursework for a doctorate.

Statistical reports and being a one-person office are the most appealing parts of her role, in Annie’s view. Annie cherishes her role in institutional planning, and the reports she compiles which document enrollment trends ensures her place at the table for those discussions. Where others may feel oppressed with no one to assist them with office tasks, Annie appreciates the variety of tasks and the ability to organize her own workload. Variety seems to be a strong motivator for Annie; her least favorite cited aspect of her job is the repetitious nature of certain tasks.

*Foundations in Faith*

Annie’s path to becoming a seminary registrar took its origins from her work as a sociologist. She worked for an organization that partnered with her current employer’s denomination. This organization was committed to issues of mission within the church, and Annie began there as a researcher on women and children living in poverty. The organization came to be housed at the seminary where Annie is now employed, which is how she originally came to the area. But it was Annie’s background in sociological research that helped her land a position at the seminary, and her interest in the academic study of theology helped keep her there. Annie’s husband also enrolled as a student at the seminary, further strengthening her ties to the school.

I like the theological atmosphere. I am a life-long [member of this denomination]. From high school/college age, I was saying [that] I am going to get my degrees. I am going to [learn] sociology. I am going to go work as a researcher for the
church . . . So I was interested in Bible, theology, ethics. The systematic theology courses I took as a spouse were just wonderful. So, I had very positive experiences with the academic side of the seminary, as had my husband, also as he worked his way through, discovered a great deal of personal support, again among faculty, among staff.

Annie found the environment at her seminary appealing enough for her to enroll in a few courses herself, on an auditing basis. When the registrar position at the seminary became available due to the incumbent’s retirement, Annie’s positive experiences with the school overcame any misgivings she may have held about entering this line of work. Her entry into the profession, however, was marked more by expedience than by ambition in the context of career pursuits.

The registrar position was one I had to think about it, because the perception of registrar is, “Oh, they just do that boring work.” A little bit like that. I wondered is it going to be challenging enough for me. I am used to digging into research statistics or qualitative work or something. I decided this would be worth doing and discovered after I was in it, I really liked it much better than I had anticipated even. So, I can’t say I started out thinking of myself as a professional registrar. I really didn’t see it as a career move, [or a] step forward, it was just something that opened at the right time.

*A Generous Community*

Annie’s interactions with the seminary began when her husband applied for the Master of Divinity program. His application was unique in that he lacked an earned
bachelor’s degree. This is an automatic disqualifier for admission to most graduate programs; in theological education, it is a familiar request to many admissions offices, and within certain limitations such admissions are authorized by accreditation agencies, in part for the purpose of addressing shortages of church pastors. Favorable treatment for Annie’s husband as he navigated through these circumstances left her with a good impression of the school.

When we got back from living in England, we did a little seminary tour of three seminaries including [this one]. [It] was the one which the then registrar and admissions directors called some faculty together . . . [my husband] had brought some papers he had written. The faculty read them overnight, met with us and talked with us the next day, and before we left said, “You have provisional admittance, if you want to come here.” The fact that everybody went out of their way like that -- I liked the helpfulness. It was the academics, the helpfulness of the people, the general feeling of healthiness of the atmosphere, there wasn’t a lot of backbiting.

*Autonomy*

Annie’s husband did enroll as a student, and her encounters with the seminary as a student spouse continued to be positive. When the registrar’s position became available and she applied and was selected, one of the factors influencing her decision to take the job was her assumption that she would experience a fair amount of independence in this role, with enough space to concentrate on her work and considerable freedom from
arbitrary restrictions and overbearing supervision. Annie’s assumptions have for the most part come true, and are among the reasons for her longevity in the position.

I like the freedom of scheduling that I had. When we moved to [this city], I had applied for state work as a researcher and that would have been fine. The work would have been interesting, but as I read the things -- be there at 8:00, check out at noon, at such-and-such, be back at such-and-such time. Where [the seminary’s] was more, I guess, honor system, where they expected you to be able to handle your own schedule. Maybe not when you are first coming in as a clerk or something, I think they do have to do hours, but for my position, it is one where you get the work done and don’t worry so much about the hours. You can set your own time. I like that.

The high value Annie places on autonomy in her work environment has origins that can be traced back to her upbringing.

I very much like being able to plan how I am going to do things, when I am going to get them done. My parents are farmers. Farmers have a great deal of autonomy in setting their tasks with an overall lack thereof in that weather is what determines you have to do this now because the crops are ready now, you have to do this now because it is raining, you can’t do this now because it is snowing. It is not a capricious human telling you I am going to put my power around and do this. It is something that you look at the reality around you and you determine when you have to do things because of that reality. So, probably I was disposed to not like the idea of human beings telling me I must be here right now and I have
to do this one first and then this one and then that one. Now, I still have a whole lot of things I have to do this first, this second, but it is because I see this needs to be done by such-and-such time. This needs to be done now. I have set this parameter as such. I like that kind of autonomy within limits.

**Change within a Faithful Community**

The value of autonomy may be even more significant to Annie in an atmosphere characterized by change. In the past five years, Annie’s seminary has undergone a calendar change from quarters to semesters, and added a joint doctoral program with another nearby seminary. Annie thinks this wave of change is energizing, and in fact finds it useful as a way of organizing her work.

Another thing I like about when I came in, there have been some changes each year that are enough that keep my learning curve high. When I came in, we moved from one relational database to another relational database within about the first year. That was a lot of learning and it involved a lot of data conversion, some of which hadn’t gone well so it was a lot of pick up on that. Then, not that much later, we moved from a quarter system to a semester system, again with a lot of adaptation. Because of the change of the semester system, we are now doing curriculum changes and there again that is a lot of things that I have to do because of the curriculum changes in terms of getting things ready. So, outside events keep me interested because I am learning things. But they also help set the sorts of tasks I need to do and when.
The significance of change, for Annie, is understood within the context of the faith tradition. Community, in particular, is a sustaining value for Annie, and it reveals itself both formally and informally at her seminary. It includes the notion that all are actually included in the community, and not just invited to join it.

This community values community. When somebody is needing, other people are praying for that person. Other people are [saying], let’s organize bringing them food, let’s do this, let’s do that . . . does somebody need a ride? That prayer is a big part of the community. You pray for people by name and/or by situation. That is something that can be done by e-mail as well as in person. One of the things that we can struggle with is that as we have people who aren’t here on campus all the time, who are only part-time, how do you incorporate them and care for them as well? Again, if you include this praying for them, whether they are there or not, letting them know they are being prayed for, that is, if you’ve been here very long, I think you’ll start noticing that. More generally than just prayer, worship, one of the joys, and something I think people will notice is that we have a lot of worship opportunities and they are not just the once a day, morning one that is set by the administration, but that students come in and say we want to have evening song, and they’ll organize and evening song. There is an early morning prayer. Some of the times there is a Spanish language short, 15 minute service. These are not always student directed, or student impelled, but they tend to come from at least student interest so that the variety and number of worship experiences is big. When people come to work here, right in the handbook is that you are free to go
to worship as long as your workload permits, you need to check with your supervisor and so forth, but that is really an acceptable and expected part of this service. If you want to participate in worship, you are more than welcome to do so.

Most of all, however, the higher purpose of her vocation provides the sustenance and motivation that Annie uses to maintain enthusiasm for her work. Annie sees this not as a unique quality that she possesses, but as a defining characteristic of the workforce at her seminary.

They all, I would say most of the time, most of the people here, do feel and express that we are doing this for a higher purpose. We are preparing people to be workers in Christ’s church in the world. We do have a responsibility to form our students in ways that we are accountable to the places they are going to work. We need to send them good people, not good like holy, but good as in the sense that they are responsible, they are reliable, they are accountable, not just that they are hot-shot students, but that they are people who understand that other people exist and you have to be sensitive to their needs as well.

Reese

Reese is the registrar at a small, mainline denominational seminary in a historic Southern city. I made the long journey by car for our interview, arriving on a gorgeous but hot afternoon. The old stone building that houses Reese’s office seemed perfectly in keeping with the school’s early 19th century founding, and matched the grandeur of the homes in the surrounding neighborhood.
Reese has a Master of Divinity degree from the seminary where she works. While a seminary student, she moved into a position as assistant registrar, and became associate registrar after graduation. Her previous education includes a bachelor’s degree in French and English from a Western state university, and an associate’s degree in court and conference reporting from a state university in the northern U.S. Seminary education and seminary employment afterwards were not obvious career paths given Reese’s background. In regard to her family background, she described the West Coast household of her upbringing as non-religious, but she still felt a call to ministry that led her to her master’s program.

Reese believes that the work of a theological school registrar suits her. She finds satisfaction in using her theological education and practical organizational knowledge to assist students and faculty in reaching their personal goals. Reese especially enjoys problem solving and “creative applications of policy to fit individual circumstances” in her role.

Reese’s written biographical questionnaire revealed more dissatisfaction in her present situation than other participants in the study. Over her 12 years at her seminary, Reese has come to feel less respected despite the expertise she has acquired. She described a variety of changes her institution faces, in which she is eager to participate, but went so far as to describe herself as marginalized in this process. Uncovering the source of these feelings became one of my primary goals for our interview.
Work as Ministry

Reese believes her vocation is a form of ministry, and this belief is fortified by her own theological education. Her career in the registrar’s office began while she was a Master of Divinity student, and gave her the opportunity to connect her occupation to her calling.

I very much enjoyed the opportunity to use the pastoral skills that I had been developing as a M.Div. student while I was working in the office. Over time, I gradually became more and more aware of how much I enjoyed working with students and facilitating their progress through the same degree program that I had been in . . . My focus was more on ministry than on administration when I came to the position. I actually did my supervised ministry placements in this office. The field education office approved my using this as a ministry site. I loved it. It was a wonderful opportunity to explore how an administrative position could be pastoral.

Marginality

As a second-career theological student, Reese was familiar with feelings of uncertainty in a new environment. This helps explain why Reese was drawn toward service to those adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings, but in fact, this particular sense of call predates Reese’s arrival in seminary. It just gained focus there.

I was a work-study student in the English as a Second Language Program at [my undergraduate school] where I was an English major and did quite a lot of work with students in that capacity . . . It was at the time of the first immigrations of
Vietnamese after the end of the war. We also had a lot of Middle Eastern students who were trying to get their English skills up to speed in order to take engineering degrees and go back to the oil rich countries which they came from. I had experience before coming to [this seminary] in working with students who felt a little bit “fish out of water” and knew that I enjoyed that part of the work that I had done in the ESL program and found that some of those skills translated to working with prospective ministers who felt like “fish out of water” even though they were English speakers. It was the same kind of assisting people to become comfortable in a new environment that I really enjoy.

In seminary, Reese found that her own experiences helped fortify her outreach to those experiencing feelings of marginalization.

Coming in off the street as a complete beginner to theological studies, which some of our students are, you know, they’ve got engineering degrees and all kinds of other sorts of background rather than the basic religious studies background. Coming in as a beginner and working with the top level of faculty can be deeply intimidating. I find often students come with enormous enthusiasm and then within the first term they are just terrified because they realize what they have gotten into and they are not sure that what they brought to the table really will and them through. I find that my office is a safe space. Students can come with questions about, sort of the “what if” questions. If I get a C- in this class, how am I going to maintain an average that will enable me to stay, and all of those kinds of terrible anxiety things that come over people who are brand new to an
intimidating situation? What I am able to do having been deeply intimidated myself and having survived very well, thank you, is to kind of put it into context and say, yes, I know what that feels like.

Reese was disappointed that her influence within her own school diminished, due to leadership changes and modifications to committee structures. This dissatisfaction was complicated by the fact that, as a former student herself at this school, Reese finds herself at odds with some people who have previously served as mentors to her.

