Single gendered community of practice:

Acquiring and embracing a woman president’s identity

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Georgina M. Ginn, M.A.

Graduate Program in Education: Physical Activity and Educational Services

The Ohio State University

2014

Dissertation Committee:
David Stein, PhD, Advisor
Wendy Smooth, PhD
Raymond Noe, PhD
Abstract

Using an exploratory case study approach, this study explored the impact on identity women presidents of for-profit companies, one-million dollars or larger, experienced as a participant within a community of practice. While the individual women’s lived experiences within the group varied, the findings produced four themes that revealed characteristics of a women president’s identity that is influenced by her participation in an all-women, all-president community of practice; a) sisterhood, b) skills, c) role negotiation and 4) self-assurance. The three main conclusions presented as the outcome of this study in review are: 1.) Deep and meaningful relationships are integral to the formation of a community of practice; 2.) Membership composition in a professional role identity development community of practice has an impact on the topics that are raised and discussed within the community; and 3.) Professional Role Identity development within a community of practice is the result of the interaction and interconnection of multiple identities which are socially constructed through participation. The overall primary learning from this study is the understanding that professional role identity development within a community of practice is a progressive process thatformulates overtime and is dependent upon other facets of a member’s identity.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Rick and Carol Ginn, my parents, who helped me to pursue any dream that I have had. To Darren Arnett, my husband and best friend, who supported me in every way through this process even when I didn’t think that I could complete this process.

And finally, to my friends, PhD cohort, and co-workers, who continually inspire me and showed me how to complete this process.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair Professor David Stein, PhD. and committee members, Professor Wendy Smooth, PhD. and Professor Raymond Noe, PhD. Your push for producing great scholarship has made me a true scholar that is grateful for the level of education and training that I received at this great institution. Thank you for your continual guidance and persistence throughout the dissertation process.

Without all of you this would not have been possible.
Vita

EDUCATION

PhD Candidate, Doctorate of Workforce Development and Education
College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
Research Focus – Women in Leadership
Dissertation Topic – A Woman President’s Identity, How Participation in an All-Women Community of Practice Influences Professional Identity: An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study

Masters of Arts in Higher Education and Student Affairs
College of Educational Policy and Leadership
The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio – 2005

Bachelor of Science-Environmental Studies; Minor-Biological Sciences
College of Arts and Sciences/Honors Scholars Program
University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio – 2002

PUBLICATIONS/PRESENTATIONS


PEER REVIEWER

2nd ILA Women & Leadership Affinity Group Conference
Advancing Women in Leadership: Waves of Possibilities
2014
Midwest Research2Practice Conference
2014
Academy of Human Resource Development Annual Conference
2006, 2009, 2010

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education: Physical Activity and Educational Services
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication...................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments........................................................................................................ iv
Vita ................................................................................................................................. v
List of Figures ............................................................................................................... viii
Forward ........................................................................................................................ ix
Chapter 1: Study Introduction ..................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2: Literature Review ....................................................................................... 19
Chapter 3: Methodology ............................................................................................. 54
Chapter 4: Data ........................................................................................................... 88
Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusions .......................................................................123
References ...................................................................................................................148
Appendix A: Interview Protocol .................................................................................162
Appendix B: Demographic Survey ..............................................................................165
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Research Study Conceptual Framework......................................................... 22

Figure 2.1 Marsick and Watkins’s Informal and Incidental Learning Model
    as adapted with Cseh................................................................. 25

Figure 3.1 Final Code Book.................................................................................. 72

Figure 3.2 Coding Results................................................................................... 75

Figure 4.1 Sample Agenda for Roundtable Meeting ................................. 94

Figure 5.1 Proposed Model for Women President’s Identity Development .............. 130
Foreword

The experience of writing my dissertation has been nothing short of a journey—a learning experience that mirrors to a great extent the women who are being asked to participate in my study. The journey for my dissertation began as I was riding on the subway in New York City in the summer of 2007, contemplating the choice to continue the pursuit of my doctorate. I was handed a piece of paper that said, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” In a recent broadcast of The View, during their “hot topic” segment, the hosts discussed how smart women have to “dumb-down” to be successful in business and in love, in order to not intimidate their male counterparts. In issue after issue of Newsweek, Fortune, and countless other mainstream publications, journalists tackle the question, “Do women lead differently from men?” And, daily, there are affirmations that encourage me to continue with my research. The prevailing attitude, as on the subway or presented in The View, illustrates how women are still viewed as different or out of place in the highest roles of business.

My personal pursuit for an answer as to understand how women presidents become a president, stay a president, and are deemed a successful president is because at some point in my career, I intend to be the president of an organization or company. Understanding how women leaders learn from their experiences and how their experiences, when shared with other peers, help them learn could facilitate the career development of future women
organizational leaders and may help to deconstruct popular culture’s attitudes that question the ability of women to succeed in the highest role of a company.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

If you look at the headlines of multiple popular publications, there is a raised level of consciousness about women in the professional setting and the types of networks that they create for learning. For example, recently, Sheryl Sandburg, the COO of Facebook, released *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (Sandberg, 2013). Sandburg did interviews with Katie Couric, Oprah Winfrey and all of the major network morning shows to promote the book and her message to professional women. Sandburg urges professional women to “lean in” to leadership opportunities and to strive to be at the top of their organizations. Sandberg’s book talks about the barriers that exist for women to access these elite roles in the business community (Sandberg, 2013). Her perspective is that barriers exist on two levels: those that are a part of the organizational structure that a woman works within, such as discrimination, sexual harassment, and blatant sexual discrimination (Sandberg, 2013), and those that are self-imposed. She describes this second barrier as women themselves not fighting against the institutional barriers and subscribing to the behaviors attributed to traditional gender roles (Sandberg, 2013).

In another article published in *Business First*, the first sentence says, “Women executives aren’t shy about turning to their peers for help to solve business problems and discover new approaches to leadership” (Tortora, 2012). Tortora (2012) argues that women business owners who take the time to build strong relationships and networks for their companies will see a positive impact. This support system can result in leads for new employees and for new business.
However, the overall intention of these groups is not for increased business; instead, it is to provide a safe place for these women executives to share and learn new ideas for the issues that they are facing within their organization (Tortora, 2012). Because women business owners invest in these types of relationships and expanded networks of support, the growth of women-owned businesses is surpassing that of male-owned companies by 1.5 times (Tortora, 2012).

An article published in Redbook in 2012 discussed four women who meet every two weeks and call their work group the “accountability club” (Fernandez, 2012). At their bi-weekly meetings, one of the group members presents a list of business and personal goals to the group. The women then work through each of the issues to determine tangible tactics that can be used to help them see this issue through. These women believe that this model works because there is a commitment to one another, a renewed commitment to themselves, and accountability.

Another example of a group similar to “accountability club,” which has formed to support women leaders (specifically, women presidents) on an international scale, is the Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO). Dr. Marsha Firestone founded this organization in response to a lack of support for women presidents to navigate the challenges that they were experiencing with the growth of their company. The premise of the group is that the members of each chapter meet on a monthly basis and utilize a roundtable format to solve problems within their organization and share knowledge with other female presidents in hopes to improve the practice and innovation in each of their companies.

The overarching message from these three headline news stories is that women executives need to support other women executives throughout the span of their careers. The push is for women to share their experiences and knowledge that they have acquired with
other women. The hope is that these informal learning opportunities that women are choosing to participate in or creating for themselves will help them to succeed in their jobs and solve problems that they are encountering.

Even with this attention in the mainstream media regarding women’s work experiences and groups such as the Women Presidents’ Organization, women are appointed president of major Fortune 1000 companies at a much lower rate that would be expected; especially when taking into account that women make up over half of the U.S. workforce (Kotte & Agars, 2005). Only 20 women currently hold the role of chief executive officer or president on the Fortune 500 list of companies (http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-fortune-1000, 6/01/13). Underpinning the literature that tries to explain why women are not being appointed to the role of president is the concept of gender and how gender has typically been used as means of power within the workforce and defines certain jobs as being for men and certain for women (Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 2000). Three main issues are presented within the literature that explain women’s limitations in executive roles: societal—societal influences on women’s choices (Lyness & Thompson, 2000, Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000, Tannen, 2001, Burgess & Tharenou, 2002, O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005); institutional—organizational structures (Oakley, 2000, Burgess & Tharenou, 2002, O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005, Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich & Atkins, 2007, Haslam & Ryan, 2008); and relational—personal and professional relationships (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1996, Burgess & Tharenou, 2002, O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Societal constraints can be defined as those circumstances or conditions within larger society that may influence women’s choices or considerations when choosing a job.
Organizational constraints can be defined as “the impact of organizational structures such as policies, procedures, culture, and environment” on how women experience their workplace (2005, p. 175). Relational constraints refer to the impact that both personal and professional relationships can play on a woman’s career choices. There are many variables within each of these facets that can affect a woman’s experience within the workforce, and having an understanding of the types of issues can lead to the creation of support mechanisms that may help women to overcome these barriers.

The argument that gender has limited the experiences for women has given rise to multiple types of informal learning opportunities that women can use to try and break through the limitations that exist due to gender in the workforce (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1996; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). These informal learning opportunities can include structured mentoring programs and participation in all-women professional organizations, for example (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1996; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Another type of informal learning structure that can be utilized is a community of practice, such as the Women Presidents’ Organization. The formation of a community of practice within the workplace or by a group of people may be in response to lack of support or access to similar people that do the work that they do (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice have also been used as a structured learning group to help participants to find a place for support and learning in regards to their professional careers (Wenger, 2002).

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people that come together—either spontaneously or through a sponsored initiative, most likely within their company or
community—to improve their area of practice. More specifically, a CoP “is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Most CoPs are formed around a specific job field or task (Wenger, 1999). Communities of practice differ from other types of work groups or professional organizations in that their existence is to help members to be able to formulate their identity within that position or area of practice, as well as the group forms an identity that influences how they do their work and view other aspects of their lives (Wenger, 1998). This identity impacts the way that members operate in all other aspects of their lives; participation reaches beyond just the times that the community meets.

The progression of literature surrounding CoPs began when the term was coined by Lave and Wenger in 1991. It was further developed by Wenger in 1998 (Cox, 2005; Merriam, Courtenay & Baumgartner, 2003). The premise of CoPs is derived from the larger body of literature in adult learning known as informal learning (Pastoors, 2007). Informal learning, when referred to in the professional setting, is usually self-directed but not highly structured (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Informal learning is also learner-centered and based on gaining knowledge from lived experiences (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Examples of informal learning can be networking, participating in a mentoring program, career coaching, and career planning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Although tied to informal learning, the terms communities of practice and informal learning are not synonymous (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). The CoP theory is a departure from informal learning because it is a new way to structure learning opportunities within the workforce (Cox, 2005). The term communities of practice is mainly framed around Lave and
Wenger’s first publication regarding legitimate peripheral participation (Cox, 2005). The focus of Lave and Wenger’s 1991 publication, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, was to describe how learners are situated within the social environment of their work. Situated learning is more than just learning factual knowledge about someone’s job. Situated learning is a comprehensive understanding that involves how an individual receives knowledge, and that knowledge is linked to something that they can identify with from their experiences. How workers are situated has a direct impact on not only what they learn but also how their identities shift to become active participants in their craft and the further perpetuation of that work.

Although this shift in identity can occur in any informal learning environment, the difference between a community of practice and another form of an informal learning group such as a project work group is that at the end of the project, the group dissipates. With a community of practice the concept of identity also applies to the group itself. So regardless of the end date of a project, resolution of an issue, or a change in the membership, the group and its identity is still maintained and will continue to exist (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Wenger states that there are many purposes that a CoP can take on, including but not limited to problem solving, knowledge sharing, improving practice, or innovation. The literature regarding CoPs spans from how CoPs are used in the workplace to neighborhood civic associations to religious sects (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, Wenger, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Riel and Polin’s (2004) understanding of communities of practice categorize social learning opportunities in three ways, task based, knowledge based and practice based. Practice based CoPs aim to produce knowledge specific to their practice. The
community is specifically purposed with continuing this identity across “generations” – the community is tasked with teaching the language, artifacts, rituals, routines and stories specific to that – in this case – profession (Riel & Polin, 2004). Wenger’s work when looked at in the context of Riel and Polin (2004), the majority of Wenger’s work is situated as a practice based community of practice. This research was positioned to gain a better understanding of how members of a practice based community of practice developed their professional role identity – Women President.

Another more critical perspective questions issues of gender, power, trust, conflict, organization, leadership, size, and limits of CoPs (Taber, 2011; Pastoors, 2007; Praechter, 2006; Cox, 2005; Praechter, 2003b; Praechter, 2003). Much of the research found was concentrated on the actual structure of communities of practices and what factors need to be present for a group to operate as a community of practice (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, Wenger, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This additional perspective on communities of practice raises questions about who has been included in this research and what experiences have been included regarding CoPs.

The CoP literature also shows a gap in our understanding of how professional role identity development actually forms through participation and if group composition can influence identity development (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, Wenger, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, in the community of practice literature, there is a lot of attention around the teaching and nursing professions, two professions that are still dominated by
women. In each of the empirical studies reviewed for this proposal, there was no mention of the gender make-up of the study participants (Chinn, 2006; Sim, 2006; Gomez & Rico, 2007; Andrew, Tolsen Ferguson, 2008; Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran & Simpson, 2009; Li, Grimshaw, Nielsen, Judd, Coyte, & Graham; 2009; Li, Grimshaw, Nielsen, Judd, Coyte & Graham, 2009).

From a research perspective, recognition of gender and how it may be at play in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice is an important perspective that will be noted throughout the research process. However, the research plan does not include a comparison study of a mixed-gender presidents group, but gender can be used as an analytical category. By using gender as an analytical category it creates an understanding of these complex connections, interactions, and structures that form in respect to the concept of gender (Scott as in Hawkensworth, 2006). Gender as an analytical category questions the natural attitude in relation to gender and how one’s gender has been used to oppress and legitimate certain types of oppression (Scott, 1986).

Gender as a category of analytical critique used in relationship to the women presidents who will participate in this study and their community of practice could help us to understand how they operationalize the community. Do they utilize the support of the community to teach women how to combat the sexism that they may encounter as a woman president or do they use it to teach women how to dial back their femininity, so that their gender is less present in meeting with male CEOs with whom they may do business? Or is this community utilized as a way for women to engage with other women like themselves to formulate their own identity as a woman president?
The importance of recognizing the impact of gender within communities of practice is that it will ensure representation of a woman’s perspective within the framework of communities of practice. It will help to build an understanding of how the type of support that can be created in a group of all one gender works within the social relationships required for a community of practice to be successful. Understanding the role of gender within a CoP, especially in relation to this group, will provide knowledge on how gender gives meaning to this organization (Scott, 2007). Studying how women operate within a practice based – professional identity development community of practice gives greater depth and knowledge to how a community of practice operates. It will also require reexamination of the current standards of communities of practice (Scott, 2007).

If women like those that participate in the Women Presidents’ Organization are utilizing their COPs as a means to cope with the demands of being a president, form an identity as a female-president, build a community around those that identify as a woman president and practice such things, then more should be known about the type of support that is present within the WPO community of practice and how the learning that occurs from this type of support influences the women’s identity as a president. Secondary to this is the role gender may play in a community of practice and in shaping the experience of a member of an all-female community of practice.

*Study Purpose*

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to build an understanding of how participation in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice impacts her identity development as a president. The study participants are members of one
of two chapters of the Women Presidents’ Organization in a mid-sized midwestern state. The word *support* is generally defined as the how the women presidents support each other in their roles as presidents. This includes but is not limited to how sharing their work experience with one another creates learning and how that learning influences their role and function as a woman president. Essentially, how does the support that is provided by this practice based – professional role identity community of practice encourage this group to learn, how does the learning happen, what is done with the learning, and how has this support and learning impacted their identity as a woman president?

*Methodology*

In-person interviews or telephone interviews, one hour to one and a half hours in length, were conducted with each female participant to understand how the group functions and to gain insight on the role that gender plays within the community of practice. Follow-up interviews were conducted to allow for further questions regarding information gathered in the first interview or information that arises out of the other interviews. Collecting and amassing a portfolio of information for the CoP and the individual participants allowed for multiple perspectives of learning and experience to be reviewed and triangulated in the analysis process. This will help to form an understanding of how the support that these women receive as a participant in this all-women CoP influences their work.

*The Women Presidents’ Organization*

Women Presidents’ Organization, Inc. is a non-profit 501(c) (6) organization formed to improve business conditions for women entrepreneurs, and to promote the acceptance and advancement of women entrepreneurs in all
industries. The WPO is the premier membership organization for women presidents & CEOs (and managing directors) of privately held, multi-million dollar companies. Through global, confidential, and collaborative peer-learning groups, the WPO accelerates business growth, enhances competitiveness, and promotes economic security. It is the ultimate destination for successful women entrepreneurs. (Women Presidents’ Organization, 2012, WPO’s Mission)

The Women Presidents’ Organization was founded by Dr. Marsha Firestone in 1997. While flying home to New York, in the mid-1990s, Dr. Firestone was discussing the challenges faced by executive women with a friend. Dr. Firestone noted the struggles she was seeing with women business owners and presidents as their businesses moved over the one-million-dollar marker. When they reached this level, she observed, their problems and growth concerns radically changed. She recognized that women at that level lacked a support system to navigate these challenges, and it was hurting their ability for growth. Dr. Firestone envisioned an all-women presidents’ organization that could provide this support for highly successful business owners. At the end of the flight, Dr. Firestone’s good friend gave her a check for $10,000 to begin an organization geared to help and support women presidents. Her friend also asked others to help as well, and that was the beginning of the Women Presidents’ Organization.

Today, the WPO has 1,600 members in 101 chapters throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Peru, and South Africa (Women Presidents’ Organization, 2012, WPO’s Mission). The organization’s international office is located in New York, New York, and has 15 staff people that provide support and leadership to the chapters and the platinum and
zenith groups. Additional functions of the national office are to plan and organize regional and national seminars, events, marketing efforts and sponsorship initiatives.

Membership in the group is most common through the chapter structure. A chapter has 20 members. A member is a woman president from a company that grosses more than $2 million a year in gross annual sales or $1 million per year if in a service-based business. She must have some form of ownership in her company, as well. Members must come from noncompeting organizations, and all members are required to sign a confidentiality agreement. For established chapters, members are asked to apply after being selected by the current membership.

Chapter meetings are held monthly, for approximately three to four hours in a conference room setting. They are moderated by a professionally trained moderator who is also a woman business owner. This moderator also serves as chapter chair. The meeting is formatted in a roundtable discussion model. Four other forms of membership exist: member-at-large, alumna, platinum, and zenith.

Membership at-large is granted to women business owners who are not located near an active local chapter. If the WPO expands into the area of a member-at-large, she will be offered a spot in the new chapter as a founding member. This form of membership is also ideal for women who would like to be affiliated with the WPO but are not able to make the time commitment necessary for monthly meetings and peer-support. Members-at-large do receive weekly e-mails from the international organization as well as monthly newsletters, and have access to webcasts and telecasts offered to chapter members.

Alumna membership is for women who have participated as a chapter member for a minimum of at least three years, who have retired, sold their business, or have “special
authorization from the international headquarters. Alumna benefits include the ability to stay involved in activities of their chapter as they choose, as well weekly e-mails from the international organization, monthly newsletters, and access to webcasts and telecasts offered to chapter members.

The final two forms of membership are platinum and zenith membership. Platinum membership groups meet three times a year and are designed for members who have annual revenues of at least $10 million (average revenues are $37 million) (Women Presidents’ Organization, 2012, WPO’s Chapters). The meetings for the platinum groups are held for 1.5 days at a time, with many groups electing to meet for three days. These groups are also limited to 20 members.

The zenith group is referred to by the WPO as “women of exceptional achievement.” These women meet twice a year, once on the West Coast and once on the East Coast (Women Presidents’ Organization, 2012, WPO’s Chapters). The women that are members within this group are owners of businesses with revenues of $50 million and above. This group meets in scheduled meetings and activities for 1.5 days. Members of this elite group are required to have either participated as a member of a chapter or as a member-at-large. An additional requirement for membership is this group is that the member’s company must also be Women Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) certified. WBENC certification is a rigorous certification process that a company can elect to participate in that certifies that the company is owned, managed, and controlled by a woman or women.

The chapters identified for this research study are located in a mid-sized midwestern city in the United States. There are two active chapters of the WPO within the city, chapter
one and chapter two. Based on feedback from the president, who presides as the president for both chapters, this research study was opened up to all members from both chapters.

The meetings start off with the facilitator doing a debrief around the business of the group. Each member then gets three minutes to update the group on the issues and challenges that she is facing within her organization. The issues presented by each woman can be both personal and professional. The facilitator categorizes each of the women’s presented issues into four categories. The group chooses which of the categories they believe has the most relevant issues presented to the group. One issue is then selected, and the facilitator works with the female president to identify the true problem. The problem is then presented to the group. The group then takes time to reflect on the issue and has the opportunity to present their experience with that problem to the group. If a woman president does not have direct experience with topic issue, she is asked to pass on to the next person. This is to ensure that the women are learning from the actual experiences of other members in the group. The president that presented the problem to the group has the opportunity to ask clarifying questions of the other women and is asked that once she has resolved the issue presented to the group, she report back to the group how she solved the problem, the steps she took to solve the problem, and what the outcome was.

The WPO would provide the opportunity for an interesting case study because little is known about a community of practice such as the WPO and the type of participants that apply for membership within this group. The women in this organization across the globe stay involved in their membership for very long periods of time—some until (and even past) retirement. Since its inception in 1997, the organization has continued to grow and is now an
international organization. The WPO would provide an environment for a significant research study because:

- The WPO utilizes a structured approach to enhance professional role identity development of women presidents. It is believed that this structured approach would foster a community of practice.
- The long-term nature of the group provides a rich environment for a qualitative case study.