Some schools grant their registrars faculty status or near faculty status . . . when I began as registrar, I had membership, I had voice and vote on three committees. Since I have been registrar, the committee structure has been reorganized such that I no longer participate in any of those committees. I feel much more boxed in [in spite of] the expertise that I have to share. The faculty has developed a system whereby I am asked for data, but I am almost never asked to interpret it. I am keenly aware that interpretation is critical to understanding a lot of what I provide. Sometimes I am able to offer interpretation along with what I present, but I am not present when the conversations take place, so I have no idea how that material is received or processed. That is a considerable disappointment to me at this point . . . in the first five or so years of my tenure as registrar, I became known as a good resource for students. The prior registrar was a member of the faculty and I have sensed there was some resentment of the level of, the value students placed upon my assistance to them -- almost a kind of jealousy, which I regret very much. It was extremely painful . . . I had won awards as a M.Div. student. I had
worked very hard to please members of the faculty who were now rejecting my expertise as, I felt, one of the team. It has been very difficult. In the last five years I’ve needed to really reevaluate my position on the staff. I feel very much less connected with students and I regret it.

**Mattering**

Professionally, Reese benefits from more and better collegial connections with peers at other schools than many other seminary staff members enjoy. Two other seminaries operate in consortium with Reese’s school in the city where she works. Reese is something of a leader among her fellow registrars in this consortium, as she holds the most seniority in her position, and is thus able to give experience-based advice on occasion. Reese’s seminary is also the largest and best resourced of the three, giving her advantages in terms of clerical help and the ability to attend professional conferences.

Outside of this local consortium, however, Reese notices that her position and experience seem to carry less currency among professional peers within the larger realm of higher education. She laments that she cannot engage fully in all of the professional conference opportunities available to her, especially in comparison to her peers at larger seminaries within her denomination.

Reese’s frustration with her position and her increasing feelings of marginalization seemed to reach a breaking point several months after our initial interview. I contacted her several weeks later about reviewing the interview transcript, and Reese informed me that she had left her seminary to accept a position as registrar at a small seminary in the Midwest.
Kelly

The basic facts of Kelly’s work at her seminary interested me right away. Kelly is the Associate Dean for Academic Services at a medium-sized Midwestern seminary – not one of the largest in the country, but larger than many freestanding theological schools, including my own. What made Kelly’s story so intriguing was both her length of service – 18 ½ years at the same seminary, and the last 12 in her current position – and the level of her position at this particular school.

Kelly’s seminary is in the Reformed tradition. It is a mainline denomination and, as such, it attempts to inculcate thorough knowledge of the Bible and refined scholarship and communication skills in its graduates, and promotes the doctrinal understandings of the denomination through the learning environments it creates. At a seminary in this tradition, female students are typically not admitted to programs leading to positions of pastoral leadership, and thus within the seminary’s own workforce the status and role of women is frequently limited to supporting functions rather than leadership positions. It was noteworthy for Kelly to have retained a highly responsible non-faculty position at any seminary for such a length of time; to do this in the particular seminary where she worked was most uncommon.

Kelly has done some master’s-level work at her seminary, but her bachelor’s degree is from a large state university. She was raised in a religious household in the faith tradition represented by her seminary employer, and continues to worship in that tradition as an active church member. In her role at the seminary, Kelly relishes the opportunity to support faculty in training the next generation of clergy, as well as the
interaction with students. Like many people I spoke with, personnel issues and job ambiguity are the things Kelly enjoys least.

**Divinely Inspired Destiny**

My interview with Kelly revealed that her reasons for beginning and continuing work at her seminary were directly linked to her personal religious beliefs. Kelly began her description of how she came to work at her seminary by explaining “The Lord and I had a little argument.” Kelly had been living overseas and working as a missionary, and believed that her calling was to return overseas to continue this work. But she had to earn a living, and she was unable to find work at an American company with a position in this foreign country. Meanwhile, a lifelong friend had become the dean at Kelly’s seminary, and he pursued Kelly for a job in academic administration. Kelly resisted this offer for a long time, but she described her ultimate resignation to the fact that work in theological education as her divinely-inspired destiny:

When I came back from [overseas], I did not want to come back. I really felt like He wanted me on this side of the Atlantic. There were little heel marks all the way across the Atlantic. I just knew that I needed to work for [an overseas] company in the states or for an American company [overseas], so that I could continue to be involved in a church over there but have the ability to get back and forth for family reasons. The Lord did not share that opinion and so for a year I temped and argued with Him and at the end of that year, [the seminary] called a second time . . . In hindsight, I was dragging my feet, largely because I was intending to go back overseas . . . The bottom line was the Lord wanted me here and until I
decided to pay attention, He was just not going to make anything else available. So, they called again and finally with my sister about two inches off my nose going, are you listening this time? That is how I ended up here. I never had any aspirations of working in academia. But I have loved it and enjoyed it very much.

*Embracing Breadth*

It is common at many small freestanding seminaries to find staff members with a wide variety of responsibilities to cover, often as a way of coping with the school’s lack of resources. For some staff, including Kelly, an environment characterized by change is not a source of frustration but a key element in maintaining an attitude of refreshment and renewal for one’s own responsibilities. “One of the things that has been really helpful is that I have never done the same thing for two years running,” Kelly explained in our interview. “I like variety and that is good for me. For me to thrive anywhere, I need variety.” Some of the change at Kelly’s seminary is associated with growing pains, and is thus welcomed, in spite of its inherent aggravations, because it symbolizes hope and prosperity. This does not mask the very real problems that rapid growth injects into day-to-day operations for staff members.

The tremendous growth that this school has experienced forced everybody to shift and change and cover stuff for a long period of time. Now we are better equipped. We have better staff. We have been at this level for a little longer, so we are learning how not to be a “mom and pop” operation. We still have aspects of it. I liked part of the aspects of being a “mom and pop” thing, because you knew everybody and you knew how to get things done. It becomes a little more
complex as the organization gets larger and people’s jobs become a little more
defined theoretically as the organization gets larger. In reality, that aspect of it has
not gelled as well here as I think some people would like. We have had a
tremendous amount of change and it continues. It’s not minor changes in job
responsibilities. It’s major shifts in who is handling what. That therefore leads to
lots of questions on how to get things done because nobody is real sure where the
responsibility and the authority lie. But, I think . . . I’m a quick study. I think that helped tremendously here.

**Uncertain Future**

Question of career trajectory held some uncertainty for Kelly. She is quick to
point out that aspects of her own background and preparation might be equal to the
circumstances of her present position, but they limit her future opportunities, both at her
own seminary and within academia.

I think the lack of [an advanced] degree is not a good thing. In terms of
knowledge of the job, because I’ve worked pretty hard to learn the institution as a
whole here and have been heavily involved for several years with AACRAO and
several things where there is broader exposure to the ‘industry’ so to speak, I
think I have a fairly good understanding of the industry and of the way it works
but the lack of credentialing makes it impossible to do any kind of lateral stuff. So
that is, I think, an issue . . . to be very frank, that is a question I am struggling with
right now and have done a lot of thinking about. I haven’t really landed yet . . .

My gifts are in administration. I am not a teacher. In faculty, I also would not be
looking that way. I do not know what it means here. This is a very, very live 
question right now. We have had a lot of changes, some changes in personnel and
I’m not sure what the career trajectory means.

**Mattering in the Margins**

Kelly’s presence as a high-ranking female in a male-dominated seminary is a
remarkable characteristic of her position. Over the years, Kelly’s seminary has become
more receptive to women in many ways, but the denomination still prohibits the
ordination of women as pastoral ministers, thereby preventing the enrollment of women
in programs leading toward pastoral ministry. This doctrinal position seems to parallel
within the seminary’s administrative structure.

When Kelly first arrived at the seminary, the administration acknowledged freely
the gender-driven reasons associated with her hire. In our interview, Kelly explained
how she overcame some initial reservations about being in that position before ultimately
accepting their offer.

When I started, there was one female in management position, in development,
and that lasted three months. Three months after I got hired she was gone. I was
the only one for quite a while. It was very intentional. I’ve known [the seminary
president] for a long time. Even in the job talking, there was at one point a
discussion that went something like this… “Look, you and I both know you are
hiring your token woman and that is okay with me. But there is nothing else for
me to do here and I don’t do the same thing well for long periods of time . . . The
agreement that we made is that I had to stay at least two years. I said I can handle
that. We’ll take it and see. Part of it was he had a known quantity that he knew could be trusted to maneuver church issues without creating problems in the church being a female in management here. So it was very deliberate. Both of us knew that was part of the reason I was here. Part of my job, unofficially initially, was to help the administration understand the issues of female students on campus. It has changed a lot since then. We have added a counseling degree, which has a majority of female students. We probably have a third of the students here are female, even though we don’t support the ordination of women. We do allow women in the Master of Divinity. It has changed dramatically. There are a number of women in management here. When I started, that wasn’t the case. He wanted somebody he could trust to do the job well and not create total problems with the ecclesiastical bodies.

Despite her unique status as a female in her seminary’s administration, Kelly was not dismayed. In fact, she was quick to defend her seminary’s efforts at inclusivity, expanding our discussion of her own situation to the seminary’s endeavors to build a more thoroughly diverse workforce.

There are very deliberate decisions in hiring, not just females . . . Nobody wants to be defined by the constituency they may represent, because no person clearly fits in that hole. But, we have a professor who is Korean background here, because we want more non-Western representation here. We had an African-American professor. We are reformed in our theology. There is not a huge constituency of reformed African-Americans with doctoral degrees, so it is
always a struggle to try and find people who can help to represent those constituencies. The school pushes hard to try and do that. It is not just the profs, it is not just management, it is everybody we hire here. We try to look on a broad scale to say, “We would like this place to represent the body of Christ and it comes in lots of flavors.” It comes in Caucasian flavors, and international flavors, and Latino flavors, and African-American, and Asian, and all different kinds of things. We would like all of those people to be welcomed here and represented here whether it is students, clerical staff, management, professors. It is something we think about every time we hire.

Michael

I traveled by car to the Southern city that is home to Michael, the last participant I interviewed for the study. It was a seasonably hot summer day, and I was grateful for the shady, cool parking garage where I could leave my car. This was an unusual perk for a seminary, in my experience. Michael’s seminary was connected to a very large, modern and beautiful church in a suburban area. As I discovered later, this was a long-term but temporary location for the seminary, and a new campus was being established nearby and the school would be moving soon. We met at first in Michael’s office, and then conducted our interview in a spacious and comfortable but very public lobby area, at his suggestion. On this summer day when classes were not in session, I figured that we were not likely to be interrupted, and this turned out to be true, but I was surprised that Michael wanted to have our interview out in the open, rather than behind closed doors in an office or conference room as the other participants favored. I took this as a sign that
Michael had a lot of comfort and satisfaction in his role at work, and was unconcerned that anything would come up in the conversation that he would not want a colleague or supervisor to hear.

Michael directs student services at a seminary affiliated with a church in the Reformed tradition, and he has been in this position for seven years. He is a graduate of this seminary with a master’s degree in Biblical studies. His bachelor’s degree was earned at a university in a neighboring state, and he majored in chemistry (which, in my experience, is uncommon among people who ultimately attend seminary). Michael was raised in a religious home, and is a current church member who regularly attends services. Like others whom I interviewed, Michael most appreciates his opportunities to assist students and help them reach their goals. His greatest occupational frustrations come from balancing institutional goals and reconciling conflicts between those goals.

**Career Origins**

Michael felt called to seminary shortly after earning his bachelor’s degree. He had been working as a chemist in this Southern city for about five years and planned to enroll at a well-established Midwest theological school in his denominational tradition. During that time, his church pastor introduced him to an academic theologian who was founding a new seminary locally in the same faith tradition. Michael was persuaded to enroll in a few courses, if for no other reason than to get a leg up on his studies once he enrolled on a full-time basis elsewhere. Michael was so energized by his studies that he was moved to seek a ministry position, and revealed this desire to his new academic
mentor, who persuaded him to consider an administrative role at the fledgling seminary instead. Once again, Michael was won over, and accepted the administrative position.

After about three years in this role, however, financial difficulties at Michael’s seminary led to its merger with a larger seminary in another state, becoming that seminary’s local campus in a distributed, multi-campus model. Michael was offered a position locally with the new parent institution, but instead decided that the time had come to begin full-time study – not at the original seminary he had planned to attend, but at the parent institution’s main campus. He relocated and became a full-time student and a part-time intern for a senior minister in a large church. After a year’s time, Michael realized that his gifts might be better suited for the administrative work he had done successfully before the move. An important new relationship in Michael’s life, and an insightful supervisor’s foresight, helped him make the decision to return to administration.

So I ended up going out to [the] campus that we call our ‘Fountainhead Campus,’ which was our original campus. I was there from 2002 to 2003 working . . . as a senior minister’s intern, [in] a large historic church. Through that year interning, I really decided my calling was more towards administration. It was at that point in my life than it was towards pastoral ministry. So, I met my wife that year. We got married that summer of 2003 and before that I called my present boss here . . . and asked, ‘Is that job offer still on the table?’ He said, ‘I’ve been holding it for you.’ So, I came back in 2003 to do the job I am in now which is Director of Student Services . . . I [had taken] an internship that really could have gone either way. I
had a little bit of freedom where I could have picked really which kind of area I focused on, being the senior minister’s intern, and I just found myself constantly gravitating and succeeding more in the administrative side than what would be considered the more pastoral. Not that pastors don’t have to do administration, but some of the more, maybe personal aspects. It wasn’t that I couldn’t do them but I didn’t, maybe, enjoy them as much, but I had opportunity to work on things like improving their website, producing a radio show which a lot of it was administration on the production side, a lot of interviewees and things like that. I found a lot more success and pleasure in doing those aspects.

As much as Michael enjoys his current position, he does not expect this to be the last chapter in his career at the seminary. He eventually finished his master’s degree, and has also taught Greek languages courses at his school in recent years. Soon, Michael would like to begin doctoral studies in New Testament, with the hope of eventually joining the faculty at his seminary.

Structure and Satisfaction

Michael’s seminary is unique among theological institutions, and even more so among higher education institutions generally, in that it is not faculty-governed. This model of governance reflects some intentional choices by the seminary’s founders, as Michael explained in our interview.

[This school] is actually somewhat peculiar for a seminary. It’s administration-driven. We started in the middle ‘60s by laypeople that wanted to start a new seminary in [this] tradition, primarily serving [our] denominations, though it is
conservative theologically. That was lay-driven. They had seen the movement of [our denominational] seminaries in the United States at that time, many of them adopting what we would consider liberal theology and it usually developed within the faculty. So, as a safeguard against that, [we have] a very strong board. In fact, everything comes under the board. So, our faculty are on year by year contracts, not tenured. Every year they have to sign a statement of faith and that carries on through the seminary. Not that our faculty are not prized, and [they] have a lot of freedom and benefits, but at the end of the day [this] is an administration-driven seminary.

Another uniqueness of Michael’s seminary is its organizational design, which he describes as a “distributed model.” In this model there is a parent campus (the “fountainhead” campus that Michael referred to, where he enrolled as a student for a year) and a number of satellite campuses under the same organizational umbrella, including the one where Michael works. The parent campus is the original and largest campus, but some important administrative functions for the entire multi-campus seminary are housed at the “distributed” sites. In an environment designed to elevate the role of administration, it is easy for someone in a role like Michael’s to identify the importance of his work, but there are organizational challenges as well.

We have a lot more probably discretion at some points than others. Not being faculty run, [or] faculty governed, I should say. What makes [this seminary] unique and challenging is that it is a distributed model . . . you still have to go up through sometimes a number of steps up in your command structure, sort of
chain-of-command before you can get [things] accomplished. Sometimes there is confusion as to how that happens. [We are] still trying to figure it out. We keep starting new seminaries. We just started in [two large Southern cities]. So that, and who is that going to come under and who decides on certain aspects of that? In terms of value, administration is very valued [here]. In terms of sometimes resources and the capabilities to make decisions, sometimes there is some haziness. Not necessarily does it make you feel less valued, [but] it can lead to some frustration at times . . . . So much of the heavy administrative lifting has been split among a couple of individuals. I haven't had much time to do things and we haven't had the budget here locally to participate in AACRAO and some of those other professional [organizations]. Some of our other campuses are more involved. Whereas some schools have one registrar, we have six. So a few of those are very involved and kind of keep up with what is going on there, if they have the freedom and budget to do it, while some of us, especially at the smaller startups are consumed with the kind of day-to-day and that has been my case. I haven’t been able to be very involved.

The Follow-up Interviews

Four of the initial seven participants in the study were interviewed a second time. These second interviews took place approximately 10 months after the initial meetings. An interview guide protocol was used for the second interview as well; however, the protocol was individualized based on the researcher’s experience with the participants, and to allow more flexibility to pursue themes that emerged from my analysis of the
content of the first meetings. Since I had collected location-specific data at the first interviews, three of the four follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, and one was conducted in person at a professional conference that both the participant and I attended. The experiences of these four participants, within the contexts of these emerging themes, were made more illuminating given the surprising trajectories that some of their careers took during the time of their participation in the study.

Reese

Reese was the only participant who changed jobs between her first and second interviews for this study. By coincidence, Reese’s new position at the time of our second interview is at the same seminary where Brianna works, over 1,000 miles away from where Reese was working when I met her. To the best of my knowledge, both are unaware of each other’s participation in this study.

Reese is at a new institution, but her position as registrar is the same, and both her prior and current seminaries are very similar in terms of size and their freestanding character. The denominational affiliations of the two schools are different, but both denominations are mainline, Protestant, well-established churches in the U.S. Reese’s original seminary was in the eastern part of the country, but her new school is in the Midwest. This was a substantial move for Reese, both physically and emotionally, since she is a graduate of the seminary she left.

Moving In

In our interview, Reese had nothing but positive indicators to describe her transition, though she noted some distinct differences between the two environments. In
particular, Reese quickly identified some variation between the two schools with respect to time.

I am at a new institution under a different denomination and it turns out that [the people of this denomination] are the meeting-est people I have ever met. [The people at my former seminary] love to do things decently and in order and by the time clock. The [people of this new denomination] I am working with talk until they have settled it, which may be two or three hours more than I would have expected. So, the balance… I am learning to balance the needs of the office with the rather surprisingly greater number of meeting hours than I experienced in my first 15 years as a registrar. I laugh, because it is a challenge, and it is a frustration not to be caught up. However, I have so much greater insight into the workings of the institution because I have these additional hours with my colleagues which in some ways have been a blessing.

**Reclaiming Satisfaction**

Reese’s transition has also been eased by her perceptions that she has: reclaimed some of the personal connection to students that she felt she had lost in her previous job; realized a renewed connection with faculty, and believes that her expertise at administration is seen as a valuable asset to her new institution.

My joy is still with helping students. It always has been. It is a ministry and it is a delight. What I am finding is particularly delightful about the new situation is there is a kind of surprise and enthusiasm that comes back
to me from faculty as well as students when I say, “Look, can we do this faster and easier for you?” There is this, “Oh, my gosh, you mean you don’t just sit here and crunch numbers? You really like us as people?” So, I think the faculty has been enthusiastic and I’ve never felt I was at odds with the faculty. But, I do have the sense in the new institution that they haven’t been served, maybe, as diligently by my predecessors as I think they deserve. It is a pleasure to give people some extra care and discover that things do, that the serves go more smoothly both for faculty and for students. So, getting those two groups together and demonstrating to them that an administrative office can, rather than slowing things down and being obstructive, an administrative office can actually facilitate their experience and make it more pleasurable. That is not just win, win. It is win, win, win. Those are great sources of satisfaction for me.

Finding Familiarity

Reese was familiar with the institution where she now works because there are graduates of her former seminary on the faculty of her present seminary. The position Reese now holds was open two years prior to her arrival, and Reese was solicited to apply at that time by these same contacts. She did not believe that the time was right for such a move, however, and she cited her husband’s good job, her years of experience, and her alumni status at her former seminary as factors discouraging relocation. Two years later, the position came open again and Reese’s former colleagues renewed their entreaties. This time, the interest was there.
What particularly interested me was that not only was it a very similar school, it had distant campus and a historic home campus. It was exploring uses of technology in ways I found interesting. Also, the registrar [here] has voice and vote on a number of committees and is expected to be a real participant in shaping policy. And that was extremely welcome. I decided to step up and investigate and it has been a happy change.

*A More Satisfying Organizational Structure*

Part of the “happy change” for Reese has been the introduction into an organizational structure that is more conducive to cooperation than the one she left. The new environment has made it easier to bring her experience to the forefront of decision-making meetings and has helped her earn the respect of her new colleagues.

It is a much younger school, so people are a little more flexible about making changes. But there is a whole mid-management team, all of us relatively new who are mutually supportive. We all recognize the boundaries of our expertise. I am not trying to tell the financial aid officer what to do or admissions or there is an associate dean that I work with very closely, but we check in with each other often. We don’t have that sort of silo-ed approach and we strategize about meeting mutual goals a lot. At [my former school] I was never quite sure what the org chart looked like. It was almost a secret who and there were lots of sort of entrenched procedures that were hard to work around. [Here], I find that
the team that I mentioned to you plus two or three other student services individuals really, really listen to each other well, really strategize well about how to get jobs done on a shoestring, because, you know, all of us are small schools are operating on next to nothing. And when that group goes to deans and president we are treated with respect. I’ve written a couple of revisions of policy recently that have gone through faculty council like greased lightning. I was expecting them to come back, you know, marked up and maybe in two years we’d get somewhere. But there it is, and it is enormously gratifying.

Reese believed she benefits from fortuitous timing in that there are other people who are relatively new to their positions at the seminary. This provides for a network of mid-level managers who have come to depend on each other for success, creating an effective team atmosphere. Though the conditions for cooperation are present today, Reese suspects this may not have always been the case.

I am hearing echoes that apparently there was a kind of contention between academic life office and admissions for many years. We have new people in both offices now. I don’t think there is any memory of [contentiousness]. Yes, there are a few staff members who remember what that was all about, but most of us were not involved in that at all. In fact, I am kind of the old-timer because I’ve actually done my job for a lot of years. We have a very experienced, but new to [the school], financial
aid officer. And I think the world of her and send her business frequently. I think those of us who are new in one way, have experience in other ways so we feel free to consult with each other. The new director of admissions has not done that kind of work before but he is a graduate of the institution. So, when I have a question about what [this school] has always done with respect to students in a certain area, I can ask him. He will remember way back when he was a student and give me good guidance on what the faculty will be expecting. So, we have provided safety nets for each other and that has reinforced the kind of mutuality of our work.

**Making Personal Adjustments**

Reese’s acceptance of her new position necessitated a move halfway across the country. Though the move was substantial, it helped her solidify some personal commitments to family. She now lives closer to her mother on the west coast than she did before, so she can provide assistance as her mother ages. At present, Reese’s job provides some strain due to temporary separation from her husband, but Reese has found a way to make this temporary problem tolerable.