**Research Questions**

There is one overarching research question and six supporting questions that guided the research. The research question and supporting questions were as follows:

**Overarching Research Question:**

1. How is a woman’s identity as a president influenced by her membership in an all-women, all-president community of practice?

**Supporting Questions:**

a. How do members of an all-women community of practice participate and engage in learning?

b. How does gender inform the organization’s formation; the practices of the group; the content of the knowledge transferred; the manner in which learning takes place; and the group’s self-defined goals/outcomes?

c. How do newcomers learn the norms and practices of the group?

d. What are the power dynamics within the group that facilitate or hinder the progression of a new member from a newcomer to an old-timer?
e. What facilitates what the learning topic is within a meeting? What conditions precipitate? Who selects the topics to be discussed?

f. How do community members incorporate their learning into their personal and professional lives?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research will be an understanding of how the support and relationships that are forged within a community of practice may differ based on the purpose for formation. In this particular instance, gender, specifically, has a place in the formation and practice of this community of practice. In the larger sense this study is important, because it will begin to help us understand the need to acknowledge the person’s experience within a CoP. This will help to inform how they operate and most of all how individuals learning can be affected by factors such as gender. This research will contribute to the community of practice body of knowledge by bringing light to women’s experiences and the support that they receive within a community of practice as an acting president of a for-profit company. The research will show how gender may influence the formation and operation and specific learning practices of a specific type of community of practice, bringing light to the mechanisms women use to make such groups work for them in the predominantly men-only environment they inhabit as woman presidents.

Definition of Terms Used In Communities of Practice Literature

Newcomer. This term is used to refer to a new member of a community of practice and is usually defined as a person who is on the peripheral of the group.
Old-timer. This term is used to refer to a member of a community of practice who is an established member of the group and has gained full understanding of how the community operates.

All-women community of practice. A community of practice whose members are all women or identify as being a woman. The term woman is used versus female, because female is a biological term used to identify a male from a female based on anatomy. The term woman refers to the sociological determinant of a female and denotes how the body interacts with society (Edmonson, Bell, & Nkomo, 2001).

Participation and engagement. As defined in this study, refer to a member’s movement within a community of practice and interactions with one another within this particular community of practice.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, a statement of the research problem, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the research problem—specifically, theory and empirical research regarding informal learning, learning communities, communities of practice (how they develop, how they function, who are the members and how members influence outcomes), women leaders, how women learn in the workforce, and gender as an analytical category. Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the results, and chapter 5 provides a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the study founded in the results in chapter 4. Finally, chapter 5 offers suggested areas for future research, with appropriate references and appendices to conclude.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Background to the Literature Review

The link between communities of practice and the experience of its individual members, specifically the experiences of members, is limited. The information disseminated to members of a community of practice may have an impact on their identity; therefore, it is important to conduct research, such as the research proposed for this study, that will allow us to gain an understanding of the type of support that is present within the participant’s community of practice, what learning results from this support, and how that learning influences the participant’s identity as a woman president.

Through this literature review, a foundation of what is known and what is not known about communities of practice and women’s professional development will be developed. The purpose is to show that the gap that seems to exist within the literature about the experiences of members from their perspective that participate in a community of practice. Specific to this research is the support women presidents have received in their participation in a community of practice and how that support has influenced their identity as a woman president.

Focus was placed on empirical studies from the teaching and nursing profession to gain an understanding of how and why communities of practice form, how they operate and their impact on members’ identities. The cultures of these CoPs also contain a specified language, values, and norms that help to formulate the person’s identity within that profession.
predominance of women in these professions, it was assumed that these communities of practice may operate and aspire to achieve similar outcomes for members to that of the Women Presidents’ Organization.

This literature review is guided by the following questions:

1. What is informal learning, and how are communities of practice situated within this learning theory?

2. What is a community of practice? How do communities of practice operate? Who participates in a community of practice? How does learning occur within a community of practice?

3. How are communities of practice used in the work environment for professional development?

4. What do single-profession communities of practice (such as communities of practice for teachers and nurses) show us about the person’s identity development as a professional within that job?

5. What is known about the effects of professional development for women in the workforce? How do women learn? Is there a need for single-gendered learning environments? What do studies that focus on an all-woman perspective add to the research landscape?

During Fall 2012 through Spring 2013, literature on informal learning, situated learning, communities of practice, single profession communities of practice (nursing and teaching communities of practice) women’s experience in the workforce, career development theory, and feminist theory was reviewed, synthesized, and summarized. Several research
databases were used to obtain this literature, including Business Source Complete, Education Full Text, and ERIC. Manual reviews of reference lists were also used for additional references. Search terms included: “women in communities of practice,” “communities of practice,” “how women learn,” “females in communities of practice,” “communities of practice for nursing professionals,” “nursing communities of practice,” “communities of practice for nurses,” “teaching communities of practice,” “communities of practice for teachers,” “learning communities,” “informal learning,” “situated learning,” “women presidents,” “first female presidents,” “women career development,” “minority career development,” “career development,” “women executives,” “women in leadership,” and “women leaders.” Selection criteria of the empirical research and supporting literature included a focus on communities of practice, women in leadership roles, and the utilization of communities of practice in the workforce. The search resulted in 76 peer-reviewed articles published from 2000 to 2013. Three articles were referenced outside of this time period because of their contribution to more recent research. The articles were published in human resource development, business, teaching, nursing, economics, sociology, psychology, and education journals.
The conceptual framework, presented in Figure 2.1, was developed to illustrate how the purpose of the intended research is situated within the literature. The literature review is broken down into sections that correspond to the above categories of the framework. Section one explains informal learning and how communities of practice are situated within this learning theory. Section two provides the criteria needed for a community of practice to exist, the progression of the literature on communities of practice, single-profession communities of practice and nurse and teacher identity, as well as how this study will be situated in the larger body of literature concerning communities of practice. Section three illustrates how
women learn and forms an identity as a professional. Section four looks at the literature on women’s professional development and how communities of practice could be used to facilitate professional development for women. The literature review concludes by discussing what we know about communities of practice, what is not known about communities of practice, and how the intended research will add to the overall CoP body of literature in regards to the impact communities of practice can have on identity and, more specifically, on the identity of a woman president.

*Informal Learning*

The primary mode through which adults learn is informal learning (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003). Informal learning can take many shapes. Informal learning can be intentional or may be reactionary, and when compared to formal learning is generally defined as any learning that takes place outside of the classroom (Berg & Chyung, 2008). Learning that takes place in the classroom is considered formal learning.

The central phenomenon to informal learning is that the opportunities for learning come from experiences that are encountered from being members of social groups (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003). It is also important to recognize that from a longitudinal study completed by Hodkinson, Colley, and Malcolm (2003), the term *informal learning* is synonymous to nonformal learning. Some forms of informal learning include self-directed learning, networking, mentoring, professional organizations, performance reviews, and communities of practice (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Marsick & Watkins, 2001).
The best way to define if a learning encounter is informal learning or formal learning is to examine the attributes of the learning. Hodkinson, Colley, and Malcolm (2003) use a set of four criteria to examine the situation. They evaluate the process of the learning, location and setting, purposes, and content. The finding from their research showed that all learning experiences have some attributes of informal and formal learning. This interrelationship, Hodkinson, Colley, and Malcolm (2003) would argue, should stand to encourage proponents of workplace learning that both types of learning are necessary—and furthermore, that they should not be held in opposition to one another (2003).

Marsick and Watkins (2001) develop a model for informal learning that is cyclical. Seen in Figure 2.2, their model for informal and incidental learning includes eight steps and shows that it is rooted in a context. The eight steps include a trigger, interpreting the experience, examining alternative solutions, employing learning strategies, producing proposed solutions, assessing consequences, identifying lessons learned, and framing the learning within the context (business or other) (Marsick and Watkins, 2001, p. 29). This model is to illustrate that individuals progress through their learning and make meaning of their situation. Marsick and Watkins (2001) point out that although the model is depicted in a circle, these steps within the learning cycle are not linear and may not even be sequential. Their point in developing this model was to aid adult educators in the practice of facilitating informal learning. This model can be used by adult educators to enhance informal learning within the workplace or other learning setting (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).
According to Boud & Middleton (2003), informal learning is frequently invisible in the workforce but can be made visible and “consciously deployed” by employers to enhance a work environment (p. 195). Others posit that the need for informal learning in the workplace is brought about by individuals trying to make meaning and understanding of explicit knowledge (Li, Grimshaw, Nielsen, Judd, Coyte, and Gramham, 2009). This meaning making involves engaging colleagues in discussion, finding a mentor or observing, and then trying those behaviors themselves within their job (Li, et al., 2009).

Boud and Middleton (2003) explain Li et al.’s (2009) understanding of informal learning in the workplace by identifying three reasons an individual may pursue an informal learning opportunity. These include mastery of organizational processes, negotiating the political, and
dealing with the atypical (Middleton & Boud, 2003). Middleton and Boud (2003) define mastery of organizational processes as the ability for an employee to learn at work to keep pace with revised administrative processes. Negotiating the political is the ability of an employee to learn to negotiate work relationships, placing themselves strategically within the organizational structure to navigate their career path (Middleton & Boud, 2003). Dealing with the atypical occurs when an employee can deal with new issues that arise at work that do not have a set procedure (Middleton & Boud, 2003). Middleton and Boud (2003) argue for this separation because it helps to illustrate complex learning networks within the work environment.

Others also acknowledge the importance of bringing informal learning at work to the forefront to enhance work and work–life balance for employees (Li et al., 2009; Stein & Imel, 2002; Rowden, 2002). Li et al. (2009) explain that because these informal learning groups are loosely defined, there can be inconsistencies that can arise from one group to another in the way knowledge is transferred. Li et al.’s (2009) concerns were also recognized by Marsick and Watkins (2001), but Marsick and Watkins (2001) identify that individual learners have the greatest impact on the learning or lack thereof that occurs in these unstructured, informal learning incidents. The learners’ personal beliefs and values influence and frame how they interpret the learning. People do not often question their own personal views and values (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Informal learning’s presence in the workplace is viewed as a practice that is natural and usually takes place through social interactions and networks (Marsick, 2008). Informal learning helps employees to form a complete understanding of their job and become integrated into the workplace (Brook & Clunis, 2007). However, because the majority of informal learning is
unstructured, there is concern that what employees are learning may not be consistent with the needs of the organization or that the information is incorrect. Multiple factors have been presented that affect a person’s access or exposure to informal learning opportunities within the workplace.

In a study completed in 2004 by Skule in Norway, the purpose was to develop a framework and measurement tool that could be used to assess the learning conditions necessary for informal learning to occur. Skule’s stance was that to this point, there were not any indicators for measurement of informal learning. Skule (2004) identifies seven learning conditions: exposure to change, exposure to demands, managerial responsibilities, professional contacts, feedback from superiors, management’s support for learning, and rewards for proficiency. Skule’s (2004) focus centered on learning intensive jobs. The framework was developed through a qualitative research procedure in step one, and was followed by a larger scale explorative survey. The results of the survey show that as the learning intensity of a job increases, the learning conditions at work for informal learning should increase (Skule, 2004). The thought is the demand for an employee to participate in informal learning opportunities increases as well (Skule, 2004).

There are some concerns regarding the applicability of this research. Skule’s (2004) research was conducted with two very specific industries in Norway, transportation and oil industries. These two industries have highly specialized roles and responsibilities at highest levels and at lower levels within the organization jobs do not require advanced education or training. These industries may have specific institutional characteristics that may not apply across industries. In addition, there may be cultural implications at play in this research that is
specific to Norway and the Norwegian work culture that may impact its transferability to other cultures.

Kyndt, Dochy, and Nijs’s (2009) explorative factors analysis study looks at very similar learning conditions, but focused on labor organizations in Belgium. The research tested the degree to which the following learning conditions—feedback and knowledge, new learning and communication tools, coaching, coaching others, and information acquisition—are present within the workplace. The results of Kyndt, Dochy, and Nijs’s (2009) research show that the presence of these learning conditions vary with age, gender, position, and seniority. However, the type of organization (nonprofit versus for-profit) and the size of the organization (under 500 employees versus greater than 500 employees) had the greatest impact on the learning conditions available to employees to engage in informal learning. The learning conditions “feedback and knowledge acquisition” and “coaching others” were seen most often in nonprofit organizations (Kyndt, Dochy, & Niji, 2009, pp. 379–380). As for the learning conditions “new learning approaches and communication tools” as well as “being coached,” those two conditions are most prevalent in for-profit organizations (Kyndt, Dochy, & Niji, 2009, p. 380). The size of the organization showed significant impact on all of the learning condition variables. “New learning approaches and communication tools” and “being coached” showed the highest scores among employees from small organizations and lowest from employees at large organizations (Kyndt, Dochy, & Niji, 2009, p. 380). Their findings would then support the findings of Skule (2004), in that there should be an expectation that there are variations across industries and job responsibilities in regards to informal learning and access to informal learning opportunities.
Kyndt, Dochy, & Niji (2009) specifically acknowledge Skule’s (2004) claim that employees with different functions are exposed to different learning conditions for informal learning (p. 380).

Kyndt, Dochy, & Niji’s (2009) research adds another level of understanding in regards to the acknowledgment of the individual. Add that gender, age, and level of educational level may play a role in a person’s tendency to seek out and participate in informal learning opportunities. The acknowledgment of personal characteristics and their impact on informal learning activities is further supported by the research completed by Berg and Chyung (2008). Their research was situated in trying to determine if individual characteristics for seeking out informal learning opportunities are influenced by an organization’s learning culture (Berg & Chyung, 2008). The findings of their study did not show a significant relationship between an organization’s learning culture and the presence of informal learning. In addition, gender and educational background or the interaction of those two variables did not show a significant relationship on an employee’s engagement in informal learning. However, as with Kyndt, Dochy, and Niji’s (2009) research, Berg and Chyung (2008) find that with age, employees have greater likelihood to participate in informal learning.

From these studies, there is a correlation that supports this initial work of Marsick and Watkins (2001), that the individual has the most influence on informal learning and the acquisition of the tactic knowledge needed to do their work and succeed in the workplace. These studies, along with the foundational work of Marsick and Watkins (2001) and Boud and Middleton (2003), show that individuals will seek out opportunities or use experiences that they encounter in the workplace to gain the knowledge that is not written down needed for their job. Specifically in regards to this research study, the concept of informal learning is at the
foundation of the participants’ participation in the group. They have sought out a learning opportunity that is specific to them gaining skills and insight needed to function as a woman president. In addition, they use the prior knowledge that they have gained through informal learning experiences to teach others within the group how to navigate a situation that they are currently encountering.

*Communities of Practice*

Having an understanding of the phenomenon of informal learning and that a community of practice is a specific type of environment that promotes informal learning will be important in the context of this research. Communities of practice tend to be more focused on a team level and how the learning within the team transfers to the individual and then to the organization. Keeping communities of practice in context with informal learning helps to stress that environment influences an individual’s subsequent actions toward learning.

Communities of practice tend to form when people find that their “issues” and “interests” are shared by others (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 71). This key issue that they share is the domain that the members (community) commit to practice around (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The success or the sustainability of the community is the value that members perceive they are receiving by participating in the community. Specific to the intended research study, these women leaders have chosen to create a specific space for themselves and the learning that they believe that they need to be a woman president.

The idea of communities of practice first came about when Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the notion of legitimate peripheral participation. Derived from research the authors did regarding apprenticeship, they have formulated a dynamic viewpoint that takes the learner
from a newcomer perspective to an old-timer as they learn within the context of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The learning that the newcomers encounter as they move to old-timer status is that of negotiation of group dynamics, understanding and participation within power dynamics, development of an identity within the group, and how they fit as a member within the group (Wenger, 1991). In addition, the other participants in the group are learning throughout the renegotiation of the group dynamics and power with every newcomer (Wenger, 1991).

The progression of CoP literature is followed by Brown and Duguid’s (1991) perspective, which states that CoPs form out of necessity in the workplace for employees to get the job done. Their focus in these CoPs is not around “the reproduction of existing practice, but around improvised learning” (Cox, 2005, p. 530). Brown and Duguid (1991) studied Xerox technicians who utilized a community of practice when trying to find solutions to problems that arose. Many of these instances arose because the way in which they were trained to attend to a specific task was not the way to actually fix the machine. The technicians’ use of storytelling to create a new practice was a direct departure from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of CoPs to reproduce learning from master to apprentice. Brown and Duguid’s expansion of the concept of communities of practice is important because it illustrates how communities of practice interact with the overall organization (Cox, 2005). They specifically address the tensions that can arise between the members of a community of practice, the organization, and management (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

The first two seminal works regarding communities of practice do not directly define the term. Wenger’s (1998) next work clarifies the concept of communities of practice by specifying
a definition and indicators that should be present for a community of practice to succeed. Wenger (1998) states that the term *community of practice* needs to be looked at as a unit and defines a community of practice as having three dimensions. A community of practice is a group that forms through “mutual engagement” using a “shared repertoire” to create a “joint enterprise.” Fourteen identifiers can be used as a level of analysis for a community of practice to ensure that the three dimensions are present at a substantial degree (Wenger, 1998):

1. Sustained mutual relationships
2. Shared ways of engaging in interactions
3. Rapid flow of information
4. Absence of introductory conversation
5. Quick setup of problems to be discussed at meetings
6. Substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belongs
7. Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
8. Mutually defining identities
9. The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
10. Specific tools, representation and other artifacts exist within the group and are defined/created by the group
11. Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
12. Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new types of shortcuts
13. Certain styles recognized as displaying membership
14. A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world (pp. 125–126)

The presence of these 14 indicators mean that the community of practice shows it is highly functioning and all three dimensions of a community of practice can be observed: mutual engagement, negotiated enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). These criteria can also help to form an understanding of how members are expected to act and participate and what the outcome of their membership is supposed to produce. From exploratory conversations with the president and research on the WPO, it is believed that these criteria are present with the WPO and operate as such. This is why this organization was chosen for this research.

In continuing to trace the development of the definition of communities of practice, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s work from 2002 is a departure from the earlier literature on communities of practice (Cox, 2005). Cox refers to the shift as the commodification of communities of practice. Seen in Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) writing, this book is a guide for managers to be able to set up and use a community of practice for innovation within their company. The handbook for practitioners is to help managers to create a community of practice within their company, manage it, and maintain it to ensure the outcomes important to the organization are gained. This book also marks a clear separation from the previous Wenger writings in that technology can be used to create virtual communities of practice that require little to no face-to-face interaction (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This progression of communities of practice from the perspective of the learner in Wenger (1998) to the perspective of the employer in Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002 starts to show that there multiple perspectives that can be considered when researching this subject matter.
Riel and Polin’s (2004) understanding of communities of practice categorize social learning opportunities in three ways, task based, knowledge based and practice based. Task based communities of practice aim to produce a product or outcome. These communities of practice are generally temporary groups whose members try to accomplish well-specified tasks (Riel & Polin, 2004). Knowledge based CoPs aim to compose knowledge based on a specific area (Riel & Polin, 2004). Members of a knowledge based community may or may not know each other personally but usually sustain together long-term to construct the knowledge base (Riel & Polin, 2004). Practice based CoPs aim to produce knowledge specific to their practice. The community is specifically purposed with continuing this identity across “generations” – the community is tasked with teaching the language, artifacts, rituals, routines and stories specific to that – in this case – profession (Riel & Polin, 2004). Additionally, since a practice is ever-changing and their identity within that role is ever-changing, is one explanation as to why these types of communities stay together for long periods of time.

Dube, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) criticize that Wenger’s (1998) model for communities of is a one size fits all model. However, if Wenger’s work is looked at in the context of Riel and Polin (2004), the majority of Wenger’s work is situated as a practice based community of practice. And most often, Wenger’s work is centered on professional role identity development in the confines of a career. This research is situated within the understanding that the study participants are members of a practice based community of practice based on Riel and Polin’s (2004) description. More specifically, this research was positioned to gain a better understanding of how members of a practice based community of practice developed their professional role identity – Women President.
Communities of Practice as a Means to Shape Identity

Wenger (1991) suggests that the goals of a CoP are fourfold. Communities of practice promote situated learning around the identity development of member (within a specific work group) and address issues of access, conflict, and motivation. Situated learning ties both the physical and social context, in which the learner is based, to the knowledge they will acquire (Stein, 2001). The social interactions of the learner directly impact the learner; the meaning gained is a construction process that occurs between the learner, co-workers, and their work environment (Stein, 2001). Social interaction is an integral part of situated learning and is contingent on the socially accepted behaviors of the organization (Stein, 2001). These socially accepted behaviors are based on historical, cultural, and organizational constructs of the environment in which they are based (Stein, 2001).

Wenger (1991) gives the example from one of his studies on the apprenticeship of nondrinking alcoholics; all members (new and current members) are encouraged to participate and tell stories to learn the cultural model of the group. Participating and listening are just as important and help the new member to learn what are the appropriate experiences and stories that can be used about their alcoholism to reconstruct their identity as a nondrinking alcoholic. Wenger’s example shows that if a learner is situated within the environment about which they are trying to learn, they will be able to build an understanding for how to participate in the group, the language to use, what experiences to draw from to enhance the learning of the group, and what makes for effective participation. They are building an identity as an Alcoholics Anonymous member.
Professional Communities of Practice and Professional Identity

A person’s professional identity has been shown to increase through participation in communities of practice. Two types of single-profession communities of practice were looked at to evaluate how they influence a participant’s identity in their respective fields. Teaching and nursing communities of practice were reviewed. It was assumed that this may be as close to representative to the intended research as possible because these two professions are still dominated by women. Their identity is rooted in their profession and their role. Each of the professions has an established culture, identity, language, values, and norms that impact how individuals join the profession. These established norms aid in the formation and continuous function of the community as well as how a community of practice would operate.

Three research articles from each profession were chosen to be reviewed for the purpose of this literature review. The three articles within the teaching field reviewed were studies completed by Sim (2006), Gomez and Rico (2007), and Chinn (2006). The three studies reviewed from the nursing profession were by Booth, Tolson, Hotchkiss, and Schoefield (2007), Tolson, McAloon, Hotchkiss, and Schoefield (2005) and Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran, and Simpson (2009).

Within the teaching and learning field, there is a need to understand how teachers learn the social practices needed to be a successful teacher (Gomez & Rico, 2007). It is also believed that this learning happens in groups (Graven & Lerman as in Gomez & Rico, 2007). Gomez and Rico (2007) studied pre-service secondary teachers in a methods course. The research centered on the interaction of the pre-service teachers and if those actions resulted in a CoP. From their findings, Gomez and Rico (2007) found that certain factors needed to be present for the group to
function as a CoP: the presence of a leader; similar experiences for members to draw from; reference materials available for members to refer to; and the creation of artifacts that contain a shared repertoire. If these attributes are present, then the group is operating as a community of practice, interdependent learning is promoted, and there is movement forward from the pre-service teaching in their identification as a teacher (Gomez & Rico, 2007). Without the presence of these factors, the group acted as a project group or work group and the project task assigned was completed like a checklist. The members did not rely on one another to negotiate the meaning of the project, which resulted in a lack of a shared repertoire.

Gomez and Rico’s (2007) study supports Sim’s (2006) study that within learning groups, there are varied levels of participation, and the structure of the community of practice can have significant impact on the learning outcomes of the group. Sim (2006) set out to build a better understanding of how pre-service teachers apply teaching theory to practice within the classroom and evaluate the development of skills needed to navigate relationships within their assigned schools. Half of the respondents focused their responses to the survey on the structure of the class, such as the amount of reading and overall class structure, reported discontentment with the amount of reading, the lack of time within the class to have discussions, and more time needed for reflection on classroom practice. The students felt that they needed more discussion time within their groups to discuss and seek peer support on experiences they were having in the classroom. They were trying to utilize the group to continue developing their professional identity as a teacher.

The findings of the study showed that based on the responses of the students who participated, the researchers felt that the structure may have prevented the students from really
form a community of practice that supported collaborative learning to become a teacher-researcher (Sim, 2006). Despite the separation between the expectations of the students and the teacher-researchers, the researchers planned to continue the course. Sim’s (2006) conclusions regarding the course and the results that they received by their students/research participants bring question to their stated researcher bias. As the instructors of the course and also the researchers, there were specific goals they wanted the students to gain from the course. If these expectations were not defined clearly at the onset of the course and throughout the process, this could explain the disconnect students experienced and why some groups were not able to achieve community of practice status and therefore did not move forward in their identity as a teacher or a teacher-researcher.

Booth, Tolson, Hotchkiss, and Schofield (2007) reiterate what Gomez and Rico (2007) and Sim (2006) found in their studies with pre-service teachers. Booth et al.’s (2007) study worked with a group of gerontological nurses to develop a series of best practice statement (BPS) for evidence-based care of seniors that could help in the early detection of depression for these patients. The existence of a leader was a crucial indicator in the success of the group in which they were researching. Booth et al. (2007) also believes that the diversity of the group that participated in the CoP added to the capacity of the group and the learning that resulted because of the breadth of the group. This diversity, Booth et al. (2007) believes, aided in the groups understanding of integrating research into practice for the development of evidence-based care.

In addition, the integration of an online CoP with the demonstration site CoP accelerated the development and testing of the care process. The result, as reported by the
research participants, was the development of a useful model for evidence-based care guidance (Booth et al., 2007). In a follow-up study completed by Tolson, McAloon, Hotchkiss, and Schoefield (2005), although published before the full study, their findings were validated. Tolson et al. (2005) showed that the long-term engagement of members continued to help members to provide evidence-based practice to their patients and gave members the needed support for problem-solving so that they could overcome challenges.

From the findings of Sim (2006) and Gomez and Rico (2007) in which they reported that not all of the groups participating in their study actually formed a community of practice. However, the findings by Tolson et al. (2005) may explain the benefit of continued mutual engagement. Continued interaction may help a group move from operating as a work group into a community of practice where members can promote the negation of meaning and interdependent learning (Gomez & Rico, 2007).

In 2009, Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran, and Simpson researched an international community of practice of novice nurse educators engaged in an online community of practice. Andrew et al.’s (2009) community of practice was used for helping a set of nurses to understand how a current skill set needed modification to be applied in a new setting. In this case, the CoP was meant to help a set of new nurse educators to develop a sense of professional identity and belonging. The utilization for a CoP for this purpose reiterated the need for a moderator. However, Andrew et al. (2009) point out that after an extended period of time, the group needed less and less input from the moderator/leader.

The findings of the study showed that less-tenured nurses that transitioned to an educator role experienced a period of mourning toward their clinical expertise. More tenured nurses who
made the transition reported that it was not a loss of expertise but a shift in how their expertise would be utilized. As the community progressed, many of the members came to the understanding that clinical knowledge can be applied for students’ benefit within the classroom instead of in a clinical setting.

Chinn’s (2006) research mirrors the findings of Andrew et al. (2009) in regards to how participation in a community of practice can impact the identity of professionals. Chinn’s (2006) study was conducted with pre- and in-service science teachers within the Hawaiian public school system. This study varied from the previous two studies conducted with teachers, in that the majority of the research participants were teachers who were already practicing teachers, but it mirrors that of Booth et al. (2007) and Tolson et al. (2005) in which they worked with already practicing nurses.

The intended outcome of the research was to investigate whether immersing teachers in an understanding of the Hawaiian culture could have a positive impact on learning for native Hawaiian students. Native Hawaiian students consistently show underperformance in mainstream testing of academic performance within the Hawaiian schools, especially in the subject of science (Chinn, 2006). Chinn (2006) saw that within the subject of science, there seemed to be the greatest disconnect between the beliefs of the Hawaiian culture and the nature in which those classes were taught. So, the purpose of the study was to understand if through situated learning a framework for professional development could be utilized to help non-native Hawaiian teachers address the needs of native Hawaiian students within their science classrooms. Overall, the findings from this study reemphasized the importance and implications for practice of professionals who participate in professional development opportunities. A
community such as this can increase their ability to feel confident in implementing changes and dealing with changes in policy that affect their classroom practice (Chinn, 2006). It shapes their identity as a teacher and as a teacher of Hawaiian native students.

These studies add to our understanding of landscape of communities of practice by demonstrating that if a group is able to develop into a community of practice, a participant’s identity can truly be influenced by the group. As identified, the factors that need to be present for a community of practice are the presence of a leader; members have similar experiences to draw from; reference materials are available for members to refer to; and the creation of artifacts that contain a shared repertoire (Gomez & Rico, 2007). If these attributes are present, then the group is operating as a community of practice and interdependent learning is promoted. At this level, communities of practice can impact a person’s identity or professional identity. In addition, communities of practice can be utilized throughout a person’s career to help the participant to continue skill development with the support from peers, adding to their professional identity. The above authors chose to distinguish the variable of teacher and nurse. That variable, they believed, had an impact on how the communities of practice formed and operated and their impact on the participants’ identity within that profession. That is why it is important to evaluate other types of communities of practice that are specific to other professions or roles. That role or profession may have different variables that affect the operation of the group and the identity development and formation of the participant. Studying how an all-female and all-president community of practice impacts the identity development of its participants will help to broaden the understanding of what is currently known about different types of communities of practice.
Gender Identity

Gender identity is how individuals identify with either being a man or a woman. This may or may not align with their biological sex assignment. A person’s gender identity is a process that is constructed in relationship to a person’s social relationships. Gender identity is also constructed through how these relationships interact with economy and politics. These interactions are how an individual learns boundaries, the relationship of power, and limitations that surround the individual’s gender.

Women’s perspective in research and literature, especially in relationship to work, has been absent, because the worker identified in the literature has been a gender-neutral and universal body. This is due in part to the need for control (Acker, 1990). However, the worker is actually a male worker and this is at the foundation as to why women are marginalized and segregated from certain jobs in the work place (Acker, 1990). West and Zimmerman’s (1987) perspective is that once we learn to “do” our gender, it is then something that we reproduce each day (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Taking this idea of gender as a state of production, in which we produce each day, the relationship that is created for the workplace exaggerates these differences. There is a division of labor and power that are defined as masculine or feminine. Also, there are jobs then that become defined as for one gender or the other (Hawkesworth, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987). These divisions begin to define the types of constraints for what women have access to—not only in work but also in larger society as well. Some of the constraints are paid versus unpaid labor, comparable wages, access to developmental opportunities at work, and promotions (Hawkesworth, 2006).
Paechter’s research (2003b, 2003c, 2006) supports the observations of Scott (1986), Acker (1990), Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (2000), and Hawthorne (2006), that gender is formulated through socialization and social networks. Paechter’s (2003b, 2003c, 2006) writing discusses the masculinities and femininities and how our identity is formed by participation within communities of practice. Paechter’s (2003b, 2003c, 2006) writing explains that women and men from birth are socialized into various roles within our society (communities of practice) and that these roles are transferred into work. These communities of practice teach us how to perform our masculinity and femininity. The practice that is taught articulates that certain knowledge is masculine and that it needs to be kept within the masculine community. This specific knowledge places power on that knowledge, and denying it from the feminine community of practice keeps it specifically masculine.

Taber’s (2011) work actually tries to tests Paechter’s concept within the work setting. Taber’s (2011) study of the masculinities and femininities in the military builds an understanding that these learned masculinities and femininities are heightened in work environments where women are the minority. Because men are considered full members within the community, they hold the power to redefine what knowledge is masculine and feminine, therefore keeping women marginalized (Taber, 2011). Women’s experiences in environments such as this show them that to be a full participant in their work community of practice, they must not be identified to feminine practices. Taber (2011) argues that if women conform to the norms and expectations, they are maintaining their marginalization in that community and the other peripheral communities in which they participate.
Both Paechter (2003b, 2003c, 2006) and Taber (2011) make the argument that there is a need to further develop an understanding of how communities of practice influence gendered behaviors and a person’s identity. In Taber’s (2011) work, a person’s gender identity directly affects that person’s experience in the workforce. Her findings are mirrored in the research that has been completed in the business community and social sciences. Being of the female gender has a direct impact on developmental opportunities afforded to women as well as their ability to move through the ranks of their organizations.

Although gender identity is not an implicit variable in this study, it does have relevance, because the group in which these presidents participate is all women. The perspective of research participants who are all women may have an impact on the study and the information that is gathered. Additionally, what is known about their decision to participate in an all-women community of practice may add to the landscape of what is known about the impact of communities of practice on identity.

*Gendered Experiences in the Workforce*

As introduced in chapter 1, women are appointed president of major Fortune 1000 companies at a much lower rate that would be expected, especially when taking into account that women make up over half of the U.S. workforce (Kotte & Agars, 2005). Only 20 women currently hold the role of chief executive officer or president on the Fortune 500 list of companies (http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-fortune-1000, 6/01/13). The factors that are used to explain why there is a divide between men and women in the highest levels of the workforce are societal constraints, institutional constraints and relational constraints.
To restate how these concepts are defined, societal constraints can be defined as those circumstances or conditions within larger society that may influence women’s choices or considerations when choosing a job. Organizational constraints can be defined as “the impact of organizational structures such as policies, procedures, culture and environment” on how women experience their workplace (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005, p. 175). Finally, relational constraints refer to impact that relationships, both personal and professional, can have on a woman’s career choices. There are many variables within each of these facets that can affect a woman’s experience within the workforce, and having an understanding of the types of issues can lead to the creation of support mechanisms that may help women to overcome these barriers.

One dimension of organizational constraints is the topic of learning and on-the-job learning. There seems to be a link between learning and the developmental opportunities afforded to men and women as a possible reason for this divide of men and women in the workforce. In trying to better understand this link, it is important to acknowledge that women’s learning is expressed in the literature. In the literal sense there is a body of literature that makes the assertion that women learn differently from men. The other research regarding women’s learning is in conjunction to the learning opportunities or developmental opportunities women are given in the workforce (Noe, Greenberger & Wang, 2002; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Bierma, 1999).

First, the concept that women may learn differently from men is presented in Belenky, Cliche, Goldberger, & Tarule, (1986, 1997). Belenky et al.’s (1986) model for women’s perspective on knowing consists of five categories: silence, received knowledge,
subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. They would argue that women tend to approach situations in two ways, as a separate or connected knower (Belenky et al., 1986, 1997). Belenky et al. (1986) explains separate knowers as women who doubt, reason and debate processes, are adversarial and competitive, separate self from ideas, and like public presentation of their thoughts. These traits could also be categorized as masculine. Connected knowers like learning to be experientially based, are empathetic, prefer conversation versus debate, clarify conversations and do not judge, and are more collaborative and personal. Connected knowers could be termed as feminine. Women, regardless of how they interpret information, as a separate or connected knower, are trying to acquire and apply procedures to obtaining and communicating the knowledge that they acquire.

According to Belenky et al. (1986, 1997), jobs are classified as masculine or feminine, and that classification of jobs and character traits is antithetical to how women actually learn and approach work or other experiences in their lives. Belenky et al. (1986) explains that women further along in their career and development view situations as a constructed knower, where all knowledge is constructed by the learner. Women feel responsibility for their knowledge and gain their knowledge by examining, choosing, questioning, and developing the system of what is to be known or learned (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Depending on where a woman is in her development and in her career, she tends to have more difficulty than men in asserting authority or considering herself as an authority figure (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Expressing
herself in public, gaining respect of others based on her ideas, and fully utilizing her capabilities, training, and education may also be difficult.

The discrepancy between how women approach a situation and how certain occupations and characteristics of the workforce are stereotyped as being masculine or feminine could have an impact on women’s representation within certain areas of the workforce. An anecdotal example of this is that contention may result if a female employee is put into a role that is stereotyped as being feminine while she is a separate knower and prefers working in an environment in which she can be more direct. These roles have often been deemed masculine and may not be offered to women. If placed in a role that she is not comfortable with, the female employee may not be given developmental opportunities for growth as she may be seen as an underachiever because of her lack of comfort with a role that prefers a connected knower.

Bierma’s (1999) model deals with women’s career development and consists of three stages: compliant novice, competence seekers, and change agent. Bierma’s (1999) model is also a model of learning for women as they progress through their professional career. If you superimpose Belenky et al.’s (1986) model over Bierma’s (1999) model, there is a significant congruence between how women develop in the workforce and their development of knowledge. To better illustrate this point, although a woman may be a constructed knower within her current position, if she takes a new position within her organization, she may once again move through the stages of knowledge development and career development beginning as a Silent/Compliant Novice (Bierma, 1999). As she begins to build confidence within her
skills in conjunction with the demands of the new position, she can once again move to being a Procedural or Constructed Knower/Change Agent.

Bierma (1999) and Belenky et al.’s (1986) position tends to lean on the assertion that jobs can be classified as masculine or feminine, and women are often placed into positions that are perceived as female activities (Bunch, 2007). These jobs are typically positions within human resources, teaching and certain medical professions (nursing) (Kirchmeyer, 2002). Kirchmeyer (2002) lists professions that are usually qualified as being masculine as engineering, accounting and management. Bunch (2007) describes characteristics associated with masculine behaviors in the workforce as aggressive, ambition, objective, independent, self-reliant, self-confident, task-oriented, competent, and directive, whereas characteristics associated with feminine behaviors include talkative, gentle, tactful, passive, empathetic, understanding, and sensitive (p. 153). However, these arguments are largely circumstantial and there are no empirical studies that further test Belenky et al. (1986) or Bierma’s (1999) assertions.

Bierma (1999) suggests that “women experience career transition in terms of work responsibilities and self-concepts, and those relationships were very important throughout their careers, especially with mentors and women’s networks” (p. 117). Bierma’s assertions are mirrored in the findings of Lyness and Thompson (2000). Their study worked with both men and women to determine if male and female senior managers from a large, multinational financial services corporation followed similar career paths. The quantitative study measured perceived barriers, perceived facilitators, strength of track record, developmental experiences, career history, and career success (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The findings of
the study suggested that the women and men followed similar career paths, but the women faced greater barriers and used different strategies for advancement than their male counterparts (Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

Lyness and Thompson (2000) are describing the concept of tokenism. Kanter’s (1977) work is foundational in the understanding of tokenism. Kanter (1977) explains women’s work in disproportionately concentrated in low-opportunity occupations, so when discussing those in leadership, it has been assumed that those roles are held by men (p.967). Kanter (1977) describes the effects of tokenism in the workforce as creating an exaggerated difference between the dominant work group (male workers) and the token group (women workers).

Women who have advanced into upper management roles usually do not have other female counterparts available to them for support and interaction with regards to the stresses of their job (Kanter, 1977). The women executives “reported that lack of culture fit, being excluded from informal networks, and difficulty getting developmental assignments and geographic mobility opportunities were greater barriers to advancement” than that of their male executive counterparts (Lyness & Thomson, 2000, p. 97). More recently, Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, and Atkins (2007), Ryan and Haslam (2008) and Ryan, Haslam, Hersby and Bongiorno (2011) have observed that this concept of tokenism is still the experience of senior female leaders.

Ryan, et. al (2007), Ryan and Haslam (2008) and Ryan et. al (2008) saw a trend in the women who were promoted to the role of president, were promoted in business units or companies that were struggling. Because the business unit is struggling, this puts the female
leader at greater risk for failure and criticism (Ryan et al. 2007). The women’s experience in this type of appointment is what they deem as the “glass cliff phenomenon.” The authors conducted three studies on the glass cliff phenomenon.

First, they examined the appointment of women to the board of directors to the top 100 companies in the United Kingdom. These companies were evaluated regarding the share price before and after new board members were appointed. This evaluation included both men and women board members. They found that women were appointed to the board of directors of companies that had experienced a period of poor performance leading up to their appointment (Ryan et al. 2007). In these situations, the research suggested that the women in these glass cliff positions were more likely to be subject to greater criticism, a disproportionate share of the blame for the company’s decline, and “being held accountable for events set in [motion] long before they took control” (Ryan et al., 2007, p. 5). The other studies conducted sought to determine why women are overrepresented in these glass cliff positions and if it was based on the leader selection process. The results showed that people “see the female candidate more suitable for a risky situation than for one in which the organization is running smoothly” (Ryan et al., 2007, p.6). However, there is a negative impact on the female leader.

The female leaders who participated in the study cited an overall decrease in organizational identity. A decrease in organizational identity was defined by these women as a decrease in motivation and effort, reduced cooperation with colleagues, lack of communication, reduced leadership effectiveness, and lack of commitment to decisions that have been made or are in need of being made (Ryan et al., 2007). The overarching goal that
the authors seem to be striving for is a comprehensive way to pull together all aspects of women’s experiences as leaders within the workforce.

The gender-stress-disidentitification model was used to explain what happens to women leaders as they continue to experience a greater amount of stress or the glass cliff than a male counterpart would within a leadership role (Ryan et al., 2007). Ryan et al. (2007) and Ryan and Haslam (2008) present three key factors related to stress: lack of informal networks, lack of sufficient information for the female president to do her job and lack of acknowledgment. They conclude by encouraging organizations to address the relationship between stress and the possibility for turnover if they are to retain female talent within their organization.

If these female leaders were provided with a set of organizational supports within a similar peer group, such as a mentor, as stated by Noe et al. (2002), it could provide women presidents more satisfaction within their job and a higher rate of persistence within their job and the organization in which they work. Many of the developmental opportunities given to employees seem to be linked to mentor relationships. Specifically, Noe et al. (2002) evaluate the mentoring relationship, its impact on developmental opportunities, and woman’s career mobility. Jarvis (1987) explains “that learning is the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 164). If women are not given opportunities to learn new skill sets and given increased responsibilities, their development can be stunted (Jarvis, 1987). They are alienated from the learning process within their organization. This can result in the “slowing down of thought, even a closing of the mind” (Jarvis, 1987, p. 170). This may also explain why women tend to leave the workforce in larger numbers than men to start their
own companies, or do something different all together (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Tannen, 2001).

Noe et al.’s (2002) evaluation of the mentoring literature shows that women are more likely to report that they are in need of or want a mentor. This is because, as reported, women who participate in a mentoring relationship show a positive impact on career development (Walsh & Borkowski, 1999, as in Noe et al., 2002). Additionally, in the research reviewed by Noe et al. (2002) three other findings were observed. First, women who did not have a mentor suffered a reduction in the ability to move forward in their careers Baugh, Lankau, & Scandura, 1996 as in Noe et al., 2002). Second, if a woman initiates the mentoring relationship, then she will receive more mentoring then if imitated by the mentor (Scandura & Williams, 2001 as in Noe et al., 2002). Finally, the gender composition of a mentor/mentee relationship has an impact on the mentee’s compensation achievements. If a woman is in a mentor relationship with a male mentor, it will have a positive impact on her compensation (Ragins & Cotton, 1999, as in Noe et al., 2002).

Summary

The barriers women experience in the workplace have impacted their ability to achieve the role of president or appointment into the upper levels of management. The women who participate in the WPO state that they utilize the community of practice and what they learn within the group to overcome barriers, navigate perceived barriers, and use the knowledge gained for career progression. A theme develops regarding the relationship between informal learning and women’s experiences in the workforce. Furthermore, there seems to be a connection between women having the opportunity to participate in informal learning opportunities and their
identity as a professional. One possible way for women to have access to this type of learning and the relationships that make this type of learning possible is through communities of practice.

But, in regards to practice-based professional role identity development communities of practice, such as the WPO, and the learning that occurs within them to influence their identity as a president, there seems to be a void. This void in the literature as to how this professional role identity development actually happens within the community was the purpose of this study. This study will add to the landscape of the literature on communities of practice as well as to the literature regarding women’s learning and career development. To pursue this type of data, a qualitative method of research design and inquiry was used to allow the voices of these female learners to serve as the center of the data analysis.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This research study conducted attempted to construct an understanding of the learning that occurs within a practice based professional role identity development community of practice in which all participants are women presidents. The research was conducted within the constructivist paradigm utilizing a case study approach. Two research techniques were utilized throughout this case study—specifically, semi-structured interviewing and document analysis—to “seek and make sense of [the] personal narratives and the ways they intersect” with the research participants (Glesne, 2006, p. 1). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to build an understanding of how participation in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice impacts her identity development as a woman president.