Being away from my husband is grim and we’re going to put a stop to that. One of the reasons that this move was possible is that the couple of years difference between the first time the job came up and now puts him within his 20 years with [his federal job] so he can retire and that means that he can move and my career can be the focus which is just a serendipitous blessing. We are within closer range of his family. It is a
good move for both of us. With respect to the family and career balance of the two, I am just incredibly blessed . . . I actually do have more family time, even though right in the last few months we’ve been stretched out a lot. It is a good place to be . . . I work many hours overtime and it is probably a good thing I am alone on campus most of the time. I am living on campus in this interim stage. I can walk over to the office after dinner or early in the morning and get something done and then Skype [my husband] and catch up with him and then we can have a long weekend and try to make up for all those hours . . . We are in a transition, and no, I didn’t expect to be starting over at this point in my life, but I guess it isn’t starting over. It feels like a natural progression. It is a place where I can really use what I have learned and it is being received with enthusiasm. My family is intrigued and supportive. I am excited about that.

Reese sees the possibility that her present position will be the last stop on her professional arc, but hopes to be in position to advance within her school and contribute at a higher level. Reese seems like she will be content with either outcome. Reese is pleased with the contributions she has made and satisfied with her impact on those on whose behalf she has worked, and she is reflective without being regretful about the paths-not-taken along her career trajectory.

At one point, I explored the possibility of pursuing a doctorate. Academically, I would have been able to and my professors encouraged me to. I did not, you know . . . having been a registrar, I saw pretty
clearly the supports that are needed for that kind of work and I didn’t have them. At that time, I wasn’t married. I didn’t have the kind of financial support that would have made an advanced degree comfortable to pursue. As I have mentioned, I am my mother’s only child and I knew that I needed to be responsible about being able to be present for her . . . I’ve had enormous satisfaction from the sense of really helping people through what is intended to be a transitional time in their lives, [and] then to see them go on and do the ministry that they are called to. In that sense, I feel fulfilled in my career. I’m not done yet. I look at a place like [my new school] and I see that there are more opportunities for management types of positions for someone with my credentials. There wouldn’t have been at [my former school]. As I work to help [my new school] . . . to create policies that actually operate more smoothly, get more done with fewer people, I think about how, you know, this might lead to something more than just the registrar’s office. On the other hand, if it doesn’t and I create something in this small sphere that contributes to a very successful small school, I’m going to feel good when I retire. The numbers of students that keep in touch with me, the kinds of opportunities for personal and family life that I have because I haven’t been a driven academic -- those things balance out. They matter a lot to me.

If Reese lost her job one day, she has a plan for what would come next, which she offered laughingly but without hesitation when asked.
Move back to [the West] and tend to my mother’s garden. That is one of those blessings of a few extra years. You know, five years ago I couldn’t have said that, but my husband has reached the 20 year mark with his job with the federal government and that makes him eligible for a pension even though we don’t either one of us feel terribly old and so we’ve got some options. I hope I don’t lose my job. It would be tight. I would certainly look for another job in this specialized area that I’ve put so much of myself into. And I am aware that this is a tough time in our country economically. Registrar jobs don’t hang on trees. I am not nearly as anxious as I would have been earlier. I think it is simply I have a better level of family support than I’ve ever had before and just because of where we are in our lives right now.

Brianna

In the months following our first meeting and leading up to our second conversation, Brianna seemed to have retained the generally positive attitude toward her job, her workplace, and her future there. Still, the pressures and frustrations of her position have remained, or even intensified. Brianna said that her workload was heavier than ever before. This situation is common to many seminaries like Brianna’s, and she related it to financial strains, staff cutbacks and turnover.

We . . . let some people go and there [are] just more things being apportioned to some of the staff and I’ve had had some new
responsibilities added. So there is a heavier workload. I am now doing part of the international student [responsibilities], the part that relates to any work that they do has been added to my responsibilities, so that is a little frustrating in getting up to speed and understanding it and knowing the territories, totally new territory. And territory you want to be really careful that you get it right. The heavier workload means there is just not enough time to really plan and look and see what is coming as far ahead as I would like and just the processing time, the planning time, the evaluating time is all really skimpy these days.

**Anticipating Helpful Change**

New leadership in the form of a new academic dean about to be installed, however, remains both a source of hope for Brianna and an event with the potential to destabilize her even further.

In the Academic Life Office, we’ve got four people who have only been here about a year, less than a year some of them, and a new dean coming in and so there are two old-timers, me and another lady. And so that’s been, I don’t know if frustrating is the right word, but the dynamics are really changing and are going to change a lot more as we get a new dean in who is establishing his way of working and his priorities and, you know, steering the boat in the direction he wants it to head toward.

The new dean at Brianna’s seminary will be met with what she describes as a strong spirit of solidarity among staff connected to the academic mission. This
remains a hallmark of Brianna’s sense of pride in her school, and is something she holds up as a distinctively satisfying aspect of working there. For Brianna, this support is manifested through the considerable independence she has for carrying out her responsibilities and the trust that this autonomy implies.

This is, and I would bet you got this across the board with all [of our] people, is really the sense of teamwork and mutual support. The staff here is so supportive of one another and the relationships. Our relationship with the [our immediate supervisor] is just very solid, very supportive, very . . . you know, a lot of mutual respect and just those kinds of things to make everything better, the good teamwork and the trust that we all have. That, well, and, you know, for me, one of the things is even with the director. We talk, we figure out, you know, what we are working on and what we are doing, but I work so independently, we talk on the phone a few times and he drops in a few times a week and then we have a team meeting and occasionally he and I will meet separately, but there is just a lot of independence in what I am doing. In fact, I’m often the person who starts processes. I am usually the one who sees what is coming and says, “OK, we need to get started on this because this is coming,” or “I just learned this from the academic folk I’m in the office with and it will apply to us so we need to start, you know, gathering our information or whatever it is,” and I find that really satisfying.
The sense of cooperation is all the more remarkable given the amount of turnover at Brianna’s school in the past few months, especially in her immediate area.

Everybody I’m working with has changed except for one person. And that, that could have been very difficult. We have been so fortunate in who we have selected. The teamwork between the assistant dean and the chapel faculty person and I, which we all three are in the same suite, but also the changes in the registrar office, the commitment to ‘we are all in this together; if you need something let me know.’ There has been a lot of back and forth, but they have both talked about how very supported they feel and how much they appreciate it and it has been an easy thing to do. They are sharp people and they’ve really gotten up to speed and know their stuff. And so the mutuality, I mean I wouldn’t have expected to have this level of mutuality in this level of communication with somebody I haven’t worked with very long. It’s just been excellent.

**Personal Adjustments**

Brianna does not express regrets about tolls taken on her family due to her career, or with regard to career impediments due to family responsibilities. At this point in her life, she is seeing some family duties diminish, and has more time to focus on her own goals and desires, both personally and professionally.

I have been in kind of an interesting place because my children, in the last five years have all grown up and moved out of the house. So those commitments are not what they were when my children were all home. On
the other hand . . . I’m in a relationship [which has] really just solidified and it is actually quite serious at this point. And, I do feel like I’ve got the time and the emotional energy to deal with it. I don’t feel like I’m being drained by work. I feel like I’ve got what I need to put into that and things are pretty well balanced, and that is feeling really good. In a more general way, you know, with the kids out of the house, I’m . . . until I get grandkids I think I am in a good place.

Like many mid-level administrators, Brianna contemplated the possibility of advancing into a greater leadership role over the years, and even briefly accepted an associate dean’s position once at her seminary before returning to her current role. She feels comfortable with what she has accomplished and does not seem to mind if a higher-level position does not open up for her, as long as her current work remains interesting.

I really like being in the middle. I like shooting all the really ugly stuff up a step to somebody so that I am not the only one dealing with it. And I really found, and I didn’t know this until I did the associate dean job for a while, was I felt kind of fragmented by all the different areas of territory I was supervising, even though there were other people dealing with much of that, but I felt fragmented by that and I found that I was really pleased to get back to the contextual ed stuff and have all my eggs, mostly, in the same basket. And that was something I didn’t know . . . and I think some of that, now, you always have in your head that you are going to move up,
you are going to be in charge, you are going to get to the place where you
are top dog and stuff, but that was, maybe, wasn’t particularly strong in
me but is certainly something that I let go of pretty easily. I’m really at
this point, pretty content with where I am at. And stepping up, stepping
back up to the level that I was doing, I mean there are some payoffs
particularly in financial payoffs, but in terms of stress and just satisfaction
with the work and balance and things, I really find that I am in a good
place.

If Brianna lost her job, however, she is concerned about what would come
next. Her area of expertise is more parochial and specialized than some others,
and does not readily translate into the higher education job market at a level of
equal responsibility. Unlike Reese, Brianna is not at a place where she could
afford to retire, and the combination of highly specialized expertise and a grim
national job market worried her when she was asked to discuss this contingency.

I worry about that . . . I was job hunting and given that I am in the
contextual education office, it is not like being an accountant, you can’t
just, you know, go on Craigslist, type in accountant positions and pull up a
bunch of other positions. If I were to lose my job and have to job hunt, I
don’t even know what position I’d be looking for. I can explain my skills,
I can explain what I’ve done, but in order to hire me it would have to take
someone who really heard that and really was open to . . . somebody with
experience and organizational skills and communication skills and all this
and [who would say] ‘we can plug you into this and you will learn how to
do whatever this new position is’, but most folks don’t think that way . . .

Where in a tight market people are more willing to hear those kinds of
things, I think in this market you can find people who are qualified if not
over-qualified in the area you already need them to be doing the work in.

So, in this job market, if I were to lose my job it would be a big problem. I
don’t really know what direction I would go. I mean, it makes sense to
stay in higher education, but there is no direct correlation. It is not like
going to another admissions office. I’d be in a lot of trouble, truthfully.

**Michael**

Michael’s seminary relocated in the months between our two interviews.
Now it is in a suburb of the city where we first met. The physical move of
facilities and operations, however, did not seem to create as much impact as
structural changes within the organization. At the time of our second
conversation, Michael still expressed a great deal of satisfaction with his position
and prospects at the seminary, but also used words like “transition” and upheaval”
to describe the time between our two meetings. Unlike the other participants in
the study, the tensions at Michael’s school take their origins in expansion into
new program areas – in this case, an international doctoral program. Michael has
had to tailor his responsibilities to make room for this program and the
concomitant addition of new staff.
This is very much a double-edged sword... we expanded our staff and expanded what we are doing, brought the Korean language program, I think that was kind of in its infancy last time I talked to you and that has been a lot of upheaval for us, trying to figure out how that incorporates into what we do with our, you know, local oriented masters program to have this global doctorate program. I guess the frustrations over the last year and there, just to be expected is just to figure out now, kind of what my role is. We started cutting parts of my job off. Good. That is very welcome, but then trying to figure out, you know, with what is remaining what do I emphasize there?

**Helpful Organizational Adjustments**

Michael’s responsibilities have shifted in the organization. He was in charge of admissions at the time of our first meeting, and those duties have now been assigned to a new full-time staff member. Responsibilities in the area of student billing, which Michael once held, have been assigned to an entirely different campus, under the distributed multi-campus model his seminary employs. Accompanying these changes has been a shift in the reporting structure, moving Michael under the supervision of an Academic Dean who is relatively new to the institution.

The shift of responsibilities has been welcomed overall, because it frees Michael to focus on the duties of a registrar. At his seminary, those duties extend beyond records and registration to encompass advising, student life, counseling,
etc. However, the pace and magnitude of change has been unsettling. Michael has an increased and very high degree of autonomy in the organization, which has both good and bad sides.

I've really enjoyed it but [have to] just to kind of figure out, I don't have a new job description that clearly outlines what I'm supposed to be doing. In a way it speaks a little bit to the trust of me, but at the same time is a little frustrating because I have to figure out what I am I supposed to be doing myself. I also transitioned and I think this had taken place when we last talked from my direct supervisor had always been the President here. Then when we named our newest Academic Dean, he became my supervisor. He is a great guy, very, very hands off. Really, he really just expects me to know my job and do my job without any kind of direction whatsoever. In a way, it is welcomed because I feel I really know my job but at the same time I could use probably some direction . . . Sometimes there is overlap between me and other staff members and there is not really clear direction as to who is really supposed to be doing stuff. So sometimes I'll be working on something and find out someone is working on, not on purpose, but working counter to what I am doing. I am trying to move us one way and someone is trying to move us the other way and neither of us were told to do it, it is just . . . there is a little frustration in that. Then, you know, kind of always having to be in some ways a self-contained boss and employee. Every day I come in and have to figure out what is important to
do today on my own. Like I said, it is really double-edged because sometimes I really enjoy that and in some ways it is almost a frustration sometimes because sometimes it is like I really could use someone telling me, "this is what is important to us now." "This is what you should be working on.