Lather (2006) argues that students must be able to locate themselves within the tensions that characterize the different fields of knowledge within qualitative research (p. 47). The case study approach is relevant to this study because the study is focused on how an all-female community of practice operates, why it operates as such and how the learning of the members influences their identity as a president. Yin (2009) asserts that a case study approach is the right choice for those studies that are trying to understand the “how” and “why” of a social phenomenon. Stake (2005) describes a case study as studying the unique
complexities of the “case.” Stake’s (2005) position aligns with Yin (2009); that case study research is trying to understand “a specific, complex, functioning thing” (p. 2).

This study could be conducted using another qualitative research approach, but because the researcher is trying to describe the phenomenon that occurs within all-women community of practice and how these practices influence the identity of its participants as a woman president, the case study makes the most sense. This research study aimed to build an understanding of the language and dialogue that is used to foster learning and in turn influences a woman’s identity within this community of practice. For example, within the context of my research, the interviews and document analysis are aimed at helping the research participant to identify the language and practices that are present within the group that have resulted in learning and how that learning has impacted their identity as a woman president. The results will help to form an understanding of an all-women community of practice and will add to the communities of practice literature in regards to the effects of CoP on identity.

**Research Questions**

The research examined one overarching research question and six additional supporting questions. The research questions that guided this case study on an all-women, all-president community of practice were:

**Overarching Research Question:**

1. How is a woman’s identity as a president influenced by her membership in an all-women, all-president community of practice?
Supporting Questions:

a. How do members of an all-women community of practice participate and engage in learning?

b. How does gender inform the organization’s formation; the practices of the group; the content of the knowledge transferred; the manner in which learning takes place; and the group’s self-defined goals/ outcomes?

c. How do newcomers learn the norms and practices of the group?

d. What are the power dynamics within the group that facilitate or hinder the progression of a new member from a newcomer to an old-timer?

e. What facilitates what the learning topic is within a meeting? What conditions precipitate? Who selects the topics to be discussed?

f. How do community members incorporate their learning into their personal and professional lives?

Research Design

Case Study Approach

As stated above, the research approach for this study was case study, with the unit of analysis being members of a professionally focused community of practice for women presidents. To bind this case study, the study consisted of members from two chapters of this organization in a midwestern city in the United States. The study included woman presidents who are members of a particular organization for women presidents and not just any woman president located in the researcher’s area.
The case study aspect of the data gathering has been classified as a collective case study, which allows the researcher to “investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Stake as in Glesne, 2006, p. 13). The collective case study approach used in this study was important, because each woman (each case) interviewed will help to build an understanding of the learning that takes place. The fact that they are all linked together because they all belong to the same all-female community of practice justifies the collective case study.

The goal of using a collective case study approach was to gain a rich description of what it is to be a participant in a single-gendered (all-female) community of practice. Each of the interviews with the participants (the body of research collected from each individual study participant) was used to build an understanding of the social reality of their participation in this community of practice (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). In essence, using a case study approach to engage with the research participants allowed the researcher to be able to “report the complexity of social activity in order to represent the meanings that individual social actors bring to those settings and manufacture them” (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 33).

Propositions or issues are another important aspect of setting up a case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Within the framework of this research, the researcher did not define any propositions, for two reasons. One, the researcher wanted the findings regarding identity development and formation of identity for female presidents participating in a community of practice to be emergent and not influenced or biased prior to gaining information from the research participants directly. Second, the research did not support setting any propositions in
respect to this research. We know from prior research that communities of practice are utilized to influence participants’ professional identity (Sim, 2006; Gomez & Rico, 2007; Chinn, 2006; Booth et al., 2007; Tolson et al., 2005; Andrew et al., 2009). However, within this research, the researchers did not identify characteristics that define identity and how those identifiers change or are altered by participation in a community of practice. Without any of that information, it is even more important to allow that information to emerge from their words in the interviews.

Stake (1995 as in Baxter & Jack, 2008) explains the importance of identifying the issues that may arise during the research process because of political, social, and historical influences on the research and the research participants. In addition, the researcher could experience personal issues that may influence the research (Stake as in Baxter & Jack, 2008). Possible issues that may exist within this research and in trying to gather the data in this project might be in regards to the research participants and their comfort level with sharing their experience within the organization. Their hesitation could be in respect to how others may interpret their answers and the information that they disclose.

The researcher tracked the issue of discloser as the research unfolded. There was some hesitation from members to disclose certain examples or stories, but it was not found that this had an impact on research design and no adjustments were made in response. Having outlined the specifics of the case ensured that while conducting the research, the researcher stay focused on gaining insight on how participation in an all-female community of practice influenced the identity development of the participants as a woman president.

Data Collection Procedures
The research was conducted by one researcher (myself) and supervised by a lead researcher. The lead researcher was the PhD candidate’s adviser and dissertation supervisor. The case study utilized interviews and document analysis. The purpose of utilizing document analysis, was to give greater depth to the information being compiled, since a prolonged relationship is not possible, due to time constraints of the project. In this research, the documents analyzed were the workbook used by the president/facilitator of each chapter to facilitate their monthly meetings, the mission statement of the organization, and the information regarding membership details on the organization’s website.

The interviews were conducted utilizing the responsive interviewing model and the questions were semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A responsive interview is the extension of a conversation that is conducted with a research participant. The difference in a responsive research interview and an ordinary conversation is that the researcher is trying to build a relationship with her research participant with the goal of answering a research question. It was a focused conversation with a goal.

The purpose of utilizing the responsive interviewing model, for this research, was to help the researcher capture material that has the depth and detail required for thematic analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin & Rubin (2012) explain that this level of detail allows the researcher to build a deeper understanding of the subject being studied. The key in conducting a responsive interview with these women was to ensure that the questions and follow-up questions were asked in a way to gain an in depth understanding of what they experience as a member of an all-female community of practice and how it has impacted/shaped their identity as a female president.
These semi-structured interviews were planned for one hour to one and a half hours, with the majority of the interview lasting right around 50 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted with members of an all-female community of practice that had volunteered to participate in the research study. Since the organization did not want the researcher to observe meetings, due to wanting to maintain the secrecy of their meetings, the president/chapter facilitator presented the proposed research and informally asked if there were individual members who would be willing to participate in the research study as approved by the Institutional Review Board. After the initial interviews were conducted, the researcher asked those participants to refer her to others within the two chapters who would consider participation. This resulted in a total of eleven interviews that were completed for data analysis.

For each interview, the interviewer (researcher) used the interview protocol to record the information gathered throughout each interview. The interview protocol was an outline for the researcher to follow that included an introduction of the researcher, the purpose of the research, explanation of informed consent, consent form from participant, the expectations for the interview (including length of interview and types of questions to expect), introduction of the person being interviewed, and all of the interview questions (Creswell, 2003). The procedures followed and the questions asked and ultimately answered ensured that the central research question was addressed. If the interview questions did not answer theory-based questions that support the central research question, the researcher resolved to revise the protocol during the data-gathering process (Spickard, 2013).
The interview questions were structured to identify characteristics of their community of practice, including information about each of the participants, why they chose to join the organization, and questions geared toward understanding the dynamics of the learning that takes place within the group and how it has influenced their identity as a woman president. The questions asked were open-ended, and follow-up questions were asked to gain additional information based on the respondents’ answers. Not all respondents were asked exactly the same follow-up questions. The interview protocol was not revised throughout the data gathering process. The protocol from the first interview proved to illicit responses that were in line with the research question and the supporting questions.

Document analysis was “used both to try to gain realistic insights in various contexts [and] issues” within an organization, as well as to “analyze and interpret the meanings transmitted by certain documents” (Harber, 1997, p. 114). For the purpose of this research, one main document—the manual used by the president/facilitator of the all-female community of practice—was reviewed. This manual is a prescribed method of how the group operates throughout each of its meetings to promote learning, organization, and time efficiency. The document was analyzed to understand how the group is supposed to function and, if it lends itself to a better understanding of how the group operates, how the learning is structured and how they make decisions about what they learn each session. In addition, the organization’s mission statement was analyzed, as well as meeting minutes or meeting notes, if given access to review by the organization. In analyzing meeting notes, patterns for whose problems are discussed were looked at as well if the learning topics were brought up among members in the interviews as being salient to their reason for membership. These meeting
notes might also prove to present indicators of how the women’s identity is shaped by participating in this community of practice. For example, what language is used amongst participants to communicate the issue that they present to the group, and does this change throughout their membership?

These methods were deemed the most appropriate design because these methods have the greatest potential for the researcher to gain the richest information in regards to the research questions. These data collection methods will helped to construct and build an answer regarding how a community of practice influences the identity of a woman president. By using the responsive interview model and document analysis, a possible outcome of the research will be to question the assumptions of how an all-female community of practice operates and what effect it can have on a participant’s identity. Specifically, this research could produce a set of characteristics that make up a woman president’s identity or a specific set of goals that exist in membership in this all-women, all-presidents community of practice. The knowledge gained from this research will help us to have a greater understanding of how individuals influence a community of practice and how their practice influences identity.

**Inquiry Timeline**

The timeline for data collection was conducted over an initial two-month period from late January 2014 to early March 2014. During the initial period of data collection, individual interviews were conducted with members of all-female communities of practice. A total of thirteen interviews were conducted, with eleven of the thirteen interviews used as cases within the collective case study. The additional two interviews conducted were contextual and were utilized as a part of the triangulation process of the data analysis.
The interviews were transcribed as they were completed. The second portion of the research inquiry was completed in March of 2014, the researcher and peer reviewers conducted a thematic analysis of the data and then coding of the interviews was completed. This portion of the data analysis also included the document analysis portion of the inquiry. The third portion of the research inquiry formulated the findings and results, as well as the completion of the write-up of the research study for submission for edits.

The audit trail for this research will be maintained throughout the data collection process. The researcher will maintain personal notes, copies of the transcripts of each interview, the process and documentation of data analysis, and research reflection notes. This documentation of all aspects of the research process and research tactics helps to ensure the creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research (Schwandt, 2001).

Selection of Research Participants

For the purposes of this study, the research participants were members of one of two chapters of an all-female, all-president community of practice. The research participants were located in a mid-sized midwestern city. The research participants were recruited with the help of the chapter chair for both chapters of the organization. The researcher, from personal contacts, had access to the chapter chair for both Chapters One and Two. She was willing to take a proposal to Chapter One for recruitment of participants. Additionally, the researcher used a personal contact who is a member of Chapter Two of the WPO to gain additional contacts for participation in the study. This aspect of participant recruitment and selection is important to note in regards to replication of the study. The group’s membership is held
confidential expect for Chapter Chair information provided for each chapter on the National WPO website. If another researcher were to try to replicate this study there could be issues of access that they may experience that was not a factor in this study.

Outside of the first four interviews conducted, the researcher utilized the snowball effect to gain the additional research participants to complete the data collection. With this, the researcher asked the participants to refer other participants that they were close to in the organization that would potentially participate. As a part of their recommendations, the researcher asked that they recommend women who were in varying stages of their membership in the organization. The hope was that the variation yields the greatest understanding of a member’s experience within the group. Having members from different years of membership participate would build a body of information that allowed the researcher to learn about the issues of central importance to the community.

For this study, the researcher had proposed to conduct eight to ten interviews. With the snowball effect, eleven interviews were conducted in total. Of the members that participated, five research participants were members of Chapter One and six were members of Chapter Two. In an ideal research environment, the members who choose to participate would be from various years of membership within the organization, varying from new members to more senior members. Based on the snowball effect use for participant recruitment, the researcher did not have full control over the years of membership. However, of those that participated, their years of membership ranged from two years to twelve years.

To ensure the comfort of the research participants to feel confident in their participation in the research, the researcher conducted on-site interviews at a location
suggested by the participant. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were addressed for each research participant. Confidentiality for participants was achieved by helping them to understand that the information that they are disclosing is being obtained in confidence, as well as that they “may refuse publication of any material that they think might harm them in any way” (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 57). In addition as issues of confidentiality came up during individual interviews, confidentiality and how the information they shared would be represented was revisited to reassure them of the commitment to confidentiality.

Each individual who chose to participate in the study was given the opportunity to pick her own pseudonym as well as a pseudonym for her company. Only one participant chose to pick her own pseudonym; the researcher assigned the others. In addition, none of the pseudonyms chosen reflected the name of another research participant.

Because of the high-profile nature of these research participants, additional measures were taken to ensure participants’ anonymity. First, only the identifiers that were absolutely necessary were used to explain each of the participants. Second, using participants from both chapters aided in keeping the participants’ identity anonymous.

Additionally, each chapter only allows one woman president per type of company, so when possible, the women’s companies were classified into broader classifications, to increase the number of companies classified into a specific category. For example, a possible classification may be construction, manufacturing and engineering allowing multiple companies to be included in that category. Increasing the types of companies classified together was used as another measure to ensure anonymity amongst members of the group if
they were to read the completed research write up. Finally, for the final write-up of this research study and the data, the organization’s name has been changed.

*Interview Schedule and Proposed Interview Questions*

For this study, all of the women in Chapter One were approached for this project. As already explained, the president of the organization read the proposal to the group at a meeting. She asked members if there were any volunteers who wished to participate in the study. Three names resulted in this first presentation of the intended research. Those three women were referred to the researcher. The researcher then contacted the volunteers to further explain the research and to set up in-person interviews. In addition, the researcher had a personal contact in Chapter Two who volunteered to participate in the study. At the completion of those four interviews, the researcher asked for referrals for the additional participants needed for the completion of the study. This resulted in a total of eleven research participants.

The interviews were completed within two months. The interviews were schedule based on the research participants’ availability. The interviews were conducted at the research participants’ place of employment, at a place of convenience to them, or over the phone. The majority of the interviews were done at the research participants’ office and all but two of the interviews were completed in person. The interview questions used with the participants included four main questions (See Appendix 1 for full interview protocol):

1. **Introductory and warm-up questions (building rapport):**
   - Name?
   - Type of company in which you serve as the president?
   - Do you have a pseudonym that you would like to be referenced as in this study? Do you have a pseudonym that you would like your company to be referenced as if necessary in the write-up of the research?
• How long have you been a member of the WPO?

2. To start, tell me a bit about your experience when you joined the all-woman community of practice in which you are involved?

Clarifying the questions if needed:
• How did you learn about the group? What steps did you have to take to become a member?

3. Overarching Questions: What were the reasons you joined the WPO? What were your expectations of becoming a part of this organization? Have they been met?

Probing Questions:
• Why did you join this all-women community of practice? Of what importance did it hold for you (personally and professionally)?
• What do you see as the stated purpose of the organization?
• How did you find out about the organization? How did you become a member of the group? Did you research the organization before you joined? Was there a reputation of this group that you discovered prior to joining? Was that reputation accurate?
• Are you a member of any other professional development organization? Why or why not?
• How do they differ from the WPO? Why is the support that you receive in this group important?
• How does the support that you receive in this group differ from the other groups in which you are a member?

4. Overarching Question: In your view, what value have the meetings provided?

Probing Questions:
• What is the process for choosing the topic that is discussed at each of the meetings?
• From your perspective, how do the topics chosen help you in your role as a president?
• What is your role in the organization?
  o Follow up question for members that have been in the group longer than 5 years. Has your role in the group changed throughout your membership?
• How do you integrate what you learn from the meetings into your work?
• How has what you have learned influenced how you approach learning within your own organization?
• Have you formed any learning groups like the WPO within your organization?
5. Overarching Question: What has being a member of this organization done for you?

Probing Questions:
- Has participation in this group shaped how you view yourself and your professional identity?
- What does it mean to you to be a woman president?
- Do you identify yourself as a woman president?
  - Follow up question: Are you identified as a woman president when you do community events, receive awards, etc.
- How has your participation in this group helped you to define yourself as a woman president?
- How has participation in this group impacted your definition of what it means to be a woman president?

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data was the final aspect of compiling the data. Once an interview was completed, it was transcribed for data analysis purposes. All interviews were transcribed using Rev.com due to timing constraints. Interviews were coded verbatim and time stamped. Each interview transcription was read and checked for errors against original recordings by the researcher. Once all of the interviews were completed, the researcher held a one-and-a-half-hour peer reviewer training to review the process for data analysis. The peer reviewers are a previous graduate from the researcher’s doctoral program and the other is a current student in the researcher’s doctoral program. At the completion of the training, the peer reviewers were presented with copies of each of the interview transcripts.

Boyatzis’s (1998) model lays out a procedure to be followed for deriving data-driven research. In Boyatzis’s (1998) approach, the interview data is collected and two of the interviews would have been used as samples a and b—identifying one woman as having a high degree of identity and one woman president with a low degree of identity as a female
president. However, it was found by the researcher and the two peer reviewers that the interviews could not be divided or assessed in this way.

Since the interviews could not be classified in this way, the researcher and the two peer reviewers conducted a thematic analysis of the interviewees’ comments. The thematic analysis was based on the model developed by Boyatzis (1998) and used Bernard and Ryan’s (2010) technique for supporting reference. The researcher asked the peer reviewers to review the data to identify key words, phrases, and themes in regards to identifying a frame of reference for how to articulate the components of identity for a woman president as developed by participation in the community of practice.

Wenger (1998) presents several characterizations of identity that are influenced by participation in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) identifies that communities of practice impact identity in that the participant will construct an identity through participation. Ways in which one can see how a community of practice impacts identity is language, artifacts, expressed values, perception of the world (do they always see themselves as a woman president), etc. Because there was question as to whether Wenger’s theory applies to this community of practice in relationship to identity, the researcher did not give the peer reviewers an in-depth introduction to Wenger’s (1998) presentation of how communities of practice may impact a participant’s identity. In addition, this is the purpose for conducting the data analysis based on Boyatzis’s (1998) data-driven technique versus theory-driven technique for coding.

Once the researcher and both peer reviewers completed the thematic analysis individually, they met to discuss and compare the information identified. From the eleven
interviews, forty-six unique key words and themes were identified. The identifiers were then reviewed and categorized; grouping like key words together to formulate the code book. Once the code book was formulated, the researcher and peer reviewers recoded each interview based on code book.

The research team adjourned to discuss the coding results. First, the researcher and the peer reviewers reviewed the codes identified for similarities. With the initial review of the coding, the research team found that there was significant variation in the coding between the three members of the research team. It was found that the variations occurred due to the following judgments made by the research team when coding the data. Those judgments came from which content to include/exclude, the decision to code or not code negative versus positive statements, if directional statements should be coded, and finally, the number of codes that could be present in a paragraph.

In addition, the researcher gained feedback from the committee in regards to possible revisions that needed to be made to the code book. In the final code book, four final themes were decided upon to represent the data. Each theme had one to four subthemes that help to more fully describe and define the theme. The themes represent what the women identified as the ways in which their identity as a female president was impacted by their participation in this CoP. In addition, it is important to note that the researcher and the peer coders spoke specifically regarding how to address gender in regards to the research responses. It was decided that there would not be a theme specific to gender because gender underpinned the premise of the research. The group was studied specifically because it was a single gendered community of practice. In addition, the researcher did not want to presuppose any biases on
the women’s responses and influence the presentation of the data in a way that did not reflect how the women recognize the role of gender in their career and their personal lives.

The themes are presented according to the frequency in which they appeared in the data, suggesting that theme one is most important followed and had the most influence on the women and their identity as a woman president. The four overarching themes found are:

Theme 1: Sisterhood—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network”; Theme 2: Skills—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say, ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”; Theme 3: Role Negotiation—“It’s your family, it’s your company, and it’s your husband”; Theme 4: Self Assurance—“Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a nonthreatening environment…” The final code book is presented in Figure 3.1.
Figure 3.1: Final Code Book

Note: The role of gender and language is a component of each of the themes identified.

Gender was originally identified as a separate theme, but was ultimately decided upon that
the concept of gender was embedded in each theme and is the foundation for each of the
themes identified.

- Theme 1: Sisterhood—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network.”
  - Subtheme a: Relationships with and between members
    - Descriptors: Refers to how the women discussed their relationships
      with other women in the group. The women discussed how the close
      relationships that they have been able to forge have given them
      personal support as well as professional support that has resulted in the
      growth and success of their company.
  - Subtheme b: Organizational Structure
    - Descriptors: References to how the women discussed the
      organizational structure, their experiences with and the outcome of
      group participation.
  - Subtheme c: Accountability
    - Descriptors: References how the women felt when their issue was
      presented as part of the meeting and whether they felt accountable to
      report back on how the issue was resolved. Also includes references to
      meeting attendance.

(Continued)
Figure 3.1 Final Code Book continued

- **Theme 2: Skills**—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”
  - Subtheme a: Business and technical skills acquisition
    - Descriptors: References the women gave to the business and technical skills they acquired to help move their company forward. This includes hiring and firing skills, audit procedures, implementing a new technology platform, etc.
  - Subtheme b: Interpersonal skills acquisition
    - Descriptors: References the women made to acquiring interpersonal skills required in their business, for example speaking in front of a large group.
  - Subtheme c: Implementation
    - Descriptors: References made by the women toward changing an element of their management style or trying out new skills learned within the group. The women share how within this safe environment, they can discuss or “try-out” different ways of managing their employees. Some of the women discuss employing certain tactics that may be commonly referred to as masculine or feminine management techniques.

- **Theme 3: Role Negotiation**—“It’s your family, it’s your company, and it’s your husband.”
  - Subtheme a: Balance
    - Descriptors: References the women make to balancing of work, family, gender and title of woman president. The woman discuss how within the environment of an all women group they can discuss finding solutions for feeling guilty and apologizing because they cannot be everything to everyone at all times.

(Continued)
Figure 3.1 Final Code Book continued

- **Subtheme b: Role within WPO**
  - Descriptors: References the length of time before women described when they felt like a fully engaged member (i.e., six months, two years, etc.). The women discuss that they needed to feel a sense of trust and confidentiality among their fellow members before being comfortable enough to participate in the conversation or ask for advice on personal business matters.