*Focusing on the Highest Values*

Through all of this, however, Michael has remained satisfied with his position. He believes that the move to a new location, in which the seminary has control of the campus as opposed to sharing space with a church, has generated a sense of independence and feelings that the seminary is now more established. Furthermore, the new facilities and the adjustments to his set of responsibilities have enhanced Michael’s ability to do what he enjoys the most in his job: work with the people he calls, with a noticeable sense of pride, “his students.”

At the end of the day, I'm very, very satisfied [here]. You know, probably more so than before because some of the previous frustrations like being in a permanent guest somewhere, not having control over your facilities, you know, those frustrations are all gone. And so, in some ways life has gotten better. I've got a much bigger, nicer office. I've got a shorter commute. There has been a lot of just quality of work environment changes that we are in a really nice place. The other place was really nice, but we were always guests, you know, we couldn't use a lot of the common areas and things like that. Here everything is ours. So, it's just
been really, really nice to be here. The biggest satisfaction is that we are really starting to build a community which was very difficult at the old place. And so, I've spent a lot more time hanging out with students and that is trying to spend a lot of time doing it before but it was difficult because we didn't have our common areas. Here we have a cafe and a reading room and a lot of places just to hang out with students. I find myself doing that a lot and that is probably, you know, probably my number one satisfaction with my job, spending time with my students.

**Rediscovering a Pastoral Role**

When asked what he would do if he lost his job, Michael was intrigued by the question – “probably tells you if you’re in the right job to begin with,” he chuckled. He does not seem overly concerned about this prospect, which can be attributed to the satisfaction and comfort he has described in his present position, but also to growth and rekindled interest he has experienced as a result of his work at the seminary. Michael remains committed to his goal of earning an advanced degree and teaching at the seminary one day, but has also found himself drawn to leadership positions within the church. At Michael’s seminary, even more so than other theological schools, leadership positions in academia and leadership positions in the church are not mutually exclusive.

I would just go full board on my studies and I would get done as quickly as possible, or I would look for a job in a church . . . that was my original thought when I started seminary I was going to work in a church and I
kind of gravitated more toward the administration. [In] January I was
nominated for Ruling Elder which in [my church] is a lay pastoral role and
then election is this summer and if elected, I’ll be ordained in August.
And, so, there is a big part of me that still really enjoys being involved
with the local church and I think I’ve grown more in my desire for
pastoral-type work. And I do a lot of that in my job, actually, that is one
of the ways that I’ve got a job that fits very well that I get to do that a lot
with my students. You know, I get to pastor the pastors in some way. And,
I think I’ve found more satisfaction growing in that and maybe less
satisfaction in the administrative side. So, I am thinking maybe five to ten
years out seeing myself in a role that is probably more toward the pastoral
side. Here, our faculty are pastor-scholars. They are called to be scholars
but also ordained, either work[ing] in the local church or a lot of them
actually have pastoral calls as well as being faculty members.

Kelly

Of the four participants who granted a second interview, there is no
question that Kelly had faced the most dramatic change in circumstances between
our two conversations. She expressed confidence, exuberance and faith in her
seminary and obvious joy in her role there during our first interview. Now, her
confidence has been clearly shaken. A change in leadership has been a cause of
turmoil at Kelly’s school over this past year, and she has suffered collateral
damaged as a result.
Kelly believed that the trouble centers around a single senior executive, newly hired at the institution, whose aggressive approach and lack of experience in academia caused several staff departures, even at the executive level. Now, that person has been reassigned to a position with less widespread authority at the seminary, but the damage to the organizational structure and to employee morale has been done.

**Recovering from Setbacks**

Although she has retained an impressive title – Associate Dean for Enrollment Services -- Kelly has been stripped of many responsibilities she cherished, and she has received essentially nothing to replace them. Bitterness does not characterize Kelly’s personality, but I cannot find a more accurate description of her attitude toward what she has experienced over the past year. She feels betrayed, and is angry and hurt.

It’s been a very challenging year. Stuff was done very, very poorly and there has been no acknowledgment of that and I suspect there never will be and no repentance of that, nothing. So, it was left to me to figure out for myself what I thought had happened and then to forgive in the absence of repentance what had happened. That has been challenging. Frustration wouldn’t even be the word that I would use. Grief, yes. But, the ongoing frustration is that I don’t, I don’t have a purpose here that I can discern. Now, there are smaller purposes, but [no] overarching purpose, if that makes sense. In terms of being used in the lives of individual staff
members and individual students, yes. In terms of why are you part of this organization, I can’t answer that. So, that is probably the biggest source of frustration in not having job responsibilities in my estimation, not having any authority, not having any specific responsibilities on an ongoing basis. I am not used to that. I’ve been working, oh, golly, 35 years now. I don’t recall ever being in this situation before.

Because she has been removed from a position of influence over academic life, Kelly’s favorite aspect of her job – work with students – has been seriously compromised. Kelly’s response to this, however, has been creative and useful to her. She has enrolled in four courses at her seminary over the past year. She chose this primarily as a way of retaining contact with students, but has come to view her coursework as the possible foundation of a new career.

They fire-walled me from the faculty and they fire-walled me from the students, but because I essentially have little or no responsibility right now, I took six hours of class in the fall and I’m taking six hours of class this semester which has given me boatloads of student contact. And, so, the sources of satisfaction, largely, are in trying to help. I mean, by default, my office is where people land when they need to talk to somebody and pray about something, and so staff end up here and that’s a source of satisfaction because it is a form of ministry that I can do here. Some of the faculty end up here and I get to work with the students and that’s a great source of satisfaction . . . I was pretty much the sole
academic advisor here until about a year and a half to two years ago. It was berserk because we have close to a thousand students and I had other job responsibilities as well. My philosophy of academic counseling is that academic counseling is life coaching, because academics [are] a tool in the process of life. It’s not an end in itself. If you treat it as an end in itself or a goal in itself, something is off kilter. So, whatever you are doing with academics ought to be tailored to whatever God is calling you to . . . When the advising function shifted, the person who has it now has a different philosophy. It is actually my boss and his philosophy is course planning and what courses are needed for you to finish this degree and have you accomplish those courses. That is a very different philosophy of coaching and there are a lot of students who know me who still kind of seek me out and want to talk things through.

*An Uncertain Future*

Kelly’s struggles this year have been the impetus for significant career reflection. After a long career at a seminary she has loved and where she had planned to retire, Kelly finds herself in the position of having to consider career alternatives. She believes she is ill-equipped for many careers that might appeal to her. However, her prior experience at the seminary, her own work with a career counselor, and her current interactions with students have validated an idea that perhaps Kelly has a future as a life coach. It is an uncertain future, to say the least, but Kelly believes that the idea is divinely inspired.
Last summer, I would have been really happy to come in and put in my resignation on several desks . . . I talked with a career coach and I prayed a lot about it and felt that the potential and direction may be some sort of life coaching although I had a lot of questions about that but in order to even begin to move in that direction, I needed some educational credentials. So, I really felt the Lord was saying there are six classes that I really want you to get and that means you will be here through at least December of ’11 in order to get those classes and I’ve been chipping at them ever since. And I am still not 100% sure where it is going. This job is my third career and we may be potentially looking at a fourth. But I’m not sure. I’m not sure where it will go.
Chapter Five

This chapter provides analysis based on the 11 interviews conducted in the study. The analysis pays particular attention to the cases of the four participants who were selected for a second interview, but all participants’ cases contributed to the findings. As described in Chapter Three, Colaizzi’s (1978) sequence for interpreting qualitative data was used to identify themes which characterized the participants’ perceptions and experiences. Comparative analysis of the interview texts provided the canvas for this identification. Finally, I returned to the research questions that framed the study to determine how they were addressed through these interviews and the ensuing analysis.

Before I present the analysis and themes from the content of the interviews, I want to note the sense of pride that was commonly observable across all participants. This sense of pride was uniformly evident in two areas: in descriptions of one’s personal contributions to the betterment of the seminary and in reflections upon the institutions the participants represented: what the institutions stood for and meant both to them and to the world around them. The latter observation is perhaps striking, for it was true of both the lay administrators who worked in comfortable situations and those whose circumstances in the workplace seemed grim. In addition, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary graciousness that the participants offered me throughout the study.

Analysis

Five themes emerged from the analysis of data. They are: knowledge as currency; community; change (both positive and disruptive); leadership; and the insider’s perspective.
Knowledge as Currency

The statements of the participants contained a theme about knowing, or being knowledgeable, and how their knowledge earned the participants a reputation for competence. The acquisition of a level of expertise in one’s area of responsibility was a hard-earned and valuable currency for these lay administrators in a seminary environment. Its significance to their success was revealed in multiple instances in the responses of participants.

*Brianna:* I think all the folks who are good at what they do and don’t need oversight pretty much get a fair amount of autonomy.

*Reese:* When the student gets the diploma, I feel an enormous burst of success just at having had a hand in that. It is the kind of thing that a registrar is ideally placed to do because you do know so much about all of the bits and pieces that go into that student’s life.

*Kelly:* There are a lot of students who know me who still kind of seek me out and want to talk things through.

*Micahel:* My supervisor is a great guy, very, very hands off. Really, he really just expects me to know my job and do my job without any kind of direction whatsoever.

*Melanie:* If you can be reliable and responsible and innovative, I think that is what is going to be important in a seminary because you don’t have someone who can be checking in on you at all times.

These statements underscore the significance not only of knowing, but knowing in a social community, and in this case the particular social community of the freestanding
They emphasize a development of one’s sense of self in a faith-based workplace that has parallels to the development of the sense of individual faith. To illustrate, Fowler (1981) asserted that individual worldviews develop with a deep and inextricable impact from the images and interpretations that are revered and held sacred by one’s community. Fowler was describing a systems-based theory of development, acknowledging that individuals are members of social systems which define both the essence and limits of individual development, and possess an influence which is nearly inescapable.

The reputation for expertise affords the lay administrator status and respect at a seminary, both of which contribute to satisfaction and a sense of mattering. In particular, the participants valued autonomy in their work, and knowledge is the foundation of building a reputation for competence, which in turn leads to the trust to work with minimal supervision. Being seen as knowledgeable in a community that is committed to learning has distinct advantages as well. Reese and Kelly drew great satisfaction from the respect shown them by seminary students, who viewed them as trusted resources to help them through school. This respect was all the more significant to Reese and Kelly when they found themselves no longer affirmed by their seminary leadership in the ways they had been accustomed.

**Community**

All of the participants in the study sensed that they matter to the success of a work-related community. This community was usually comprised of one’s co-workers at the seminary, but it did not have to be. It may be with professional colleagues in other
organizations, and in several cases, there was a level of connection with the seminary student community. The lay administrators felt the satisfaction of mattering to this particular group, even though they were not members of it.

Melanie connected with a local network of non-profit public relations directors, which offered her a set of contacts for positive reinforcement and sharing ideas. In turn, she has strengthened the development of this network through her own initiative.

I really got involved in non-profit communications network that was in town, got to know some people from some other universities. They had already formed an organization where the presidents already knew each other but the communicators didn’t know each other. I kind of brought that together so we could share contacts and say, who are the best printers in town? How can we be the most economical with things? What are we using electronically to move us from as we lower expenses? How can we be a better network for each other?