- **Theme 4: Self Assurance—“Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a nonthreatening environment…”**
  - **Subtheme a: Confidence**
    - Descriptors: References the woman made to a change in their confidence level and being able to more fully embrace their role as a woman president. The women discussed that because of this increased confidence they believed that they could make decisions in relation to their company, family and personally.
  - **Subtheme b: Validation and Affirmation**
    - Descriptors: Reference the women made to how the participation in an all-women group and the relationships that were forged with these women resulted in them being able to attain the positive praise and validation that they had been lacking in their professional lives. This affirmation from peers resulted in an increased sense of self and ability to do her job.
  - **Subtheme c: Confidentiality**
    - Descriptors: Reference to how the woman discussed the concept of confidentiality and the impact that it makes on the conversation within their meetings. The woman felt confident sharing issues they were struggling with making it a “safe place for the hard truth.”

(Continued)
Figure 3.1: Final Code Book continued

- Subtheme d: Creditability/ Legitimacy
  - Descriptors: References how membership within the organization added creditability and legitimacy for them personally as well as their company within the marketplace, especially with male counterparts.

Once the final code book was constructed and there was more clear understanding on how to code the raw data, the raw data were recoded. Again the team discussed the similarities in coding. For those statements coded differently from one reviewer to another, it was discussed amongst the researcher and the peer reviewers until an agreement was made as to how the comment should be coded. In instances where the researcher and the peer reviewers could not reach an agreement, the individual codes from the perspective coder were counted respective to the category that the coder had categorized. In Figure 3.2 are the final code counts per code, per interview.

**Figure 3.2: Coding Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Reviewer 1</th>
<th>Reviewer 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
The purpose for this type of feedback from peer reviewers and research participants was used to ensure reliability and incorporated into the findings of the study (Boyatzis, 1998). By following this process, the list of established categories was comprehensive and included all statements that classified as determinants of identity for woman presidents.
participating in a community of practice. The overall classifications identified were used to interpret and report the data.

Interpreting and Reporting the Data Establishing Trustworthiness

Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba listed trustworthiness as a criteria establishing the quality of a particular qualitative inquiry, where trustworthiness is defined as “[the] quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (as in Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). There are four identified criteria for establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative research inquiry: creditability, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Lincoln and Guba’s formation of this criteria was intended, and continues to this day, to act as “analogs to conventional criteria” for scientific research (as in Schwandt, 2001, p. 259).

Research Quality

Creditability, used as a synonym for internal validity, addresses how the researcher has chosen to reconstruct and represent the respondents’ views of their life (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Creditability or internal validity is seen as strength in qualitative research because of the numerous strategies that can be employed by the researcher to ensure that they are reconstructing the participants’ reality as closely as possible (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The five strategies that can be utilized by a qualitative researcher to ensure the high internal validity are: triangulation; member checks; peer/colleague examination; statement of researcher’s experiences; assumptions and biases; and submersion/engagement. Within the construct of this research, three of the five criteria were utilized for creditability: triangulation, peer/colleague examination, and statement of researcher’s experiences, assumptions, and biases.
The practice of triangulation creates creditability because it requires the researcher to defend the inferences they make about their data using specific examples from the various points of the inquiry data. “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws” regarding their data (Schwandt, 2001, p. 257). When researchers use triangulation to create creditability, they are using the various sources of data “to build a coherent justification for themes” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). This study relied on field notes, interview transcripts, documents from the community, reflexive journaling, and various stages of data analysis to build a cohesive argument regarding the practices of an all-female community of practice.

Peer/colleague examination, also known as peer debriefing, is a practice to ensure creditability that involves “exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit with the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, as in James-Brown, 1995, p. no number). The purpose of peer debriefing is for researchers’ colleagues to “act as a sounding board” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 188). Peer debriefing can be played out in many ways within a study. The most important role a peer debriefing can play is to hold researchers accountable to their preconceptions and prejudices. This will uncover any ethical or political dilemmas that could arise while conducting the research or during the analysis of the research. Other purposes for peer debriefing include having other professionals in the field to seek advice regarding the actual procedures of the research. Additionally, as the research is being analyzed, they can participate in the thematic analysis and code formation, providing a sort of “consensual validity” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 168). Two of my colleagues acted as
formal peer coders and a series of peer debriefings were held as a part of the coding process. Additionally, input from the advisers presiding over this research acted as another form of informal peer debriefing.

During the peer debriefings, two main issues were discussed that could have had an impact on the study. The first issue involved how as the researcher, the researcher has intimate knowledge of each of the interviews and has the knowledge of whether an interviewee said or did not say something. For example if the researcher had not caught an error made during transcription, this could have influenced the peer reviewers to code a comment one way while the researcher coded it in a different way based on having the knowledge of what was actually said during the interview. This happened three to four times in the coding process and was discovered and corrected when the data counts were reviewed.

Second, the researcher and peer reviewers discussed that the manner that the transcription service broke comments of the conversation apart affected the coding counts. In the transcription, an interviewee’s comment may have been a continuous thought, but the transcriptionist may have broken up that thought into multiple comments, which, as outlined by our coding guidelines, required that each comment needed to be coded separately. For example, in one interview, one continuous comment from the interviewee was broken up into four comments by the transcriptionist. If prepared differently, this would have been counted as one code versus being counted as four codes. This process of discussion with the peer reviewers helped the researcher to be more fully aware of how the data collection and data processing techniques can influence the overall understanding of the data.
Reflexivity is a practice within qualitative research that engages researchers in critical self-reflection on their prejudices and predispositions toward one knowledge base over another. These periods of reflection should be recorded in field notes or a research journal. It also seeks to establish the context in which the research is being done, as well as how researchers are situated within this research. This practice is central in establishing validity. The practice of reflexivity is also important because if not practiced, it could negatively situate their research within their methodology. For example, if reflexivity is not practiced as a feminist researcher, the research may be accused of duplicating andro-centric perspectives and race and class bias (Schwandt, 2001). Glesne (2006) frames the practice of reflexivity as another research project that is being conducted parallel to the one you are conducting regarding your topic.

Throughout the data collection and data analysis the researcher kept a journal to document reactions, learnings and potential biases that could have influenced how the data were represented. The main point of reflection that was most cognizant in the researcher’s journal was in regards to the defensiveness of the researcher regarding the data. The researcher felt a sense of defensiveness when questions were posed by peer reviewers and advisors regarding the data. Through journaling, the researcher realized that this feeling of defensiveness arose from wanting to protect and preserve the stories of the research participants. And in further reflection, the researcher realized that these feelings could also be from believing that the data were communicating one specific message, but, when looked at from another perspective, might have been communicating a different message. From the
researcher’s perspective, the practice of journaling coupled with peer debriefings helped to ensure the most holistic representation of the data.

Member checks were conducted with those research participants that were available and with those that the researcher felt necessary based on questions that arose in the data processing. For this research a member check consisted of presenting the participant with a draft of the information that is to be presented in the write-up. They were asked to verify the accuracy of what was being reported. If the participant had an objection to what has been presented, the participant had the opportunity to give feedback that was used to edit her remarks in the final write-up. As Stake (1995) describes about his member checks, he routinely uses them to help him confirm what he believes as fact. Stake (1995) discusses that with using member checks, the suggestions made by his research participants help to improve his work.

The purpose of confirming the interpretation of the data presented from this research was to ensure the information presented by the participants was their actual experience and what they said they were comfortable with being presented. This practice was also followed to help create internal validity (Stake, 1995; Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Transferability/ Generalizability

The term transferability is used in the context of qualitative research over generalizability. Here it refers to the ability for the reader of a qualitative study to decide if the research can be transferred to their personal situation (Schwandt, 2001). This requires the researcher to ensure that there is enough information and the details regarding the situation, so that the reader can connect the experiences of the research participants to their own
experience(s) or situations in which they may encounter (Schwandt, 2001). In this instance, if transferability is achieved, then the information produced from my research could be used by others to determine if there are current situations within their organizations that may warrant a single-gendered community of practice.

*Dependability/ Reliability*

Dependability is also linked to reliability in that it helps determine to what extent the researcher’s findings will be found again (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). This is the term used to defend the internal validity of a qualitative research inquiry (2000). Guba and Lincoln (1981) “prefer to think of reliability as consistency or dependability” (as in Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Trustworthiness is concerned with the research process—asking researchers to hold themselves accountable for the decisions they made throughout the research process. It encourages the researcher to ask these questions: Was the process logical? Is the process traceable? Did the researcher document the research process? (Schwandt, 2001).

The concept of reliability is more problematic in the social sciences because human behavior is not static (Schwandt, 2001). Also, how do you determine if the experience of many is more important than one person’s experience? Furthermore, if a qualitative study is replicated, the results will not be the same. This does not discredit the results, because data can be interpreted in numerous ways (Schwandt, 2001). Merriam and Simpson (2000) state that what is most important within qualitative research and what qualitative researchers should be most concerned with, is “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 102).
Four strategies can be used to assess the rigor or reliability (internal validity) of the research inquiry: thick description; multisite design; modal comparison; and random sampling. Within this research plan, it is proposed to use thick description. Random sampling is not appropriate for this research study because of the scope of the project and its specific emphasis on female members of an all-female community of practice. Additionally, the researcher was only able to gain permission from two all-female communities of practice that are part of the same organization.

Thick description requires the researcher to provide the reader with enough information to determine how closely their situation matches that of the one being described (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Schwandt (2001) adds that thick description also includes an interpretive aspect. Requiring the researcher to document, “circumstances, meaning, intentions, strategies, and the motivations” of an observation or interaction with the research participant (p. 255).

Within the research results, each member interview was represented through a thick description and included the type of organization in which she serves, years of service, years of membership within the community of practice, her purpose for joining the membership, her perceived benefit from membership in the organization, and the types of learning that she has gained from participation in the community. Additionally, excerpts from my interviews, observations, and field notes with the group and with each member were used as evidence to substantiate my assertions and warrants made regarding the data gathered throughout the inquiry.
To determine if internal validity was achieved from this research, an audit can be performed on the body of research. The audit is to determine if there is a creditable audit trail that has been generated throughout the study. Schwandt (2001) explains the components an auditor should find in a researcher’s audit trail:

- a statement of the theoretical framework that shaped the study at the outset;
- explanations of concepts, models and the like that were developed as part of the effort to make sense of the data;
- a description of the findings or conclusions of the investigation;
- notes about the process of conducting the study;
- personal notes;
- and copies of instruments used to guide the generation and analysis of data. The audit trail can also be used by the researcher to encourage reflection throughout the research process. This exercise in reflexivity also adds to the internal reliability or creditability of the research.

The audit trail for this research was maintained throughout the data collection process. The researcher maintained personal notes, copies of the transcripts of each interview, the process and documentation of data analysis, and research reflection notes. This documentation of all aspects of the research process and research tactics helps to ensure the creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research (Schwandt, 2001).

**Researcher Subjectivity**

The personal beliefs and experiences of the researcher must be addressed because they can influence their view of the subject. This is because the researcher acts as the primary data collection instrument (Creswell, 2003). The study was conducted using the method of a
qualitative case study. This approach is appropriate and has been chosen due to the nature of the proposed research. For this research to be successful, it must be “with and not on” the research participants (Glesne, 2006, p. 2). It is important for the research to be situated in the natural setting of the research participants so that the information gathered is not “contrived, manipulated, or artificially fashioned” as in an experimental design (Glesne, 2006, p. 174).

The researcher participated in journaling throughout the research process. This helps ensure self-reflection and the disclosure of the biases not only within the research process but also from her personal background. The practice of reflexivity is central to the involvement of the researcher with the research participants. This helps to ensure that the researcher’s engagement with the research participants is useful and beneficial.

The researcher’s interest in a practice based – professional role identity development community of practice that was chosen was influenced by personal career goals and aspirations. The researcher has been intrigued by women-only organizations and communities of practice and how those types of groups help women to succeed within their careers. The career roles that the researcher has held thus far require interaction with a variety of executives, both from the private sector as well as from the nonprofit sector. The researcher has always been interested in understanding how women executives learn and continue to further their career. Specifically, how does a woman position herself to acquire the knowledge and identity to navigate the position of president?

Due to personal career aspirations, there are certain biases brought to this study. First, a personal aspiration of the researcher is to become a female president of an organization at some point in her career. This influenced the researcher to want to focus the research on
women presidents and how participation in groups like the WPO help them to foster their identity as a woman president and succeed throughout their careers. A second bias of the researcher is that based on the long-standing nature and structure of this organization and its alignment to Wenger’s (1998) fourteen criteria for evaluating a CoP, the groups operate as communities of practices. This bias is what influenced the researcher to work with this organization and the two chapters that operate in the researcher’s city of residence.

An additional assumption was to work only with these two groups due to ease of access. This may not be a full representation of the diversity of all-female communities of practice. The researcher attempted to attend to each of these biases to ensure that these biases did not shape the way the data was collected, viewed, interpreted, and understood (Creswell, 2003).

The research was completed with members of a practice based – professional role identity development community of practice that participate in one of two chapters of the WPO, within the city in which the researcher is a resident. The research was intended to help the researcher gain an understanding of how women form their professional role identity within an all-female community of practice and how learning is encouraged within the group. Another possible outcome for this research may be a personal understanding of how these women learn from one another to help further their individual learning and the challenges that they face within their companies. Finally, by engaging in the methodological procedure of this case study and its methodological tactics, and practicing reflexivity throughout the research process, this study aimed to capture a clear perspective of how a professional role identity development community of practice is structured, operates and impacts a
participant’s professional role identity. Understanding the practices, rituals, language, and traditions of the community that encourage teaching and learning and how this engagement impacts a woman’s identity as a woman president will be an important addition to the community of practice literature and the larger informal learning research landscape.

Summary

The information presented in this chapter includes a description of the research conducted, research questions, methodological framework chosen for the study, sample selection, data collection process, data analysis, and the methods used for ensuring trustworthiness. Utilizing these steps throughout this case study helped the researcher to better understand how participation in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice influenced the identity development of woman presidents. The collection of this information adds to our understanding of communities of practice and what activities and information lead to learnings that impact a participant’s professional role identity.
Chapter 4: Findings

The research conducted was seeking to understand a member’s experience within a practice based – professional role identity development community of practice. Within the research reviewed for this study, an absence in regards to what actually happens within a community of practice from the participants’ point of view was revealed. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to build an understanding of how participation in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice impacts her identity development as a president.

Fifteen women were asked to participate in the study. Of the fifteen, thirteen women responded and were interviewed. Eleven of the interviews were used for the purpose of analysis in relation to the research questions. Two of the interviews were used for the purpose of triangulation, building context around the responses of the women and the stated purpose of the organization. Those two interviews were conducted with the president of the international organization and the other was conducted with the chapter chair for both Chapters One and Two of the WPO in which these women are members.

Of the eleven interviewed for the purpose of analysis, five of the woman were members in Chapter One and six were member of Chapter Two. After completing all eleven interviews, a demographic survey was sent to each of the research participants. Of the eleven interviewed, ten responded. The median age of the women who participated in the study was
55.72 years old with the oldest participant being 72 years and the youngest 41 years old. Eight of the women identified as married and two of the respondents reported as being divorced. All the women reported that they have children, while only two of the respondents still have children at home. Half of the women are or were in business with their spouse while the other five are not in business with their spouse.

_Research Findings_

In representing the findings for this research, a variety of presentation styles were discussed (Chenail, 1995). The researcher had initially wanted to present the findings by building three personas regarding the phases of membership which seem to be present within the organization. However, with interviews being canceled due to scheduling conflicts with two new members within the organization, the findings regarding a new member persona would have been based on only one interview. Without further understanding of the new member experience with the additional interviews, the one interview did not provide enough information to know if her perspective accurately portrays the viewpoint of a new member. Based on this, the findings will be presented based on the themes presented in the interviews. The presentation strategy represented was presented by Ronald J. Chenail (1995), in which the researcher is representing the qualitative data that have been collected. There is a pattern to how the data are presented to the reader allowing for cross-section comparisons as well as coherency in the paper throughout (Chenail, 1995).

The findings for this study are presented by theme based on the final code book (Figure 3.1). In the final code book, four final themes were presented, with each theme having one to four sub-themes. The sub-themes are used to help more fully illustrate the
meaning and depth of each of the themes. The themes are presented according to the frequency in which they appeared in the data; suggesting that theme one is most important or plays the biggest role in their identity development as a woman president. Themes two through four follow and had less frequency in the number of data counts throughout the interviews. This suggested that the identified theme had less impact on their identity development as a woman president or that the woman had not experienced that aspect of her identity development as a member of the organization. The four overarching themes found are: Theme 1: Sisterhood—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network;” Theme 2: Skills—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”; Theme 3: Role Negotiation—“It’s your family, it’s your company, and it’s your husband;” Theme 4: Self Assurance—“Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment…” Each theme is presented as a subsection to the research findings.

An additional statement regarding the presentation of the findings is how gender and language are presented. Gender and language is a component of each of the themes identified. Originally the researcher and the two peer reviewers had identified gender and language as a subtheme of Role Negotiation, however with feedback from the committee, it was decided upon that the two could not be represented in that way because it is embedded in each theme and is the foundation for each of the themes identified. The role of gender and language is significant and as you will see in the re-presentation of the data, gender and
language are always present and always a part of the perspective that these women bring to the discussion of the WPO.

Theme 1: Sisterhood—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network”

The most prevalent theme across all of the interviews was the notion of sisterhood, which refers to the support the women received from one another in their respective chapter and from women in the other chapter as well. The women describe how their participation in the organization has given them access to other women that are in a similar situation and support in their day-to-day journey as a woman president. The women described support and oftentimes named it with the familiar term sisterhood, because the support that they are receiving is far more than just support. The women become part of each other’s family. This was the reasoning for assigning sisterhood as the overarching word to capture the essence of the most relevant and prevalent theme within the data. Within the Sisterhood theme, three subthemes were identified. Those subthemes are relationships with and between members, organizational structure, and accountability. This theme overall is best represented by a comment from Lynn:

They talk about the good ole’ boy network, it’s nice to have a good ole’ girl network too because you know they [another member] has used them [vendor/ contractor] and it worked for them and you know them now, that’s nice. Another avenue that really works well I think outside of the meeting is, I’ll be looking for something specific and I’ll shoot an email to both groups and I’ll get a dozen replies back. It’s nice that we have two groups and we try to share resources…

Lynn’s comments begin to tell the story about how the women view the organization as their way of creating a network of relationships and supports that can be used to help solve the issues as they arise within their organization. The ideas and the information that are gathered from their peers help them to make a decision and continue their business moving forward.
The first subtheme identified to support and helps further explain the *Sisterhood* theme is “relationships with and between members,” and refers to how these women discussed their relationships with other women in the group. The women discussed how the close relationships that they have been able to forge have given them personal support as well as professional support that has resulted in the growth and success of their company.

In describing the relationships that they have formed, the word *sisterhood* had common placement in the vernacular among the women. This was especially true for a small subgroup of women that have formed very close bonds in Chapter Two, Sammy, Sharon, Diane, and Brandy (one of the women asked to participate but could not because of scheduling conflicts). As Sammy discussed, participation in the group has filled a void that she was feeling and experiencing as a woman president. Sammy stated, “The part of WPO from the support side of it that has been very important for me, and has plugged a hole for me emotionally. I've cried with those women, I've laughed with them. They've laughed and cried with me, and I think there's just a level of understanding.” Diane spoke specifically about her close relationship with Sunny and how she depends on this relationship to seek advice and be there to help make decisions or problem solve through certain business situations:

> So, I mean, Sammy is one of my best friends, and so I can call her, and I can cry to her, and I know that she’s not going to judge me or be like, “What the hell’s your problem?” and [I] feel confident that she’s going to be there for me. If I need something, she will literally drop everything to make sure that I can … she could help. Literally, she would drop anything.

Sammy and Diane’s comments are examples of how the relationships that they have formed within the WPO have become integral to their identity as a woman president. The women within the group and how they relate to one another is a part of who they are now, both personally and professionally.
The second subtheme that was identified for the “Sisterhood” category is “Organizational Structure” and references how the women discussed the organizational structure, their experiences with and the outcome of group participation. This subcategory was coupled as a part of this theme because the women’s comments indicated that the structure of the organization and their individual group can directly affect their experience in the group and thus the benefit that participation has on their business. The feedback that was received based on organization varied from the participants. Several of the women reported dissatisfaction with how the group is organized.

Both Carol and Darcy expressed dissatisfaction in the structure of the meetings and that the structure does not maximize their time together and, therefore, they are not getting the benefit that they need for their company. Carol expressed:

> The meetings for me have been tough. That's why I made my change to go in this direction. In the beginning, they were very structured and we really had the opportunity to write all our thoughts down ahead of time, come prepared. Then I think we got so big, that people would come and want to do it right then and not come prepared, so the first half hour / hour were really wasted with people trying to get that all done. I know people are busy, so when they dedicate three hours of their time, they think that's part of it. That's okay. It's just everybody is a little different…My real reason for change was to get more out of the time I was spending.

Darcy also added a similar comment:

> In a lot of ways I probably have gotten more value in [the organization] outside of meeting than in meetings. Honestly, there have been several years—I’ve been part of it more than five years—in the last two years, that I’ve contemplated, do I want to rejoin?

Both of the women expressed that they believed that the group had grown too large for meetings to be productive, as well as that there should be different groups for those that own their company and those who are appointed or hired in as a president. Because of Carol’s
dissatisfaction and lack of learning, she is able to glean from the group she will be moving into member-at-large status with the organization. However, although Darcy is not satisfied with the organizational structure, she continues her membership because of the relationships that she has formed with women. Darcy said:

> I thought about leaving, and I know that there are other women in the in the WPO group that feel the same way because we’ve talked about it, about leaving the group and starting our own. I truly like the women in [our] group, so it’s not a social thing because I don't go there to be social, I’d miss them.

From the feedback that the women gave in their interviews, the organization is structured as designed and mandated by the National Organization. Each meeting follows the Lowe Roundtable Model for Discussion. The Lowe Facilitator Manual (2005) lays out specifically the perimeters for how a meeting should be conducted. The manual dictates, as seen in Table 1.1, the flow of the meeting to proceed as follows:

Figure 4.1: Sample Agenda for Roundtable Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roundtable Agenda – Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date/Time/Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality Reminder/Assignment of Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up on last meeting’s assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Minute Update Drill: Each attendee gives business/family/personal news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank and Choose Issues for Presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation by Roundtable Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter discusses issue/problem/concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers ask clarifying questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers share relevant experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter summarizes group input/next steps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Presentation or Content From Outside Speaker (optional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality Reminder/Other Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Exercise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The National Organization adopted the Lowe Roundtable Model to give structure and continuity to their meetings regardless of location throughout the world. In addition, this structure was adopted to ensure that each meeting would be kept to a specific timeline with set goals and objectives for members. This structure limits the personal and social aspects of the women lives from being the focal point of the conversation and puts the emphasis of the conversation on their companies. Marsha Firestone describes that the purpose of the meeting should always be about business with the goal to move a woman’s business forward. Marsha describes why the Lowe Roundtable Model was adopted by the organization:

Because peers were giving input and helping one another and this gave a very specific structure to that. Our tagline is ‘reaching farther together’ so it gave a very specific structure to that ‘reaching farther together.’ I like that because it meant that there was really a business purpose that was being addressed. It wasn’t an informal gab session or a social session that there was a very specific structured business goal of a meeting.

However the women report, especially the two that are most dissatisfied with the group, that they believe that there is too much time spent on the personal aspect of the members which takes away from the time that could be used to talk about actual issues affecting members’ businesses. For example, Darcy, explains that:

They were going through a staffing crisis for wait staff right now. I’ve never experienced that before, I’m needing to think outside of the box, and that crisis to me would be totally different than a crisis you might be going through. And there could be three or four of us in the group, and there is not enough time to discuss it. So I would sit there and say, oh, Gina’s [issue] is much more important than mine. I’ll just keep quiet. Or I might say mine but I also know that we are not going to have 20 minutes to really explore it.

It’s more surface. So I think for the women in the group that are really happy with WPO that surfaces, so when mean social, I don’t mean that we are going to go out and play together, but how is your daughter doing above? There is some of us, they are there for the business purpose. I cared but tell me a little bit about your wedding, but tell me two sentences or less thing.
However, Darcy also regulates herself in that because her company is smaller than other members companies she tends to push her issue to the top within the group. Whether this self-regulation is self-imposed or a behavior that has been learned throughout her years of participation, it has caused her to question her membership and the benefit that she is getting from being a part of the group. Darcy referenced this in regards to the cost of membership and whether, if she is experiencing a decrease in support regarding the issues she is facing as a business owner, should she continue to invest her training dollars in this way or find another organization that better suites her needs.

The third subtheme that was related to the “Sisterhood” theme was accountability and referred to how the women felt a sense of responsibility to the group to report back and be accountable to the issues that they brought forth and received help from peers. Participant Robyn, who had participated in presenting a case study to the group explains her sense of accountability to the group to show that she had taken action on the issues that she had brought forth to the group for feedback:

When I had my case study, they want follow up. When I see them, they say, “Okay, well, how’s this going?” not that I owe them anything, it’s just the reality of I’m driven to make positive change. When I have acknowledged to someone the change that needs to be made, I want to be able to report back to them that I’ve taken action.

In addition, the idea of accountability was also held to meeting attendance. Women felt that they should do all they could to be present at meetings. Those that could not attend and especially if they had repeated absences, their absence was “felt” by the group. The women expressed that they believed that not only are those women missing out on
participating in the conversation, but that those present are missing out on the information that those women could add to the conversation. Cheryl expresses this idea when she says:

I think that for WPO or for any women’s group, if you're really going to get the value out of it, you have to belong, because we have members who pay their dues, but then they don’t come ... never come, come once a year, whatever else. You don't get anything from it. If you don't become involved, if you don't make friends, if you don't make a commitment and do some of the work some of the time, what are you going to get from it? You're not really ... you're only going to get from it what you put into it. You have to make a commitment in yourself [to get there and be present]...

Sammy and Diane’s comments are examples of how the relationships that they have formed within the WPO have become integral to their identity as a woman president. The women within the group and how they relate to one another is a part of who they are now, both personally and professionally. Cheryl’s perspective adds that a person’s experience within the group really is dependent on what time and effort they put into the WPO. The deep relationships that Cheryl is describing have formed and developed over an extended period of time, support previous findings within the CoP literature that the group supports the development of a participant’s identity and further that this identity is translated into competence and confidence that is transferred into their enterprise (Wenger, 1998).

The Sisterhood theme is described by the participants as the relationships that are built among and how those relationships are influenced by the organizational structure and the accountability that they perceive is required. Within the interviews, there were several women who expressed that within their chapter they believed that there was not enough emphasis within meetings on helping members to move their companies’ forward. Instead, they reported that the emphasis in meetings have become more social and personal in nature.

The comments from the National President of the organization, Marsha Firestone, and her view of the organization is that these communities are not a support group or
networking group, as its primary purpose, but that the purpose of the organization is for the women to be able to grow their companies. Marsha’s comment illustrates how she believes that support should be secondary to the growth of the women president’s company that is a member.

Our primary goal—and I guess I want to be really clear about this—is to accelerate the growth of these businesses. It is not a support group, although clearly there is support that comes out of it, support in the business arena but that’s not the primary goal. The primary goal is the growth of these businesses and the next steps. Some of the next steps have to do with exit strategies, selling the company, buying other companies etc.

Marsha’s comments are supported by the stated mission of the organization:

[The] Women Presidents’ Organization, Inc. (“WPO”) is a non-profit 501(c)(6) organization formed to improve business conditions for women entrepreneurs, and to promote the acceptance and advancement of women entrepreneurs in all industries.

The WPO is the premier membership organization for women presidents & CEOs (and managing directors) of privately held, multi-million dollar companies. Through global, confidential and collaborative peer-learning groups, the WPO accelerates business growth, enhances competitiveness, and promotes economic security. It is the ultimate destination for successful women entrepreneurs. (http://www.womenpresidentsorg.com/wpos-mission, July 13, 2014).

Celia, the chapter chairwoman for both Chapters One and Two for the members that were interviewed, explained the purpose of the group as “highly spirited peer support with the goal being to grow, acquire another company or sell their company.” Her comments place support as the vehicle in which the women are able to enhance and grow their companies. Celia’s perspective on support and the role it plays in helping the women to feel empowered to enhance their organizations echoed what was reported by the majority of the women presidents interviewed. Those who reported that they were dissatisfied with the structure and were not gaining the benefits of membership for their organization may be experiencing a
lack of support. Furthermore, if the woman president is not forming or feeling left out of these deep relationships, it may result in the woman president not experiencing an impact on her identity as a woman president. It is also possible that the woman president is experiencing a negative impact on her identity development as a woman president as a result of not experiencing the deep relationships like their peers in the community.

Relationships with and between members are encouraged through the WPO organizational structure and are foundational for the women to feel a sense of accountability to themselves as well as to their other community members. The Sisterhood theme helps to explain why the women site support most frequently. The deep relationships they form within this community of practice become the basis for which the women’s identity as a woman president is formulated and further impacted as their involvement continues in the community of practice.

Theme 2: Skills—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”

The second main theme that presented in the data regarded skill acquisition and the implementation of new skills learned through a woman’s membership in the group. The skills that the women described ranged from technical skills to interpersonal/management skills, all needed for them to successfully run and grow their companies. Within the theme of Skills, there were three subthemes that were identified that help further explain this theme: business and technical skills acquisition, interpersonal skills acquisition, and skills implementation.
The skills the women described that they were in need of to be successful within their role as president they believed barriers existed to acquiring these skills or that they were left out of development opportunities where these skills were being taught or transferred. Although based on their personal experience, it is important to note, that the women are making assumptions that their male colleagues had the opportunity to learn or had access to skills that they did not. These assumptions and experiences bring to light their lived experience within their professional career was such that men were assumed as the norm as it pertains to leadership and presence within certain roles.

The first subtheme, business and technical skills acquisition, was attributed to references the women gave to the business and technical skills they acquired to help move their company forward. This includes hiring and firing skills, audit procedures, and implementing a new technology platform. This theme was present in a majority of the women and transcended the size of a company. For small companies, the women needed to acquire business and technical skills that supplemented the areas in which they did have employees to support those duties. For women who were in a growth period within their company, those women were able to attain business and technical skills that related to mergers and acquisitions to upgrading business systems related to growth.

Two examples best illustrate how the owners of the smaller member organizations can use the group to seek skill building in areas in which they are not staffed. Vera has been a member of the WPO for twelve years, and after retirement transitioned from being the senior vice president of a very large organization to the owner of a much smaller company in the restaurant sector. Going from one realm to the other, Vera realized that she did not have
the skill set to hire and fire. As she describes, she had a department that did that, and now she was responsible. Vera best describes how participation in the WPO during her transition to small business owner gave her access to women that could help her learn the new skills that she needed:

Well, then all of a sudden I’m in a small business. I don’t have a clue what small business is like, and I made tons of mistakes and they were wonderful. If I didn’t know how to get something done in some arena, I would go and I would say, “Okay.” I don’t know how to hire and fire people anymore because I had an HR person, so I got all kinds of really good advice whether I asked for it specifically or whether somebody else brought a problem up and then we talked about it. How to do a sales commission was one of the topics. I didn’t have that issue, but if I ever would it’s all laid out. Hiring people and also background checks, I didn’t have to do any of that stuff. Technical, needing to have a website, “Oh call so and so, they can do it for you and do it for you at a reasonable cost,” because now I don’t have the budget of a $300 million company. I have the budget of Vera taken out of her life savings to start a café. I don’t have a clue of what I’m doing. I was not in food service, I was not in retail. I had no desire to be in any of those and then all of a sudden I was. The advice that I got from the group or specifically from a couple of people about small business was invaluable. There is not a whole out there for those of us like [me], that if you don’t have WPO or you don’t have a friend who has been or is in small business, who can give you some handholding and some help because it’s been difficult in that respect.

Darcy’s experience has been somewhat similar; she actually sought out a group that could help her in regards to human resources issues that she have arisen as a business owner. Darcy describes:

So I was looking for a group that would have an HR component, would bring in some of the things that, I knew we’d never be able to hire an HR person. And I don’t even have a full—I’d say full-time that an attorney that you regularly, because every time as you know what it’s going to cost. So I was looking for that expertise to be brought in whether it was members of the group or because we bought in an outside facilitator.

Diane, an owner of an international consulting firm in the information technology field, has surpassed the $10 million revenue marker, which makes her eligible for
participation in the Platinum group as well as her local chapter. The Platinum chapter meets on a national basis four times a year. The knowledge and skills that she has been able to gain from those members national and international experience has helped her to acquire a smaller organization in England into her company as well as maintain relevancy with all of her business systems. Diane talks about those experiences:

Then, just, again because of the diverse businesses, having access to people that have different experiences than you that you trust is invaluable. So, I never have to go and Google anything, right? Look for anybody to do anything. I can always reach out to my network and say, “Hey. We’re going to put in a new HR system. What are you guys using? What battle scars do you have as a result of that?” or whatever you’re looking to do. Or I want to put in a professional service automation system, so asking people what recommendations they have, that kind of thing. So, it’s invaluable to just have those resources, and it’s not just a reference from a vendor, right? Which is far different than someone that’s like, “No, we’re using this, and we like it,” or whatever the case may be. So, that’s invaluable. Then, of course, the learning and the education is something that’s important for me to just continue to grow myself professionally.

The second subtheme observed in the Skill Building and Implementation category was the acquisition of interpersonal skills acquisition. This subtheme is described by references the women made to acquiring interpersonal skills required in their business, for example speaking in front of a large group or comfort with a leadership role and the responsibilities that come along with being the leader. As one of Robyn’s employees told her, she is just a different leader. Robyn continued to describe how participation in the group has helped her to develop her leadership skills, which has directly affected the relationship she has with her employees:

I think it’s more organic definitely. I was thinking about our conversation today and I thought one of the things that you would ask of course would be how has this changed your perspective in your own business and I would say that the upper level staff here who know about the group we’ve hosted the group here. For example, my public relations director, my marketing director.
Both of them have given me feedback, “You’ve changed. You’re a different leader today than you were two years ago.” My husband even acknowledges because in business together, we’ve grown. We’ve been in business together for almost 20 years.

In that time, because I was only 17 when we started. No, I’m just kidding. I was a little older than that. In that time, we have both evolved but I’ve experienced rapid evolution over the past 24 months or so. I attribute that to hearing in a safe environment my peers’ very personal business experiences where I would never have that opportunity. I would never have the opportunity to hear someone who’s running a business, explain that she’s had someone stealing and here’s how she found out and here’s what she did to take corrective action or someone who’s had an employee whose wife has been threatened by a domestic partner and how they dealt with that… Now, I feel like I have this whole encyclopedia that’s growing and building on a database of business experience and it gives me terrific clarity on … issues that either I have faced or similar issues I’ve heard about.

Queenie talked about an experience she had within her organization and how advice and learnings that she was able gain from her peers gave her the tools she needed to change an aspect of her leadership as well. Queenie was dealing with wanting to create an environment that is different for employees and wanted to treat them as “family.” However, there were employees who began to take advantage of the open environment, by not being accountable to a schedule. This started to create problems with workflow and having enough capacity to complete the work that needed done for clients. Queenie explained the situation and how she eventually had to create a more strict work environment to ensure that staff were available when needed to handle the workflow of the organization:

Some of it. Some of it. The one example I could give, two retreats ago we had a gal come in who taught us the one page business plan. I had been struggling with a couple of employees and essentially in this whole workshop session I had a moment of I need to stop being dictated to by this employees and I wrote it down. I also put it into my one page business plan where “Queenie is going to take control not the employees. Queenie is going to dictate the schedule, Queenie is going to dictate the workflow” not that I was going to micromanage. It was I was tired of them saying I'm coming in at this time and
leaving at that time or I'm working this many days a week or what ... Done, I was over it.

That gave me a boost of reality, and at that retreat I talked to a couple of the members about it and they are like, "Oh, yeah. We were over that. We've been there, done that and we'll never do that again." It's under our terms. That got me also thinking that "You know what? I value my employees but at the same point I'm paying them to do a job, they need to do that job." I don't need whining, I don't need drama, I don't need the personal stuff in the office, that's got to be left behind. We went through some change within the year and it's completely different atmosphere. Hopefully, it's working better. It is working better. We're not stressed out about work flow and all that.

The third subtheme under the main them of *Skill Acquisition and Implementation* is Implementation. This subtheme is exemplified by the women’s references made regarding changing elements of their management style or trying out new skills learned within the group. Some of the women discussed employing certain tactics that may be commonly referred to as masculine or feminine management techniques. The women shared how within this safe environment, they can discuss or “try-out” different ways of managing their employees. After they are able to try out these possible new ways for management—and if they receive positive feedback from their peers—they go back to their organization to implement. Others shared experiences related to how participation in the group related in tangible changes made within their organization or within themselves personally.

Queenie discussed how her experience in business had showed that men are able to make decisions faster than her and other women that she was surrounded by. By participating in the WPO, she found that the learnings she had attained from her peers allowed her to begin to make decisions more quickly. Queenie reflected on her experience and explained:

> We [women] have different thought processes. We're slow to react, men are fast to react but I will tell you through WPO I'm learning to react faster if that make sense. In other words, to make decisions faster and not going to labor it and not sit there and have to research.
I think having the resources of the women in general I can now pick up the phone and say "Here's my situation" and I can in general know who might be close in experience to that situation that I could pick up the phone and call them and say "Hey, what do you think?" "You need to hire that vendor. You need to go here and talk to this vendor and get a second opinion." It's helping me make decisions a lot easier. You know what, if you make a mistake "Okay, whatever" it's not going to kill you. May cost you a little bit, it's not going to kill you.

For example, Sammy shared that base on the structure and operation of WPO meetings, she implemented changes within internal meetings to make them more productive:

I also think I've learned how to manage or facilitate a meeting from being in the meetings, and how to cut out some of the chatter, and get to the salient points that need to be addressed, and make sure that we get to an end and a conclusion or go away with actionable items. I guess it's professionalized my business meetings.

Sammy’s changes that were implemented because of participation in the WPO are more tactical, whereas the changes that Lindsey discussed are changes that she has made within herself. Lindsey explained that participation in the WPO gave her the confidence needed to be comfortable speaking in front of a group:

The biggest personal gain I think would have been the ability to speak in front of other people and/or present. I tend to be a little bit shy, I could blush, whatever, and being in a group of such strong women, it pulled me out, and I got more comfortable in different settings. That's probably one of my biggest takeaways from working with the girls.

Participation in the WPO allows for the women to seek peer support to gain the needed skills that allow them to fill in any knowledge gaps they may have in moving their organization forward. With the addition of these new skills, they are able to make necessary changes within their organization or themselves to grow their own company and in turn it moves the community of practice forward. Having access to a women-only peer support
community where members can go for help in learning new skills has become an invaluable resource for the majority of the members. This has especially been true for the members who are owners and presidents of smaller companies. The information and skills they are learning from their peers has empowered them to be able to solve the problem internally. The result being that the women presidents in many instances have not had to seek outside help, which could be costly to the woman’s company. Gaining new skills set needed for the challenges they are facing within their career has not only affected their company and the WPO community of practice but also positively impacted their identity as a woman president.

Theme 3: Role Negotiation—“It’s your family, it’s your company, and it’s your husband.”

The third major theme identified from the interview data was Role Negotiation, which was exemplified by comments from the women presidents that described their role within their company, balancing that with their own families as well as where they saw their place within the group. Two subthemes were identified as descriptors and to better define the meaning of this theme: balance and the role women feel they play within the WPO.

The first subtheme under Role Negotiation was identified as balance, recognized by the references the women made to the balancing of work, family, gender and title of woman president. The women discussed how, within the environment of an all-women group, they can discuss finding solutions for feeling guilty and apologizing because they cannot be everything to everyone at all times.

Vera who began her membership over twelve years ago, at the time was serving as the senior vice president of a large manufacturing company in the male-dominated
automotive industry. Vera talked about how the group gave her the outlet that she needed to seek advice on how to balance her flourishing career with her family life:

Well, [ATC] is in a male dominated industry and I had no female counterparts. Not just at [ATC] but in the entire industry. I was really anomaly. When I would go to functions, business functions and business meetings, because it was a boy’s network, it was really hard. It was very difficult for them to even begin to think in terms of the kind of issues that faced me, not just in the business world but also trying to run a family. I averaged three days a week of travelling. They just didn’t get it. Most of them were the higher executives, they were the owners of the company and they all had wives at home doing the things that I did after the kids went to bed.

It was really hard for them. WPO gave me—even though it was small—it gave me a group of women that I wasn’t competing with that had the same issues that I did. That was the place to vent and know that it was not going to get out of that room. It was a place to ask for advice. A lot of it we took from each other. It was a wonderful support group, it still is, but especially for those of us- and this was in the ‘70s and ‘80s- it was tough for those of us who we decided to try and work especially in a male dominated industry. It was not easy for women who were out working no matter what the industry was at that time, especially engines and transmissions stuff don’t equate with women, women stuff.

Vera’s children are now all grown, but her experiences now help other younger members like Sharon. Sharon’s experience is similar and shares that the advice that she has access to from the WPO has helped her to manage many different aspects of her home and family life. Sharon explained:

There’s a lot of women there that are maybe five, ten, fifteen years older than me so their kids are grown, and the advice I get from them on that level as far [20:00] as how you juggle a lot of things. I can go into a panic about something because right now I'm worried what do people do about summer school? School's out in the summer what happens then? So they said well you check into summer camps, and gave me a whole long list of things. You look into Nannies, you call the school, OSU, and it's like oh well that's great. So that's been helpful.

The other thing that has helped me personally there are a number women there that understand that they don't have to do everything personally, let alone business wise but personally. They have people that clean their house, and
they have people that cook their food in some cases. There's one or two that are doing so well that they have a house manager, and coming from a very regular life if not below regular that is not even on the radar you just did it. My mom cleaned the house, did the laundry whatever and just did it there wasn't anything about that. I had brought that up I've got all this stuff to do blah blah blah, and someone said, "Well why do you do that?" I'm like, "Who's going to do it?" Well you could hire some help.

Oh, it was being around people like that gave you permission to do things that would help you out in that regard. Because otherwise I think again, as women we feel like we have to do everything, and a lot of women thing that they're the best one to do it too. But you find out that if you hire a really good cleaning lady for example you know what she's better at it than me. You come home and the house is clean and it's amazing. So again, it's not so unusual to get that sort of help.

What was really interesting I had seen a woman speak at a well an annual thing [meeting], and a young woman raised her hand she goes, "Well how do you get all this done? How do you balance all of this, how do you whatever?" She's like, "You hire help," and she's like, "Well what do you mean?" She's like, "Listen I make enough money where I don't have to clean my house, okay, and that's where you need to get." Okay, well then I feel pretty good now. If you get to a certain point where you're working that hard you do have to get help, and hopefully the money follows, that it's not an issue. But after I found out based on the size of my house which is nothing outrageous it was actually really cheap to get my house cleaned. I felt, oh awesome, all right, check this off the list.

Robyn shared that because of the advice that she has received, she now feels confident about how her role as a business owner impacts her role as a mother. She explained:

It’s help[s] me also solidify personally for my children that I want them to recognize me not only as a mom but as a business owner. I think that in my parents’ model although my parents are bad example, in my generation’s model, the dad was the business guy, the mom was all things social and that’s how life went. Although, we’ve all tried to shake it...