Sarah’s identity as a graduate student gave her a sense of belonging and personal value among those students and with her professional peers. The students in her higher education administration program related to her differently than her seminary colleagues, and offered candid opinions on issues of common interest. Respect in this community was hard-earned, because Sarah had to overcome what she perceived to be biases against seminaries in the larger higher education community.

We (seminaries) are not equal to other higher institutions in general. That is the perception I get. That because I went as a staff of [the seminary], I
did not have the same stature. Once I also introduced myself in these conferences as a student of [a state university], I felt a bit more respect from other peers. A lot of times it would be like, why are you still at [the seminary]? Because I am still learning, I am still growing, I still like it.

The emergence of a theme of community for these participants is consistent with ideas advanced on the topic of community in prior literature. Wuthnow (1994) has argued that our societal sense of community has been redefined by movement toward small group membership as a mechanism of support that is more personal and accessible, but less permanent and deep. Community still “lies at the intersection of individual needs and institutional structures” (Wuthnow, 1994, p. 15), but as lives become more fragmented, individuals are less apt to identify with traditional communities such as neighborhoods, church denominations, and even families. Small group membership has filled this void in ways that many persons find immensely satisfying but that have also profoundly shifted expectations of what belonging to a community means, what it can deliver for an individual, and what responsibilities an individual takes on when he or she is a community member (Wuthnow, 1994).

The desire for connection to a small group is consistent with the culture and values of both the professional and scholarly communities that surround the participants at their workplaces. In both Melanie’s and Sarah’s examples above, the groups in which they have found a sense of community are relevant to them
because they create the space for idea sharing, reflection, and imagination about vocational concerns. The theological education curriculum in the seminaries where they work invites a similar ethic of inquiry. Veling (1999, p. 420) has described theology as “interpreting the primary questions, issues, and concerns of their sociocultural situation in conversation with the primary symbols, narratives, and visions of their faith traditions.” Even in the absence of explicitly-shared religious values, as in Sarah’s case, the inclination toward connection with a community of inquiry and practice is a familiar, comfortable and transcendent value.

**Positive Change**

Conversations with the participants in the study indicated an uncomfortable relationship with change at their workplaces. Responses revealed several instances where change was celebrated in the form of task variation, was seen as a vehicle for being noticed by leadership, or was held up as a means of keeping their work interesting and meaningful.

*Melanie:* I have continued to be here because there are new challenges and that they believe in me.

*Brianna:* So I spent so much time with that curriculum change, getting it put together and they (leadership) knew how hard it was and they really appreciated it and it was what allowed things to happen smoothly and that first year was really tough, but it went well.
Annie: Another thing I like about when I came in, there have been some changes each year that are enough that keep my learning curve high.

Disruptive Change

Change that takes place within expectations is a welcome and even necessary characteristic of the lay administrator’s position. Variety is an antidote to inertia and complacency. However, change can come quickly at a freestanding seminary; it can be far-reaching and disruptive to expectations of stability. The participants in the study frequently expressed anxiety or misgivings about the scope of change they had experienced or that they foresaw.

Brianna reflected on this dilemma with concern. Though content in her position, she wondered “Do I want to stay and work through all these changes and be here for another 5 years or 10 years? How do you emotionally re-up, reinvest?”

Kelly’s work life was especially rattled by a change in leadership that led to a downgrade to her position. She worried about her future and how to work through the tense and delicate situation that characterized her interpersonal relations with her school’s leadership. At the point of our conversation, Kelly still had no clear answers about whether to stay in her position or move on: “If you do initiate the change, you are still dealing with some of [the causal issues] because there is still a grieving process. If you initiate the change, sometimes there is a great deal of excitement to go to something new. It is quite often a feeling of guilt because you feel like you are abandoning people who want and need your help . . . I don’t know.”
The Importance of Leadership

Throughout the study, the influence of the lay administrator’s perceived relationship with leadership at the seminary, and particularly his or her supervisor, was continually prominent. Many of the participants in this study admired their supervisors and other leaders at the freestanding seminary. They were esteemed advisors who could be depended upon for frank and trustworthy guidance. Several participants conveyed enthusiasm and respect for their supervisors.

Shortly after coming to work at the seminary, Brianna found that the approval of her supervisor validated her decision to take the job. “She was always so appreciative of what I did and how I went about things,” Brianna explained. “She was very vocal about her appreciation. She’d say, “You prayed me up. You prayed, I came. It was supposed to be.” Michael describes his supervisor as “a great guy” who gives him plenty of space to do his job. Sarah’s supervisor, an academic dean, was a mentor provided the necessary encouragement for Sarah to pursue a doctorate, because she “valued the growth in her staff, very explicitly. She would always find ways to make us expand our experience and our horizons.”

Even among those participants who felt differently about their supervision, it was clear that the bosses’ opinion of the lay administrator’s work was of great importance to the lay administrator’s sense of identity and place at the seminary. However, the failure of leadership created negative workplace environments for some participants.

Reese’s troubles began when she was reassigned to an Associate Dean with whom she had difficulty working, despite a previously positive relationship prior to the
Associate Dean’s appointment. “It has been a very bad relationship. I have been baffled. I have done everything that I can imagine to open up lines of communication, but I rarely even see this person face-to-face.” Similarly, Kelly attributed her reversal of fortune at her seminary to the installation of an executive vice president with a work style that Kelly and others at the seminary found intolerable. Kelly gave a summary of how this bad situation began to unfold, and her recounting suggested poor leadership across different levels of the organization. At the time of our conversation, the overall situation remained unresolved from Kelly’s perspective, much like the circumstances regarding her own specific position.

He wanted me out of the picture. There was something of a power vacuum and he could take over . . . we had five vice presidents plus this executive VP and President. In December one of our vice presidents quit. He [had] no other job in sight and a family to support. In January, our vice president for development and communications resigned and left at the end of the month of January. . . [T]he situation could no longer be ignored and both of the vice presidents had talked to the president and said that large portions of the reasons of leaving revolve around the executive vice president. But the president liked him because he let the president go do other things and not worry about what was going on here . . . he finally took the gentleman out of that position and you have to understand, this guy is not an ogre, he is a guy in the wrong place, but the president wasn’t willing to let him go so [he] put him in a VP in charge of communications
and the faculty and the president had three or four marathon sessions with the faculty trying to help the president understand that the dynamics of relationship within the staff were in dire straits. The president thinks the removal of this guy to essentially a sideline VP job has solved the problem. It really hasn’t solved the problem because the larger issues have not been dealt with, but I think the president thinks we are done. No one else thinks we are done.

**The Insider’s Perspective**

Another theme was the participants’ perception that they had a unique ability to deliver an interpretive perspective to issues facing their institutions. The source of this perspective for the lay administrators were: their proximity to students; their familiarity with data; their knowledge of best practices in other organizations, or some combination thereof.

Several participants described their value to their institutions in terms of their ability to filter raw information that is essential to their trades – statistical data, student feedback, etc. These administrators reported that they knew how to present information in ways that were understandable for faculty and executive decision-makers because of their working relationships with them and the resultant knowledge of what they value. But these lay administrators presented data in a way that might benefit the constituencies – usually students - closest to their day-to-day work. They seemed to serve as lobbyists for their constituents’ interests, who could present information in a more palatable way than those constituencies could do for themselves.
Brianna was proud that the faculty and executive leadership at her seminary appointed her as the chair of their self-study committee on student services. She was the only staff member named as a chair of one of the five committees in this extensive process related to institutional accreditation renewal. In addition to the personal validation, the appointment provided Brianna with a prominent platform to “contribute some of the things that I [am] knowledgeable about . . . I hear things from students they wouldn’t hear normally.” Annie had a happy surprise after she moved into the registrar’s position: the ability to offer policy-making advice based on the reports she produced. “I like when the dean or faculty person comes to me and wants numbers to help them make a decision on something else,” Annie explained. “I did not know that could be such a part of the registrar’s position.”

On the other hand, Reese faulted the shift in management style at her original seminary for excluding her from decision-making. As Reese explained in our first interview, “the faculty has developed a system whereby I am asked for data, but I am almost never asked to interpret it. I am keenly aware that interpretation is critical to understanding a lot of what I provide. Sometimes I am able to offer interpretation along with what I present, but I am not present when the conversations take place, so I have no idea how that material is received or processed.” Losing the ability to deliver an insider’s perspective became a crucial component of Reese’s perceived marginality, dissatisfaction, and eventual decision to leave her employer.
Responses to Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do lay administrators of freestanding seminaries develop and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their workplaces?

Experience and Advancement

It is common for lay administrators at freestanding seminaries to be working in the only positions in higher education that they have ever held. For those who have held other positions in higher education, or aspire to, there is a strong sense that their experiences at the freestanding seminaries are so unique and they are not well positioned to advance a career in other postsecondary academic settings without significant advancement of their own educational credentials.

Anxiety and marginality can intensify when lay administrators believe that no comparable position exists to the one in which they have significant, hard-earned experience. They can perceive that long-term immersion in the freestanding seminary environment has created the impression that their employable skills too specialized or parochial for transferability to other settings.

Still, lay administrators at freestanding seminaries believe they play key roles in the context of a larger team or system. They are proud of their contributions to the missions and objectives of their institutions, and tend to see their professional value in terms of what part they play in advancing those missions.
Relationships with Students and Colleagues

Lay administrators at freestanding seminaries seek what might be characterized as partnership with faculty and executive leadership in the advancement of institutional objectives, while maintaining the realization that they are not likely to be seen by these leaders as full or equal partners. Lay administrators, especially those who work closely with the students in their schools, take great pride in achieving a perspective that positions them better for completion of particular tasks or delivery of distinctive ideas that they believe others could not perform or perceive as accurately because of their distance from the point where decisions are put into practice.

Relationships with Senior Management

It is difficult to overstate how the respect of one’s supervisor and other executive leadership at the institution contributed to these lay administrators’ sense of vocational identity. Pleasing the boss with one’s work and knowing that the boss cares enough to give honest and helpful guidance were the most consistent components of the participants’ self-perceptions of mattering at their institutions. When the lay administrators perceived that a mutually well-regarded relationship with a supervisor had eroded or evaporated, they were intensely dissatisfied, and perceived themselves as marginalized, to the point where leaving the seminary seemed to be the only option.

Relationship with Institutional Identity

The stories of the participants in this study suggest strongly that many lay administrators in freestanding seminaries identify with the denominational tradition that their seminary represents. Only two participants in the study did not do so. Sarah
identified as an atheist and Reese, who was initially at a seminary within her tradition, later accepted a position at a seminary of different denomination. Thus, religious issues might not be a personal or professional concern for many lay administrators, because generally the administrator’s personal beliefs are congruent with those espoused by the seminary.

Sarah was able to avoid a self-perception of religious marginalization by simply not being public about her personal beliefs, quietly avoiding situations that would draw personal theological differences to the forefront, and most of all by remaining intensely focused on her work. Sarah identified with a professional academic community that would eventually entice her away from her seminary role. Reese’s transition from a seminary within her own denomination to one of another mainline denomination was not a jarring or significant change to her identity. She observed mainly differences in institutional culture that might have their roots in denominational distinctions but were not overly parochial in their nature.

Advancement within the Institution

The prospect for advancement within the seminary was not a common aspiration for the lay administrators in this study either, in most cases because of their lack of a theological education background. Among those with theological degrees, aspirations to the pastorate or to becoming seminary faculty were possibilities, but still not commonly pursued.
Research Question 2: How do lay administrators of freestanding seminaries develop and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their larger professional communities in higher education?

Significantly, and with few exceptions, the perception of “self as employee” by the lay administrator seemed to be completely defined by the local context of the freestanding seminary. Status within the higher education profession was not a common point of reflection for members of this subgroup of academia, and when it was considered, feelings of marginality or inadequacy were expressed.