We all do because it feels like naturally the mom stuff is going to be the kid and how you’re going to get them and blah, blah, blah. Even personally, it’s allowed me to really take confidence in my role as a business owner. “Hey, you guys. I, you know what—I’m not going to be at the Valentine’s party. I love you, and I’ll give you a little valentine when I get home, but I’m not
... going to be there because I have a meeting and my job is important to me.”
It’s not that I divorce myself certainly of my kids’ needs, but it’s allowed me to put in perspective what is really important. That has helped personally.

As Vera, Sharon, and Robyn shared their experience in balancing the child aspect of their family life, Diane shared her experience on the council that she has received from participation in the group has helped her to deal with balancing the relationship she has with her husband. Diane talked about how having the WPO as an outlet to work through and deal with the issues she faces at work, she does not have to take work home. At home she can concentrate on being a wife and mother. Diane shared:

Well, I mean, so really when I come home, I try not to specifically talk about work all the time, right? Because it becomes consuming. So, while there are certain things that you would discuss with your spouse or even I would discuss with my business partner, I guess, but there’s just … When you get home, that’s when you have to … You get into mom mode and whatever else that you have to do. So, you have to just kind of set it aside and say, “I’m going to … I’m going to go. I got to make dinner. I got to get my kid here. I got to do homework,” whatever those things are. You don’t really have the time to sit and reflect on those things…

You’d be running errands or whatever other home life things that you have to do, so you just wouldn’t take the time to do that. So, I think that’s a really good … It’s a good outlet, and it’s therapy because women get it. We all feel the same way. We’re all pretty much wired the same way, I mean, with some variation. But, we’re going to kind of feel the same way. We have the same emotions and so forth that are just God given, and it’s just the way it is, and it’s just some of us manage those personality traits better or worse than others, and it’s just kind of the reality of it.

The other thing is, also, is that there’s a lot of women that also have family businesses. So, their spouses or children might be in the business as well, and so you might be really super frustrated with your spouse or a child that you have in the business or whatever, and you don’t really have an outlet to discuss that. So, that’s a … I think that’s important. Then, the other thing is that it’s very different getting perspective from an unbiased third party, right? Because if I go home, and I say something, and my spouse disagrees with me, and you kind
of dig your heels in and say, “Well, you know, that’s just because you’re trying to be … You don’t want to agree with me or whatever.”

From the women’s perspective, participation in the WPO has provided them with the necessary support needed throughout their careers when they were experiencing issues with balancing the demands as a woman president with being a mother and spouse/partner. More than that, the women and the monthly meetings give them the opportunity to gain the perspective of their peers on how they dealt with similar family issues. The women can then use the experiences of their peers to take action on the issues that they are facing in balancing their families. This has allowed the women permission to seek help outside of the home to balance all aspects of home and be at peace with the help. This includes but is not limited to hiring a nanny, enrolling their children in after-school or summer programs, and/or hiring a cleaning person. The women reported that the result of the additional help not only made them a better parent and/or spouse, but also a better boss and women president.

The second subtheme in regards to role negotiation that presented itself in the data was how the women negotiated the WPO environment itself and what they believed is their role within the group. In addition, the women made reference to how long it took the women to feel as if they were a fully engaged member (i.e., six months, two years, etc.). The women discussed that they needed to feel a sense of trust and confidentiality among their fellow members before being comfortable enough to participate in the conversation or ask for advice on personal business matters.

Robyn reported that for her, she did not feel like she was a fully integrated member until she had been a member for six to nine months. In addition, Robyn explained that the retreat was really the place where she realized what her place would be in the group. She
revealed that based on her upbringing, she hoped that she could bring a perspective of how
decisions that are made would affect the hourly wage worker. Robyn discusses her ah-ha
moment where she realized she was a member of the group and that her experience is just as
valuable as other members’ experiences:

There’s a huge Ah-ha moment about six months in for me where I said, “Okay.” I’m one of them. I’m not an outsider who needs help as much as I up here who can offer as much as I’m getting. That was the unexpected benefit. The expected benefit has been exactly what I thought and that is that I’ve been able to glean terrific wisdom from their experiences. It holds an aspirational element for me.

Robyn, later in the interview, recounted her first retreat, as they were sitting around the campfire on their first evening and how that impacted how she viewed her role in the community of practice:

All of these women, every one of them, said, “Well, you know, my dad was a doctor, my mom was a teacher, and I always said I was going to be a doctor because I was going to be just like my dad…” It’s more of that and all of these people were somehow or someway they came from an environment that set them up for an expectation that their lifestyle would be similar to the one that they have today. My background is blue collar, and well, as [it] went around the circle, it started dawning on me and my heart started pounding. I thought, it’s going to get to me, and I’m going to say, “I thought I was going to get married at the Coon Hunters building Raccoon Hunters lodge and I figured I might be a teacher or a nurse.” That was a training that I could get in four years and get a job right away because my dad was an unemployed factory worker most of my childhood.

We were on welfare. My mom was unemployed. Nobody in my family had gone to college. I have to tell and I don’t know. This is off the WPO topic but for me, as that sort of tapes that are playing in my head and it’s getting around to me. I started to breathe a little heavy because I’m like, I don’t want to tell these women that. This is going to make no sense. This is crazy but then I said it out loud and everybody got quiet and they were like, “You were on welfare?” I said, “Oh sister, we were homeless for a while. We were like you have no idea.” And they said, “Well, how?” then of course, all these questions are coming because nobody else had that journey.
All these other ladies have had this middle class upbringing or upper middle class upbringing. They knew they were going to go to college. It was just a matter of picking off this big shelf. Here is everything you could do in life. You get to pick. I didn’t have that. They started asking me all these questions and the more I answered and I’m pretty open about that background anyway. Anybody who would ask me about my background, I’m pretty open, but how they started answering, I started thinking to myself, “I am where they are, and I came from a very different path. I belong here and they’ve got stuff to learn from me.” Because they assumed success, I didn’t. I didn’t come from this assumption of success.

I came from the assumption of poverty. All of a sudden, this light goes on and I remember the precise moment for me that I went to bed that night going, “Not only do I believe I belong here but I’m going to help them. I’m going to help them understand if nothing else. I’m going to help them understand their low-wage workers like I’m going to help them understand so many other factors. I’m going to help them understand bankruptcy. I’m going to help them understand.”

Carol had a different perspective. Carol became a member eight years ago and was one of the founding members of Chapter Two. As the chapter continues to grow and move toward a full roster of twenty members, Carol describes seeing her role as changing. During the time of our interview, Carol was in the process of moving from being an active chapter member to a member-at-large. Carol’s explained:

In fact, I just made a choice to change my membership to a Member-At-Large, to be quite frank, only because I just, after eight to nine years, we've really gotten to know everybody... Some are just getting in and finding out what it's all about, so it gets reiterated. Others, we've been together from the very beginning and we want to see change... It's really being able to work on my business and not in the business. Taking that day each month... It used to be with WPO that I could spend the time on it, but I think with a dedicated group, almost like a sorority, you already know so much about each other after all these years that there's not much more you can... Sometimes the same issues just keep coming up with certain people and that's okay, but they're still dealing with it. Others, they moved on.
Carol’s comments summarize what many of the women discussed in regards to their role within the community; it is ever changing and developing based on the needs of individual members and the goals of the community.

Understanding *Role Negotiation* theme and the part it plays in their development as a president is found to be dependent on how they are able to balance their personal life with their work life. The women bring up topics that are specific to the issues that they are encountering as a woman president. Topics the women presidents sought support on included balancing the demands of motherhood with work demands and how to manage household demands. At the root of many of the conversations was a sense of guilt the women were feeling because “they could not be all things to all people.” The women presidents used the advice and support that they received in negotiating their role as a wife and mother with being a woman president to seek permission from their peers in the decisions that they made.

In addition, the role that they play or negotiate within the group becomes integral in the relationships they form and their connection and continued sense of connection to the community. For those women who feel as if are no longer benefitting from participation and that they no longer play a role in the community, the question could be posed if there are other measures the community should take to try to maintain those members who feel as if their participation is not of benefit to them and their development as a president. Another possibility is that long-term members may have organizations that are in a different stage, such as succession planning that may require different expertise, support and guidance that isn’t applicable to women’s companies that are in a growth phase. These members’
professional experience and institutional knowledge should not be lost just because their business orientation is changing. This understanding regarding the transitioning needs of women presidents could present an opportunity for the organization; potentially offering another type of chapter or stage in membership for women who are in a more advanced position in their career.

*Theme 4: Self-Assurance—*“Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment…”*

The fourth and final theme that was observed from interacting with members of the WPO community of practice was the theme that was identified as *Self-Assurance*. This theme is most accurately described by the quote from Robyn, “women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment…” The Self-Assurance theme is described by four sub-themes, confidence, validation and affirmation, confidentiality and credibility and legitimacy. This theme is focused on the comments that the women made in regards to the changes that they have experienced within themselves to run a successful company, balance family and embrace being a woman president.

The first sub-theme identified as a part of the *Self-Assurance* subtheme was confidence and refers to the references the woman made to a change in their confidence level and being able to more fully embrace their role as a woman president. The women discussed that because of this increased confidence they believed that they could make decisions in relation to their company, family, and personally.
Confidence was the most reported sub-theme in the *Self-Assurance* category. The women who reported that their confidence was impacted in a positive way by their participation in the WPO community, were very forthcoming and repeated it throughout the interview. This was especially true in Diane, Sharon, and Robyn’s interviews.

Diane discussed how her confidence was increased in relationship to the potential growth of her company. The women that she is now surrounded by provide her with a sense of reassurance that has directly affected her confidence as a business woman. Diane reflected by saying:

I think it [being a member of the WPO] certainly gives you a lot more confidence, I think, in that when you are in a group with businesses that are much bigger than yours and you get to know these women that … But, when you’re in a business or you’re in an organization with women that have started from scratch just like you and built businesses that are far bigger than yours, it certainly gives you the confidence and the assurance that that’s possible that you can get to their size.

It really forces you to … It doesn’t force you. It really … It’s just, it’s so empowering and energizing to be around people like that, and have access to them, and recognize that that is a possibility for you, that you can … you can get there … So, I don’t know. In terms of defining that, I definitely think it helps. You have a lot more confidence in who you are and feel stronger about that. I tend to … I tend to … Again, because, as I said before, you’re just so afraid of failure, so I tended to really not be, in the past, as confident about, I guess, my position and just … You just become very self-deprecating, I think. When you’re in a group like that, people kind of call you out on that and say, “You know, really, you’ve done a lot of great things. Why would you put yourself down?” or whatever. So, it does help give you a sense of confidence that you probably wouldn’t have otherwise … at least I wouldn’t.

Sharon describes how the confidence that she has gained through her participation can been seen in all aspects of her professional life including situations that arise outside of the office…
I don't know if it's been said out right. I definitely feel different. I definitely feel more confident. I feel most days in control, and I feel that's true because there's been many things that I've invited to participate in, and those are things that are government related, chamber related things like that. I don't feel nervous about going, speaking up, standing toe to toe with the boy presidents. Because I feel my thinking is different. There's definitely more of a confidence level to it, and how I present myself in those sort of situations, and I think that is also reflected in my day to day work too. I think people do respect and look up to me. Whereas I think if I were the coworker and had that coworker mentality I would not have that.

Robyn mentioned how participation has impacted her confidence as a leader the most throughout her interview. Robyn articulated her newfound confidence by saying:

Then it’s given me as I said, confidence. I wouldn’t underestimate the confidence piece. The confidence piece is huge because I went into it believing it was going to be a self-serving. I was just going to be extracting and I was just going to sit there and absorb and not radiate back and I’ve been able to radiate back a lot more.

Now, sitting in a meeting and having women look to you and say, “Robyn, could you tell me, I have a question about and I remember another meeting where you mentioned… is phenomenal, right? It’s I mean you set your children up for that.” I set my children up for experiences and I’ve always been a big believer in set them up for success and then let them do it on their own and that’s tremendous growth. It’s working really well with my four kids. You don’t think about yourself that way. I’ve never thought about setting myself up for leadership position and sometimes, we’ve been a company that the duty and obligation you own to an employee is far different than a peer-to-peer connection.

There’s no way to achieve that. No matter how great a relationship you have with an employee or a partner. There’s an obligation and a duty there that gets in the way of truly being able to connect and lean in.

The second subtheme identified in the Self-Assurance theme was Validation and Affirmation. Validation and affirmation subtheme was identified based on references the women made to how the participation in an all-women group and the relationships that were forged with these women resulted in them being able to attain the positive praise and
validation that they had been lacking in their professional lives. This affirmation from peers resulted in an increased sense of self and ability to do her job.

Sammy accounted that without the validation and affirmation that she has received from the women in her chapter of the WPO, she may have left the workforce because she felt so isolated. Her isolation was the result of the differences she saw in the way that she dealt with situations versus her male counterparts. Sammy described the impact of this validation and affirmation she has received:

Professionally, honestly, sometimes I think I would of quit. I would have just felt like I was this person that was the only one who struggled with both sides of my personality, and that watching how men handle things. They just kind of put them away, and I would just lug them around with me, thinking that I was the only one probably I would of probably just said that there's something wrong with me I'm not good for this. Whereas I think I got perspective, and said no, this is a good thing if you use it right and it is.

It's honestly, I think women in many respects are better leaders because they see problems from different perspectives, and come at it from a different way. I also think they can juggle a lot of things at the same time. Learning how they dealt with their boards or their partners helps me to realize that Rome wasn't built in a day, and sometimes you have to learn to get along…

Robyn’s example came from when she presented a case study regarding her business to her group. The purpose of presenting the case study to her fellow members was to seek the groups input regarding her company’s name and brand identity. What she received was the validation and affirmation regarding her brand. This allowed her to focus her energy on growing an aspect of her company and move forward with acquiring another company under her current brand and know that she is communicating exactly what she needs to in the community. Robyn recounted that experience:
That’s exactly what I need to do and then there are other issues about which I again, it goes back to that lacking confidence. I worry about our brand. “Is our brand messaging on target?” and I showed them examples of our brand and they know my brand in the marketplace and they put me at ease. “Oh, your brand is just fine. Quit over thinking it.” The name of our company is [Blake]’s where country music starts. “Does it put in somebody’s mind country music?” “No, that’s silly. You say what you are and your title, you’re auctioneers and appraisers. This is the perfect logo. There’s nothing wrong with it.” They helped me identify what we were over thinking and what the strengths we weren’t playing to enough …

Sharon’s comments most succinctly described this idea of validation and affirmation described by the women. Sharon said:

To then suddenly step up and say you know what I am the boss here, and here's how it's going to be. It's again, getting that permission to do so. Because they're doing it, and they're telling you it works, and this is going to make your business better, and then you'd be brave enough to try it and then it works. But it's a little scary stuff to step on initially.

This sense of validation that the women are able to experience through their participation in the community of practice has impacted various aspects of the women’s career, business and personal life. This ability to receive this type of validation allows the women to take a position of leadership and feel more confident that they are going to be successful because their peers have used these techniques and been successful in their businesses. The women attribute this level of honesty that they receive to only to the close relationships that they have formed with the other members of their group, but also confidentiality. The women know that the issues and difficulties that they are sharing will be held in the strictest of confidence amongst fellow members; confidentiality was identified as the third sub-theme of the Self-Affirmation theme.

The third subtheme as a part of this theme is Confidentiality and is identified by references made as to how the woman discussed the concept of confidentiality and the impact
that it makes on the conversation within their meetings. The woman felt confident sharing issues they were struggling with making it a “safe place for the hard truth.”

With Carol’s transition to member-at-large:

I think the big thing I take away is confidentiality and being able to open up on any topic and know it’s going to be not judged, but supported and maybe even shared and understood. That’s huge because you don’t have that opportunity. If someone has an issue they can take to a lawyer, they will ... Or an accountant, they will ... Or a doctor, they will ... But when it comes to something that’s more about feelings or it’s a mixed emotion or it’s a combination of "Hey, I've got an issue here. My husband is my partner, my partner is my husband, and we're 24/7 of our life together. Can I just share this and let you guys know how I'm thinking and what I'm doing?" And it was "Yes". It was an open forum to say "Hey, let it out. Let's share. Let's see what's going on". I've seen others that just ... There's no place to go to talk about that. You certainly can't talk about that to your employees and sometimes you can't talk about it to your partner. Here's a group that really gets it and understands it and is willing to take the time to listen.

Darcy’s comments associated confidentiality within the group with the length of time she knew the women. For Darcy, it was about six months into her membership before she felt the information that she shared with the group would be held in confidence. Darcy shared:

I think it gets, it takes a while to know who the other players are in there, and it wasn’t matter of a trust, you want to know that you have complete, even though you see it in your guidelines but confidence in there. And that takes a while to build, but I don't know, I’d say within six months you know, because again a big part of what you’re doing is sharing what’s going on so.

The guideline that Darcy is referring to comes from the Lowe Foundation’s Facilitator’s Roundtable Manual. The guidelines for the facilitator to follow place the importance of confidentiality at the top of list in regards to the ground rules for the roundtable’s operations. In addition, confidentiality is the first item and the last item on each
of the roundtable’s agenda. The Manual further states how the facilitator to address confidentiality to the members of the roundtable:

Given the highly sensitive nature of material discussed in roundtable sessions, every meeting should begin and close with a reminder of each member’s personal commitment to confidentiality—Ground Rule #1—a precondition of roundtable membership. A confidentiality reminder may be as simple as stating, “As always, please remember that what is said in the room stays in the room.” The use of such a casual reference to this most serious of issues is in no way intended to diminish its importance, rather it is sufficient only if the vital importance of confidentiality has already been stressed at some point during member orientation, including ramifications for infractions (p.20).

The concept of confidentiality as a part of the foundation of the group gives the women a sense of security when they choose to present issues they are facing in their organizations. The women also talked about confidentiality in regards to the organizations guidelines that do not allow for any group to contain more than one company from a particular industry. This non-compete clause and the sense of confidentiality associated with it was identified as the groundwork for the beginning of how many of the relationships formed within the group. The support that the women were able to form based on confidentiality has lead them to successes within their organizations. These successes have led to a sense of Self-Assurance and creditability or legitimacy in their field’s larger industry.

The fourth and final subtheme identified in this theme was Creditability/ Legitimacy. Within this subtheme, comments were categorized as Self-Assurance: Creditability/ Legitimacy when referencing how membership within the organization added creditability and legitimacy for them personally as well as their company within the marketplace, especially with male counterparts.
Queenie’s comments best exemplified this theme. She discussed that within the health care field, it was mostly a male-dominated industry and that her ability to grow her company to a level where she is eligible for membership in the WPO, backed by her three years of membership and the relationships that she has built within the membership, gave her legitimacy in her marketplace and the community:

I almost think it's giving me credibility [in] the public. I think people are looking at me differently and taking me more seriously, sounds odd but it's almost that it put me at a level where my competitors are finally taking me seriously now as well. I will tell you in my industry it has for years been very heavily weighted in the male population or dominated by males. I would say the managing partners or the Presidents of similar companies are males, it's very unusual when you have females pop up as the lead. I have credibility, I guess.

The sense of legitimacy that the women and their businesses have gained because of their participation has led to growth individually and within the women’s companies. Legitimacy and the growth it is leading to for their companies are at the heart of the WPO nationally. This finding from the participants supports the purpose of the organization while also

The *Self-Assurance* theme and the subthemes that supported the theme was the least frequently observed in the interviews. Also it was observed that when these instances were mentioned by the CoP members *Self-Assurance* was dependent on the other variables (themes) being present. Women who expressed an increased sense of *Self-Assurance* based on their learning and how they have been able to apply that in their lives seem to be at the center of the organization and are satisfied with the overall operation of the community of practice.

*Conclusion*
Through this series of interviews an exploration was completed regarding how participants identified how their identity was impacted by participation in the WPO an all-women, all-president community of practice. From the collection of interviews, four main themes were identified as aspects of their identity that is shaped by participation in this CoP. The four main themes identified were: Theme 1: Sisterhood—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network;” Theme 2: Skills—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”; Theme 3: Role Negotiation—“It’s your family, it’s your company, and it’s your husband;” Theme 4: Self Assurance—“Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment…” This information assisted in formulating an understanding of the ways in which the women participants’ identity has been impacted by participation in the community of practice. In addition, the women revealed the factors present that influenced how each of these elements of her identity developed or were influenced through her participation in this community of practice. The information gained from these women has helped to build a better understanding around the formation of identity through participation in a community of practice, the purpose of this study and will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Identity formation may be a critical component to the behavior and role one undertakes in a leadership position. Our work life and the influence work has on our identity is carried into our personal lives, from our home to our communities (Wenger, 1998). For professional women, who are striving to access higher level positions in their careers, there is less information available as to how women can develop their identity as a woman president. This qualitative case study develops an understanding of how participation in an all-women community of practice might impact a woman’s identity as a president.

The research for this study was conducted with members of one of two chapters of the Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO) in a mid-sized city of a midwestern state. The WPO is a chapter based international organization whose purpose is to help women presidents, women entrepreneurs and women managing directors through peer learning to advance their organizations. The chapter structure is the most common form of membership in the WPO and is limited to 20 members per chapter. Chapter membership requires that a woman have some form of ownership and is the managing partner or president by title of a million-dollar or larger organization. Members must come from noncompeting organizations, and all members are required to sign a confidentiality agreement. For established chapters, members are asked to apply after being selected by the current membership (Women Presidents’ Organization, 2014). During the initial period of data
collection, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of all-female communities of practice. A total of thirteen interviews were conducted; eleven of the thirteen interviews were used for data analysis.

To understand how the identity of women presidents is shaped through participation, one overarching research question and seven supporting questions provided the framework for the inquiry.

1. How is a woman’s identity as a president influenced by her membership in an all-women, all-president community of practice?
   a. How do members of an all-women community of practice participate and engage in learning?
   b. How does gender inform the organization’s formation; the practices of the group; the content of the knowledge transferred; the manner in which learning takes place; and the group’s self-defined goals/ outcomes?
   c. How do newcomers learn the norms and practices of the group?
   d. What are the power dynamics within the group that facilitate or hinder the progression of a new member from a newcomer to an old-timer?
   e. What facilitates what the learning topic is within a meeting? What conditions precipitate? Who selects the topics to be discussed?
   f. How do community members incorporate their learning into their personal and professional lives?