However, lay administrators are largely unconcerned with their professional status in the larger professional community of higher education. Their sense of identity is more likely to come from their association with their institution or the faith tradition it represents. Those who reflect on their place within the professional community in higher education believed that seminary education is viewed as unequal to other experiences in the higher education landscape when the totality of experiences are compared. They did not enjoy coming up short in this comparison, but for the most part they did not disagree with it, given that the size, scope, audience, and resources that characterize a freestanding seminary are so much smaller than what is available to other higher education institutions.

Within the small community of comparable seminary institutions, there is effective networking activity among lay administrators through e-mail list-serves and professional conference meetings. However, it is generally difficult for lay administrators at freestanding seminaries to build effective networks elsewhere the higher education
community, or in many cases even to find someone in this community who holds a comparable position, given the often idiosyncratic job description of a seminary staff member. Even when titles and stated job duties are the same, the discrepancies in institution size and scale differentiate the work of the seminary lay administrator from his or her closest counterparts elsewhere in higher education.

Only when a lay administrator aspires to a higher education career outside the seminary setting is the difficulty in networking a point of concern, however. In those cases, a lay administrator may find it beneficial to pursue networking opportunities by aligning with a related professional group that will allow access to other professionals without having one’s main identification as a seminary employee.

Overall, lay administrators at freestanding seminaries are not characterized as possessing great prospects for mobility within the higher education community. In many cases, however, this is not an ambition they hold, and thus not an important component of their own professional identity. Lay administrators on the whole, as suggested in this study, are frequently content with the idea that the position they hold at the seminary is likely to be the last position they hold in higher education. Indeed, it was not unusual for a lay administrator to have no further career ambition at all beyond his or her current position. When asked to consider what a future career outside the seminary might look like for them, or when circumstances at the seminary might force a lay administrator to consider that option, the thought of such prospects often produced fear and uncertainty.
Chapter Six

Introduction

The road has never been easy for freestanding theological seminaries, and the road ahead may lead toward especially challenging times for these schools in the near future (Aleshire, 2010). As the national landscape for higher education becomes more defined by rising costs, higher student debts, and calls for increasing levels of outcomes-based accountability, schools that fill a small and distinct niche within the academy will face more pressure to prove their worth to a variety of constituencies and attract enough students to stay viable. If resources further diminish in these environments where resources have always been scarce, specialized institutions like the freestanding seminary will be challenged to revise their delivery systems, organizational structure, and in some cases even aspects of their mission, to meet the needs of a public that holds a much different view of the seminary than was the case when many of its systems, structures, and content were created or introduced (Dart, 2003). Among the challenges that freestanding seminaries may face are the ability to retain a dependable workforce with the requisite knowledge and commitment to their unique mission to be able to support and lead theological education in the future.

Administrators at freestanding seminaries are an under-studied group of employees within an under-studied group of academic institutions. Most of these administrators are mid-level managers, and a rich body of literature has described administrators in the higher education setting generally, but none of it involves the specific experiences of one distinctive subset of this population, lay administrators at
freestanding seminaries. These lay administrators work as leaders in institutions: with theological missions; surrounded by clergy members in their faculty and staff; with religiously-oriented student populations, and yet they have not followed the same path in terms of their own support for the institutional mission – in some cases, they may have even personal beliefs that are at odds with it. They are also members of a professional group within the academy by virtue of their responsibilities at their institutions, but may encounter barriers to full participation in professional arenas because of the peculiar status of their institutions within the academy. For these reasons, lay administrators at freestanding seminaries were identified as a potentially interesting group worthy of further study. The participants who were eventually selected for this study clearly validated this expectation with their stories.

A qualitative methodology was selected for this study because there is no extant body of literature focusing on this subset of employees in higher education. It is an appropriate research approach when a goal of the study is to build a foundation of knowledge and generate hypotheses about a cultural group when none currently exists. Qualitative methods allow for a level of variety and diversity in capturing the divergent perspectives of lay administrators, and they allowed me, as the researcher, to bring my own experiences as a lay administrator in a freestanding seminary into the study. In particular, a phenomenological perspective afforded me both the opportunity to capture the perspectives of participants in their “natural setting” and to make my own experience part of the process of achieving greater understanding of this group.
Summary of Research Questions

This study was launched around the pursuit of two central research questions: first, the question of how lay administrators of freestanding seminaries perceive and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their workplaces; and second, the question of how lay administrators of freestanding seminaries perceive and manage their personal and professional self-perceptions within their larger professional communities in higher education.

As described in the previous chapter, the lay administrators at freestanding seminaries in this study are not preoccupied with their own sense of professional identity. This is not to say, however, that they have no sense of their value to their institutions. In fact, lay administrators take great pride in what they are able to contribute to the distinctive missions of their seminaries. Like keepers of an institutional flame, the lay administrators with significant experience in their roles can bring a unique, continuing front-line perspective that would otherwise be missing from governance decisions. Though they are not clergy members themselves, lay administrators commonly follow the same faith traditions of the seminaries where they work, and thus their status as laypersons is not a source of anxiety even though their lay status might make them a minority at their workplaces.

The lay administrators at freestanding seminaries in this study did not often reflect on their career prospects outside the seminary without prompting to do so, for example, by the discussion of changes in working conditions. It was common for them to assume that the seminary position will be the position from which they retire. When they did
think about careers in other settings, the participants were concerned that their seminary experiences may not hold much currency. Based on what they know of administrative jobs in the rest of higher education, the seminary lay administrators in this study assumed that their experiences were unequal even though titles may be the same. Those who have had experience in higher education outside the seminary setting, through prior employment or academic study, were even more certain about this assumption. As a result, there is a perceived lack of mobility among most lay administrators within their currently chosen fields, but there are cases where these administrators desire to earn an advanced degree and move to a position of greater responsibility within the academy, or perhaps as a clergy member.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to Schlossberg’s Theories**

**Marginality and Mattering in a Changing Context**

Schlossberg (1989a) identifies marginality and mattering as connecting tensions to which all people can relate. Dichotomies that characterize a life experience – being rich or poor, male or female, successful or unsuccessful – have different outcomes for each of us, but the tensions themselves are common phenomena. So are the internal questions they stimulate within us, such as: Do we make a difference to others? Does our work have meaning? Do we fit within our community?

All of the participants in this study have found workplace communities and circumstances in which they matter, and where they perceive that their contributions make a difference. The dynamics of the freestanding seminary environment can change quickly, however. When the environment changes, the perception of mattering can
change with it, for better or worse. The element of transition has a substantial effect on the lay administrator’s perception of mattering or marginality, and the perception of mattering or marginality affects one’s ability to respond to the transition. Examples from the participants’ experiences demonstrated that those who consistently felt affirmed in their roles at their seminaries were better equipped to manage personal and professional transitions, while those who perceived themselves as having been marginalized did not respond to such transitions as effectively.

**Transitions: Schlossberg’s 4-S System**

Schlossberg’s (1984) Adult Transition Theory, which was introduced earlier in this study, offers an interpretive framework for analysis of the impact of transitions on individuals. She postulated that transitions may be anticipated, unanticipated, or non-events (anticipated but not occurring), and success in dealing with these transitions involves the components of situation, self, support, and strategies. Anticipated transitions are common and predictable events over the course of a life cycle, such as marriage, having children, starting a career, or retirement. By contrast, unanticipated transitions are the life events one does not typically predict, such as divorce, a serious illness, or losing one’s job. Non-event transitions include changes in circumstances that leave one’s life plan altered or unfulfilled, such as not finding a life partner, the inability to have children, or not receiving an expected promotion (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

Elements of transitions experienced by each of the participants in this study can be analyzed with this method. However, the differing experiences of two particular participants, Michael and Reese, are especially illustrative of how Schlossberg’s theory
of transitions is interconnected with the perceptions of mattering and marginality of these individuals.

Michael and Reese are degree-holding alumni of the seminaries where they were employed at the outset of the study. Their involvement in their seminary communities has changed over time and has many dimensions. Both Michael and Reese found that the administrative work of student services, specifically being a registrar, suited the sense of vocation that led them to seminary as students. Their experiences since coming to that recognition have followed different trajectories.

Both Michael’s and Reese have experienced transition in their workplaces in recent years.

**Situation**

Situation in the context of this theory includes the components of trigger events, timing, control, role change, concurrent stress, familiarity, and assessment (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). In relatively quick succession, Michael experienced several important trigger events that can influence a person’s perception of meaning (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006).

Michael began his employment at a small seminary which was merged with a larger one. The seminary merger may have been unfortunate timing for some; in Michael’s case, it was a needed impetus to leave his employment and pursue his own theological degree on a full-time basis. After a year, the realization that his gifts were in administration led Michael to ask for his former position back. Coupled with his desire to marry, his familiarity with the role to which he would return, and the fact that he had
successfully managed such unexpected changes in his situation before, Michael’s experience had little discernible impact on his sense of mattering.

The situation at Reese’s seminary, by contrast, left her feeling shaken and marginalized. After having been a successful, award-winning student at her seminary, Reese transitioned smoothly into a role as registrar. Reese believed (and continues to believe) in the registrar’s work as an extension of the ministry she was called to do. For several years, she served competently in this role with the respect of students and faculty colleagues alike. For reasons that Reese did not completely grasp, but which seem to be related to the need for enhanced assessment of learning outcomes, the faculty at her seminary have taken over much of the academic advising that was a cherished responsibility of Reese’s, and have excluded her from important planning conversations of which she was once a valued contributor. These transitions pushed Reese to the margins, in her own perception, and ultimately led to her departure from the seminary as part of a lateral career move to another seminary across the country.

Timing, control, role change, and familiarity all worked against Reese’s ability to successfully endure her workplace transitions (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). The timing of when the changes began was hard for Reese to pinpoint, underscoring the fact that she did not see the changes coming. The shifts in responsibilities (role change) and her lack of voice in the implementation of these shifts (control) threw her off-balance and into the margins, as she perceived it. Perhaps the most devastating component for Reese was her unfamiliarity with negatively changing situations. Reese had been an excellent student in this community, studying under many
of the same faculty members who she believed saw now her as a trusted counselor to students and faculty members alike. After two successful and satisfying periods of stasis, an abrupt change to Reese’s perception of mattering shattered her expectations and eventually drove her from a seminary she had loved.

**Self**

In the 4-S system, “self” refers to issues of changing self-concept, identity and ego (Schlossberg, 1984). It includes observable personal and demographic characteristics but also such things as one’s outlook, values, psychological resources, and spiritual understanding (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Progress between different segments of one’s life is influenced by these personal characteristics and perceptions, which combine to function as assets or liabilities with an impact on the success or failure of the transition.

Gaining occupational experience and a maturing sense of professional identity are factors that can lead to career transitions for professional persons, building upon their need to make independent assessments of who they are. For lay administrators at seminaries, this process may be heavily influenced by situational factors. Changes within their organizations, over which they may have little control or input, may cause discord between their senses of self before the changes and their senses of self after. The experience of grappling with this disharmony changes them as well.

Reese encountered the most acute struggle with her self-concept among the participants in this study. Reese was familiar with the experience of feeling, as she described, like a “fish out of water,” dating back to her arrival at the seminary as a
second-career student. It was an experience she likened to the experiences of the international students she worked with as an undergraduate. Reese had been successful in helping international students work through obstacles to success, and she had overcome her own misgivings about seminary to become an award-winning student. Her transition to becoming a seminary registrar seemed to not only capitalize upon, but enhance, the good will and strong relationships she had built at the school. When the nature of those relationships changed, in response to new people in leadership positions and a new institutional self-understanding they encouraged, Reese found that the personal assets that had helped her in the past were rendered ineffective. In fact, her identity as a resource for students could now be seen as a liability, since she perceived that some faculty members had become jealous of Reese because they had not been able to achieve a similar relationship with the students they taught.

Both Michael and Reese came to the study of theology after launching careers in other fields, and both found success as theological students. However, Michael demonstrated a level of resilience that enabled him to weather difficult changes related to life, work and vocation. Academic administration was a good fit for Michael, but it was not the career that he first believed was best for him. He pursued his intended goal of entering the pastorate, only to find that he was not as well suited for this work as he had thought. Non-event transitions, those that are expected but never materialize, can be devastating to one’s self-image and have an impact on one’s behavior (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Michael did not experience that impact. He drew upon his faith and the confidence he gained after having achieved success and
satisfaction in academia to redirect his ambitions. He could have been deflated by the
realization that a church vocation was not his calling, but Michael took it as a signal to
return to a related vocation where he had been fulfilled and had demonstrated
competence.

Support

To be sure, Michael had other resources that aided him in his transition; among
them, a new wife and a supervisor who was effusive in his praise for Michael’s work.
Support, in the context of the 4-S system, may consist of “intimate relationships, family
units, networks of friends, and the institutions and/or communities of which the people
are a part” (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006, p. 75). Intimate relationships
are most significant in times of stressful transition, in that they involve trust, sharing
confidences, and can be a source of hope for the future (Goodman, Schlossberg and
Anderson, 2006). As a newlywed, Michael and his wife were cementing their
commitments to one another as lifelong partners. Though uncertainty about his vocation
might have raised his anxiety for the potential impact on his marriage, the timing of the
transition also benefitted Michael based on the support he received.

Kahn and Antonucci (1980) described the function of social support as a means
for experiencing affect, affirmation, and aid. Affect includes liking and respect for a
person; affirmation is the acknowledgement of the correctness or appropriateness of a
person’s actions, statements or beliefs; aid denotes an exchange of tangible or intangible
benefits, such as money, entitlements or time. Reese perceived that she had lost affect,
affirmation, and aid, because she perceived that the academic administrators who had
once lauded her academic advising efforts now sought to wrest control of this function from her. The support system that Reese had not only come to rely upon, but had in fact helped define her experience at the seminary, had disappeared. This was a reversal of fortune that compounded the painful adjustments Reese needed to make in order to succeed in a changed environment. As the network of persons who provided Reese with value and esteem shrank, and without the resources to rebuild it, her perception of marginality increased to the point that she was driven away.

**Strategies**

Within the 4-S system, strategies refer to coping mechanisms a person employs to modify, redefine the meaning of, and/or manage the stress induced by a transition (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) held that there are two orientations for coping -- changing oneself through palliative behaviors that minimize emotional stress, or changing the situation through problem-focused behavior.

Both Michael and Reese saw that their situations could be changed, which is an essential prerequisite for the problem-focused strategies they employed. Michael actually came to this realization twice: once at the time of the seminary merger when he left to work as a pastor, and again when he realized that his skills were better suited for the administrative role he had left behind. At the time of our second meeting, it seemed as if he may be contemplating yet another career transition, though in this case it is as a result of changes in his own outlook and motivations rather than the influence of outside circumstances. Though Michael’s transitions have resulted in a change in situation, he has been able to address them by calling upon personal assets to change his expectations
of himself, exhibiting the palliative orientation for coping. Reese found it more difficult to personally reconcile the changes she faced, but she was able to take direct action to change her situation when her workplace climate and perception of mattering had deteriorated. Reese sought the necessary information needed to make an educated decision about a dramatic change in her circumstances, and ultimately executed this decision and changed her situation for the better, exhibiting the problem-focused behavior orientation for coping.

**Implications and Recommendations**

**Research**

This study is an attempt at providing insight and understanding of a very small and unique portion of the community of higher education professionals. There is a great deal more that can be learned about this group of people, and perhaps about employees at other specialized institutions of higher education. The defining themes of this study that were shown to shape perceptions of self and career among participants who are lay administrators at seminaries could serve as the foundations for hypotheses in future studies about similar perceptions for higher education professionals who do not, on the surface, closely identify with the specialized nature of the institutions where they are employed. For instance, a study of civilian employees at service academies, or non-Native American employees at tribal colleges, may yield interesting results that this study might inform.

This study commenced with the Schlossberg’s work on marginality and mattering as a guiding theoretical framework, and as results unfolded, Schlossberg’s work on
transitions provided useful constructs for achieving insights about lay administrators. There are other theoretical frameworks that could be used as starting points in future studies that may also be effective guiding interpretive lenses for facilitating insight into this population, or other similarly-placed populations.

A phenomenological perspective was employed as a way of incorporating my own lived experience into the study as a member of this population of higher education professionals. Future research in which the researcher does not share identification with participants in the study may yield rich results from the use of other methodological approaches, such as a basic interpretive methodology.

Practice

This study revealed elements of how perceptions of self and career are formed among this distinct group of dedicated higher education professionals. The results will be of the greatest utility, in practice, to the leadership of the freestanding seminaries where lay administrators are employed in positions of significant responsibility. Freestanding seminaries, like all organizations, need to be attentive to issues of employee retention and preservation of institutional memory and knowledge. Insight into the motivations and development of how this important group of seminary employees achieves meaning-making for themselves, and adapts to an often volatile changing context in the workplace, is a valuable tool for seminary leadership to have in their endeavors to address these issues with integrity.

The results of this study may also have salience for the lay administrators themselves, at the freestanding seminaries where they work. The laypeople discussed in
this study have developed their own personal strategies for managing their identities as laypeople in their seminary environment, to the extent that this identity is an issue for them. Many do not regard upward mobility within the profession as a goal or even a necessary component for mattering or satisfaction, but they do want to be appropriately challenged and be appreciated for their work. By reading this study and becoming familiar with the experiences and perceptions of similarly-situated peers, they may discern new paths for themselves to become more visible in their institutions, perhaps by demonstrating initiative to learn as much as they can about their institutions and become indispensable resources for planning and forecasting. Compiling a record of accomplishment and a reputation for good ideas is perhaps the most effective formula for recognition in this environment, and consequently, a key to enhanced feelings of mattering and satisfaction.

**Reflexive Statement**

When I first imagined what I wanted to study, I settled on laypersons who were experienced seminary administrators because that is who I am. I wanted to do important work that reflected my own experiences. Therefore, I entered into the study expecting to see my own vocational joys, concerns, and anxieties reflected in the experiences of the participants. I structured research questions around ideas of professional identity, concern for status within the workplace and within the profession, etc. because these are matters of interest for me, as a seminary staff member and a higher education professional with aspirations for advancement. Though I have succeeded and at times excelled at a freestanding seminary for a long time and earned promotions, I have never
become completely comfortable in my surroundings. I am proud of my achievements at the seminary, but concerned about the parochial nature of my experience and how it will be perceived by others when the time comes for me to seek a position elsewhere in higher education. While remaining open to any findings that the study revealed, privately I assumed that the participants’ anxieties and priorities would mirror my own.

Overall, the results of the study did not match these expectations. The experiences of the participants were quite rich; there were some who were highly satisfied in their roles and others who were highly dissatisfied, some who felt central to their institutions and others who felt marginal, and some whose experiences evolved along these lines from one extreme to the other during the course of the study. It was rare, though, that I found among them the same level of uneasiness that I feel about “what comes next.”

Sarah, who was on the brink of entering a higher education doctoral program like my own, seemed to reflect my concerns more than others. Unlike many other participants, Sarah has viewed the broader higher education landscape from a perspective other than as a seminary employee. The experiences she described validated my concerns about how seminary experience is received larger circles within the profession. Brianna has worked elsewhere in higher education, and also worries about the uniqueness of her experience if she needed to look for another job at a college or university. However, she also receives validation for her work at the seminary. Aside from some slight concern for potential reorganization after their reaccreditation process, Brianna seems content to finish her career there. Kelly has been forced to consider the next phase
of her career because of administrative changes that have marginalized her at her seminary. Without this change in circumstance, however, Kelly would have gladly remained at her seminary for the rest of her career, and may still do so if her situation changes.

I began this study to look at lay administrators’ self-perceptions through the lenses of marginality and mattering. I did not expect to find that transitions were such an important and interwoven part of the lay administrators’ experiences that helped shape these self-perceptions. The fact that Schlossberg has done such extensive work in both of these areas allowed me, through my research, to see this connection more easily. Maintaining a research focus on marginality and mattering alone may not have revealed as much about this group of administrators.

With the exception of Sarah, the participants in the study did not struggle with a self-perception of being somehow different from others at their seminaries. The obvious differences between Sarah’s atheistic convictions and the predominant culture at her workplace seemed to have no impact on her work life any more. The results of the study suggested that lay status among these seminary administrators does not have a strong connection with their perceptions of marginality or mattering. Lay status has had more of an impact on my experience, however. The participants in the study do not often think about their statuses within the higher education profession; I am often exceptionally worried about my status in this regard. In spite of the empathy I acquired for the participants, I emerged from the study feeling somewhat more isolated than before. In some important ways, not even the people I expected to be like me are, in fact, like me.
Privately, I hoped for some affirmation that the things that worry me would worry others who were similar to me and worked in similar environments. I did not receive such affirmation.

That realization brings the opportunity for re-examination of my own understandings. After nearly twelve years of success and affirmation from working in a religious environment, I still have not achieved full comfort with what is different about me as compared to many of my colleagues at work. My lack of comfort as a layperson in this environment seems to be unique as compared to my similarly-situated peers. The study has changed my understanding of my own situation in two significant ways. The first is the recognition that any apprehensions about my lay status are a reflection of my own insecurities rather than the common or expected response of laypersons in highly religious environments. The second is one that I thought I had already learned, but forgot somewhere along the way. It is that the differences between me and the clergy and aspiring clergy at my workplace are not nearly as profound as I perceive them to be.
References


## Appendix A: Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Location in U.S.</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Seminary Tradition</th>
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<td>Melanie</td>
<td>Director of Midwest Communications</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Master’s Pr</td>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Master’s Atheist</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Assistant Director of Contextual Education</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
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<td>Protestant</td>
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<td>Annie</td>
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<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
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<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
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<td>South</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Reformed Protestant</td>
<td>Reformed Protestant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Initial Interview Protocol

1. What work experience in higher education did you have prior to beginning work at a freestanding seminary?

2. What reasons motivated your decisions to work in this environment?

3. What is valued at your institution?

4. How does the work you do fit into that value culture? Or does it?

5. How much do you interact with others in your profession?

6. How do you think your job and role compares to those of others in your profession?

7. How have any of these perceptions changed during your time at the seminary?

8. Within the larger community of people in your profession in higher education, how do you see your status?

9. Based on your experiences, what do you think others in your larger professional community think about theological education? Why do you think they feel that way?

10. How much or how effectively have you been able to network with others in your professional community?

11. What are your goals related to career mobility?

12. How much of a factor do you believe your ability or inability to network within the professional community impacts your potential career mobility within your field?
13. How much has your perceived status in the profession affected decisions about whether or not to seek employment elsewhere in higher education?

14. Anything else you’d like to share with me?
Appendix C: Second Interview Protocol

1. What do you talk about with students?

2. What are the sources of frustration in your work? (Are they the same as before?)

3. What are the sources of satisfaction? (Are they the same as before?)

4. What is your internal network like here?

5. Are you where you thought you’d be at this point in your life in terms of commitments to family?

6. Are you where you thought you’d be at this point in your life in terms of career achievement?

7. What are your coping strategies?

8. What would you do if you lost your job?

9. How “intense” is your level of supervision? Do you have the right level of autonomy?
Appendix D: IRB Approval

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2. research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: Perceptions of Self and Career by Administrators in a Specialized Institution of Higher Education

Primary Investigator: Jonathan Jump

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Robert Young

Department: Counseling & Higher Education

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Dec. 16, 2009

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.