The research inquiry resulted in a body of data that was used to demonstrate how a women’s identity was impacted by participation in the CoP. Aspects of identity discussed by
the presidents were sorted into four main themes each having several supporting sub-themes. The four main themes found were as follows:

- **Theme 1: Sisterhood:** “It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network;”

- **Theme 2: Skills** - “All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”

- **Theme 3: Role Negotiation** - “It’s your family, it’s your company and it’s your husband;”

- **Theme 4: Self Assurance** - “Women face different challenges in business than men do…it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment…”

The remainder of this chapter will explore the findings and interpretations of the data, conclusions, offer recommendations for adult learning professionals and researchers, provide reflections from the researcher, and discuss ideas for future research that have arose from this study.

**Findings and Interpretations**

**Theme 1: Sisterhood**—“It is nice to have a good ole girls’ network”

The most prevalent theme across all of the interviews was the notion of *sisterhood*. Sisterhood centered on how the women’s participation in the WPO gave them not only access to other women that are in a similar situation but also the support that they needed to move their company’s forward. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified, which include: (a) relationships with and between members, (b) organizational structure, and (c) accountability. Patterns within the *Sisterhood* theme dealt mainly with how the formation of
deep relationships with other members of their community has impacted their identity as president.

The members identified that the deep and lasting relationships with their fellow members impacted their identity as a women president. The structure of this community of practice gives way to the sharing of lived experiences from each of the women within their presidency. As the women become more comfortable within the community of practice they begin to form an identity within the group as well as in their practice as a women president outside of the group. Finally, deep relationships built between members along with the sense of accountability that they feel to one another must be present for a participant’s identity to be impacted from the participation in a community of practice.

Theme 2: Skills—“All the while you can have side conversations and pick some people out and say ‘I need to talk to you about this issue.’ ‘Here’s my situation, can you help me?’”

The second theme identified was the Skills theme which focused on how through participation in the WPO, the women could utilize their peers experience to acquire and learn new skills that they could identify as necessary for the issues facing their company. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified. The subthemes identified as part of “Skills,” include: (a) business and technical skills acquisition, (b) interpersonal skills acquisition, and (c) implementation. Theme 2 is dependent on Theme 1, as the relationships the women build within the group and the organizational structure of the meeting lent itself to opportunities for the women to acquire new skills. Skill acquisition and the implementation of new skills help the women to further their development as a women president.

126
The acquisition of Skills is linked to Theme 1: Sisterhood. The women expressed that the acquisition of skills was dependent upon the presence of deep meaningful relationships. The women further explained that they must feel that they are in a safe place among their peers to open up and indicated needing to acquire certain skills to further their company. The new skills acquired give the women the confidence they need to implement those skills for the purpose of positively impacting their company. The acquisition of business, technical skills and interpersonal skills and the implementation of those new skills significantly impact the identity of the women president. Essentially, with the implementation of new skills within their company it is a renegotiation of her role within her company and the group; shifting her personal identity thus her identity as a women president.

*Theme 3: Role Negotiation—“It's your family, it's your company, and it's your husband”*

The third theme identified from the interview data was Role Negotiation – balancing home and family life and how they have negotiated their membership within the group. This theme contained two subthemes: (a) balance and (b) role within the WPO. The results seen from the theme Role Negotiation display the complexities a women president faces in regards to balancing all aspects of her life, including the relationships that are formed by participating in the WPO CoP. The results show us that there is still a dominant culture within business that is dominated by a masculine perspective. However, the women who are a part of the WPO CoP have created a discourse and an environment where the women can seek input on how to navigate any masculine practices that are inhibiting their growth. The knowledge and power that has been created within the group raises questions regarding how other women can gain access.
Theme 4: Self Assurance—“Women face different challenges in business than men do...it’s nice to have a non-threatening environment...”

The fourth and final theme is described as Self-Assurance. From the interview data, the Self-Assurance theme was supported by four subthemes: (a) confidence, (b) validation and affirmation, (c) confidentiality, and (d) credibility and legitimacy. The data for this theme focused on changes that the women saw occurring within themselves as well as within their companies based on their participation in the WPO.

Theme 4: Self-Assurance, is most closely aligned to a member’s perception of herself as a women president and is dependent upon all the other themes or aspects of identity. Through participation in the WPO CoP, women presidents are able to facilitate the on-going development of their identity as a president. Having a sense of connectedness and the opportunity to gain from peers needed skills to be more prepared for the challenges that they face, the women become more confident and self-assured that they are able to embrace the tile and identity that comes with being a women president.

Conclusions

From the findings of this research there are three main conclusions: 1.) Deep and meaningful relationships are integral to the formation of a community of practice; 2.) Single-gendered communities of practice have an impact on identity for women participants that is different than a mixed gendered community of practice; and 3.) Role identity development within a single-gendered professional community of practice is the result of the interaction and interconnection of multiple identities which are socially constructed. The conclusions show that through participation in a community of practice, the development of a women’s professional role identity development is complex. For her to be successful in her role, her
identity is comprised of many factors. These factors include the balance between work and family and business, technical and interpersonal skills; all of these facets that are required for her to be successful in her role. The conclusions help to connect prior research regarding the formation of communities of practice with specific ways in which identity is shaped through participation in a CoP. Additionally, the conclusions demonstrate how other aspects of their identity are developed or adapted from participation in this single-gendered professionally based community of practice. The conclusions are illustrated in Figure 5.1 and discussed further below.
Conclusion 1: Practice based – professional role identity communities of practice should provide an environment that is non-competitive, confidential and sustained length of membership to facilitate sustained mutual relationships and a member’s identity within a community of practice.

The sustained mutual relationships that are formed as a part of each woman’s involvement help her to construct her identity as a member within the community. The formation of these deep relationships is dependent upon a confidential and non-competitive environment that has been established and is maintained over a sustained period of time.
Based on the findings of this study it is recommended that non-competitive environment, confidentiality and sustained length of membership should be added to the list of analysis used to evaluate if a group is operating as a practice based – professional role identity development community of practice. Wenger (1998) proposed fourteen identifiers used to analyze if a group is operating as a community of practice:

1. Sustained mutual relationships
2. Shared ways of engaging in interactions
3. Rapid flow of information
4. Absence of introductory conversation
5. Quick setup of problems to be discussed at meetings
6. Substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belongs
7. Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
8. Mutually defining identities
9. The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
10. Specific tools, representation and other artifacts exist within the group and are defined/ created by the group
11. Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
12. Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new types of shortcuts
13. Certain styles recognized as displaying membership
14. A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world (pp. 125–126)
Confidentiality, non-competitive environment and significant length of membership was not indicators that Lave and Wenger (1991) or Wenger (1998, 2006, 2009) discuss as needing to be present for a practice – based professional role identity development community of practice to form. This research and the empirical evidence compiled from this research study, confidentiality, non-competitive environment and the length of membership were found to be important to the professional role identity formation of the individuals within an established CoP. In addition, the concept of confidentiality, non-competitive environment and the length of membership was also not a part of the research reviewed regarding teachers or nurses (Sim, 2006; Gomez & Rico, 2007; Chinn, 2006; Booth et al., 2007; Tolson et al., 2005; Andrew et al., 2009).

The women participants in this study indicated that knowing the information they shared within or even outside of meetings with other members would remain confidential was important. In addition since there are no competitors that are permitted as members within the chapter the women do not have to worry about disclosing something specific to their industry. The structure of the WPO which includes a requirement of confidentiality and non-competitive business entities lends itself to the formation of deep relationships. The deep relationships that are formed gave women a sense of safety and security that promoted the desire to become a fully participating member of the group. Their membership identity is foundational to the other aspects of development that occur as a part of membership in the community.

Wenger (1998, 2004, 2009) and Handley, Sturdy, Finham and Clark (2006), discuss that “taking part” in a community of practice coupled with a sense of belonging to the
community is how a member develops their identity within the group. Being able to identify as a member of the community is progressive. New members start on the periphery, only participating to a certain extent in the practice of the group (Handley, et al., 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As the member becomes more confident in the practice of the group and their knowledge of the practice they move to full membership (Handley, et al., 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This progression in membership was also noted by the WPO members, with most of them citing that it took between six to nine months for them to feel as if they were a full member of the WPO community. This understanding of full membership also encourages a sense of commitment to the other members of the group as well as to the community itself, as found in this research study (Handley, et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998). Members of this particular professional role identity development community of practice have an average membership of over eight years. This sense of belonging fostered by confidentiality, non-competitive environment and length of membership encourages deep and meaningful relationships and fosters members’ identity within the community.

Conclusion 2: Membership composition in a professional role identity development community of practice has an impact on the topics that are raised and discussed within the community.

The members of the professional role identity development community of practice who participated in this study were all women. The women, if not for the environment of this community of practice, report that they would not be able to seek input and support about issues they experience that are specific to being a woman professional. The women
address issues of work and family that they reported they were not able to do in other mix
gendered professional development groups.

The women sought information from their peers on how they dealt with family
situations that involved balancing work, family and their relationship with their spouse – are
things that impact their personal identity. The real time feedback on these subjects allows the
women presidents to gain perspective on how they might deal with the situation at hand. The
women then consider how their peers’ experiences might work within their own lives, either
this input would create conflict or assimilate into their personal identity. This negotiation,
adoptive and adaptation furthers the development of a member’s personal identity while at
the same time reaffirming their member identity (Handley, et al., 2006).

Outside of family issues, the women discuss how through participation in the WPO,
they have access to other types of knowledge specifically related to skills that are needed
within their professional role. This skill identity development grows in a similar way as their
personal identity. In addition to the empirical evidence provided by this study, Paechter’s
(2003b, 2003c, 2006) writing discusses a possible explanation as to why an all-women’s
professional role identity development community of practice would discuss different
subjects. Paechter (2003b, 2003c, 2006) describes that certain knowledge has been deemed
masculine and through socialization is kept within the masculine community. The
knowledge kept within the masculine community places power on that knowledge. It is kept
specifically masculine when access to such knowledge is blocked by the female community
of practice.
Specific to the knowledge and skills the women describe needing access to, the barriers they describe are presented in prior research in three ways: societal, institutional and relational constraints. Societal constraints have been defined as those circumstances or conditions within larger society that may influence women’s choices or considerations when choosing a job (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Tannen, 2001; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Institutional constraints are represented through organizational structures (Oakley, 2000; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich & Atkins, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011). They are defined as “the impact of organizational structures such as policies, procedures, culture, and environment” on how women experience their workplace (2005, p. 175). Finally, relational constraints refer to the impact that both personal and professional relationships can play on a woman’s career choices (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1996; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). In response to this imbalance of power and access to this type of knowledge, the WPO has created its own practice in helping women to develop their skill identity in typically male dominated professions and navigate these constraints.

The skills the women are learning and constructing through their interactions with their peers are constructed through time and instituted in exterior spaces through a stylized repetition of acts (Wenger, 1998). This community membership that has resulted amongst the women from their participation in the WPO is no longer about what one woman knows individually, but instead how when surrounded by the collective knowledge of twenty other women presidents, she is now able to have the competence of all (Wenger, 1998, 2004,
The women are able to learn from one another month to month. In between meetings they are able to implement these behaviors and new skills within their role as president all the while integrating their learning into an on-going development of their skill identity.

Taber’s (2011) findings would support the need for the formation of single-gendered professional communities of practice like the WPO. Taber’s (2011) work was set in the military workplace and looked at how female military members learn to act as women in the military (p.332). The women in Taber’s (2011) study constructed their skill identity and personal identity as well as their professional woman in the military identity through cues and interactions with the males in their surroundings. If the women in Taber’s study had access to an all-women’s military community of practice, the construction of what it means to be a woman in the military may not have been so dependent on the males in their surroundings. Specifically for the two women that reported their personal identity as a mother was not recognized as a part of their professional identity as a woman in the military, participation in an all women community of practice may have discouraged them from leaving their positions. For these women it may have meant a more fulfilling work experience.

This exchange in the WPO is possible because the group maintains single-gendered membership requirements. This single-gendered community of practice has provided an environment for these women to discuss issues that are specific to women and their experience in the workforce. Because the women do not feel the need to censor discussion topics, they are free to share and seek advice. This allows for the women to form, repair, maintain, or revise their personal and skill identities; ultimately leading to the construction of 2009).
their professional identity. This process is different than what they would experience in a mixed gendered group because influence from the other sex would not evoke the same social construction of their identity as an all-women community.

**Conclusion 3: Professional Role Identity development within a community of practice is the result of the interaction and interconnection of multiple identities which are socially constructed through participation.**

A community of practice member’s professional role identity development within a community of practice is the result of the interaction and interconnection of multiple identities – member identity, personal identity, and skill identity. A member’s role identity development evolves out of the formation of deep relationships and their identity as a member of the community of practice. Once a woman can identify as a member of the community, she can formulate, repair, maintain or revise her personal identity which involves the balance of work and family. As well, she can formulate, repair, maintain or revise her professional identity through the acquisition of business and technical skills and interpersonal skills. The interaction between member identity, personal identity, and skill identity is what allows for full integration of a member’s professional role identity.

Before participating in the WPO, members reported that within their industries, they were frequently the only woman or one of only a few women in their industry - for some this meant in the nation. The women describe feeling a sense of tokenism (Kanter, 1977; Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Ryan, et. al, 2011). The absence of peers and the loneliness that can be experienced prohibits women from feeling as if they have the support to deal with the stresses of their job causing a sense of disconnection and withdrawal from their position as
well as their profession (Ryan, et. al, 2011; Ryan, et. al 2007; Ryan & Haslam, 2008; Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

Ryan and Haslam (2008) and Ryan, et. al (2011) observed that in women presidents’ careers they tended to be promoted into business units or companies that were struggling. Because the business unit is struggling, this puts the female leader at greater risk for failure and criticism (Ryan et al. 2007). The women’s experience in this type of appointment is what they deem the “glass cliff phenomenon.” Although Ryan et al. (2007) and Ryan et. al’s (2011) research does not explicitly align with the experiences of the women interviewed in this study, their research highlights the importance of groups like the WPO.

If the women had access to professional identity development opportunities like those within the WPO, the women executives discussed in Ryan et al. (2007) and Ryan et. al’s (2011) research may not have experienced the glass cliff phenomenon. Participation in a group like the WPO would have given the women access to other women who are or have experienced the issues in which they are dealing with at the time. This level of support would have allowed the president’s to socially construct their professional role identity in a way that they might not have been as negative and resulted in many of them leaving their position.

Within this empirical study a woman’s professional role identity is embracing the title and understanding of being a woman president. The professional role identity of a women president is embracing her role and title as president. As a part of their role identity, the woman president is able to balance the challenges and the opportunities presented in both their personal life as well as in acquiring new or additional skill sets. Their professional role
identity is maintained and supported through the confidential, non-competitive and long-standing relationship that formed through their participation in the CoP.

As depicted in Figure 5.1, the professional identity role development of a CoP member forms through the interaction of their member identity, personal identity and skill identity. As a community member collects and amass knowledge to fill gaps in their knowledge base that had previously prevented them from further developing their personal and skill identity, they can begin to embrace the identity that accompanies their job title. This acquisition of skills and increased sense of their identity as a professional in their role and as an active participant in their personal life, leads to a sense of confidence. This new confidence in their ability, competence and professional role identity is positively recognized by members. This sense of recognition reaffirms the community’s joint enterprise that they are working to create. The validation and affirmation in a member’s development of their role identity furthers their connection to each other and to the community.

**Recommendations**

The conclusions of this study can be used to recommend how to further communities of practice; design, form and function. The recommendations for this study in regards to women’s professional identity development are as follows:

1.) Women executives and aspiring women executives should seek out opportunities where they can form deep meaningful relationships with other women specifically who can support their identity development as it relates to their career and career goals. Knowing that these relationships take time to build because trust must be present and the women should meet on a regular basis. Additionally, women should
consider when forming these types of relationships; seek out women that are not direct competitors and keep all information shared among each other confidential. This level of trust among each other creates opportunities that support an impact on a women’s identity.

2.) Women, who are looking to persist or advance within their work, need to acquire skills business and technical, interpersonal skills and balance work and family. The acquisition of new and strategies for how to balance work and family is directly related to a women’s identity development.

3.) Women need to seek out developmental opportunities with and among other women to help build self-confidence and self-assurance in the work that they are doing. This internal and external feedback helps to further a women’s identity in all aspects of her life, personally and professionally.

In addition, if communities of practice are going to be used as an avenue to help participants to formulate their professional identity, several recommendations can be made in regards to the structuring of communities of practice to more fully provide an environment conducive to informing their identity development.

1.) Communities of practice should adopt an organizational structure that fosters deep relationships. Possible strategies that could be adopted to help facilitate these deep relationships are: adopting a confidentiality policy, members should come from non-competing positions or companies; depending on how the community members are recruited and organized and members should speak from experience during conversations.
2.) Those who aid in or are in interested in developing a community of practice for the purpose of professional advancement should consider how participation can impact identity. Communities of practice leaders should provide resources to groups that puts learning in context and is responsible to the broader global community.

3.) Single-gendered communities of practice should be considered more often when formulating a community of practice. The environment that is provided by a single-gendered community of practice allows members to express more fully issues and situations that they are dealing with in regards to their role and how that interacts with other roles that they have within their life. This is especially true for women and balancing home and work.

These learnings could be used by the WPO in a similar manner to further inform their practice. A member survey could be administered to gain an understanding of member satisfaction and perceived return on investment. If the membership shows similar concerns regarding the structure of the group, as identified by several of the women participant’s in this study, the WPO may want to address those concerns through enacting operational and structural changes within the chapter format.

The recommendations from this study can also be used by similarly constructed communities of practice and applied to their current practices. These recommendations may also spark questioning within a community of practice and the perceived benefits of members. Depending on the feedback, if needed, the CoP can enact changes that improve the practice of the community and what members are able to gain from their participation.

*Researcher Reflections*
The researcher presented during Chapter 3 two potential biases that could have an impact on the study. The two biases that were presented was, one a bias in choosing a group that centered on women presidents due to personal career aspirations of the researcher. In regards to the researcher choosing this line of questioning due to personal career aspirations, the researcher did not go into the interviews with any assumptions regarding the information that would be gained from the interviews or that she would make connections that would lead to personal or professional gains. It is believed that the researcher’s personal aspirations to one day be a women executive did not negatively impact the study.

One benefit that was experienced by the researcher was learning from the women presidents’ aspects of leadership as well as business skills that women must acquire to be successful in business. The skills disclosed were in many cases deficiencies they themselves had and then were able to learn from their peers within the group. The knowledge that these women all experienced “growing pains” in their careers provided confidence to the researcher. Her career outside of the classroom has not followed a trajectory that mimics other women executives’ career paths. The researcher has reflected a lot throughout this process on their own career path and how the completion of the PhD process may provide a different career path that was not originally intended.

One question that is still lingering with the researcher is what compels these women to help other women below them to move forward and advance in their career. With the very elite nature of the organization, the secrecy that exists around membership rosters and the propensity for the women to do business within and among chapter members, what is the impetus for them to help other women trying to start their own company or needing support
as they move up through their career? One of the members within the WPO talked about this exact question and wanted the group to do better at mentoring other entrepreneurial business women. The group to this point has not been compelled to do so or implement a program in that way.

Much of the current programming being offered by women’s professional groups in the community, in which the researcher resides, is centered around the idea that a woman’s network is what determines her career opportunities. If this is true, how could these women leaders impact another young professional woman’s career? This may lead to future research for the researcher; understanding what compels or does not compel women business owners and women executives to help open doors for up and coming young professional women.

The second bias or assumption that was made by the researcher was that based on the long-standing nature and structure of this organization, both chapters operated as communities of practice. This bias or assumption is what influenced the researcher to work with this organization. The researcher found that based on the interview feedback from the research participants and how they framed their experiences within the group, these two groups have formed and do operate as communities of practice. The researcher believes that this helps to add credibility to the initial reasoning of the inquiry.

Other reflections that the researcher feel is important to note, are the researcher knew the chapter chair for the both of the chapters that the inquiry was made with and the two chapters were located in the researcher’s city of residence. The researcher chose to only interview women from the two chapters within close proximity to her geographically. It is
understood that the information gathered may not be a full representation of the diversity of all-female communities of practice or even all WPO chapters.

Additionally, because the researcher also knew the chapter chair for both of the WPO chapters, it was assumed that this would help with ease of recruitment of participants. However this was not the case and provided great stress on the intended research initially. It was not until the fourth interview, a business partner of one of the women in Chapter One that the snowball of participants occurred. One of the most important aspects of the interview process that the research did not intend to see happen, was that this experience provided an opportunity for the women to reflect on their experience within the WPO. More to , that participation in the study positively affected their perspective on the group and what they had gained from their participation in the group over the years. In essence, the researcher also provided a service to these women executives. This was unexpected and for the researcher helped the researcher to gain confidence in her role as a researcher and a scholar.

Suggestions for Further Research

From the work completed for this study, there are opportunities to continue to develop this line of questioning and understanding of how identity is shaped by participation in a community of practice.

1.) Initial further research that could result from this study would be to take the data collected from these participants and look at it through a different lens; specifically critical feminist theory. The opportunity would lie in gaining a deeper understanding from a critical feminist theory lens the impact of language
and how the language they use to describe their experiences as a woman president is perpetuating or deconstructing the socially created views of women leaders.

2.) Expand the study to other women’s business organizations to find out if participation in those organizations impacts the women participants’ identity in the same way or if there are other elements of an executive women’s identity that are impacted based on race, sexual orientation, size of the company, organizational structure or intended purpose of the organization.

3.) A third scenario for possible further research would be to investigate identity formation as part of a mixed gendered all-presidents group. Are all participants identity impacted in the same way? Does it vary based on gender? Are there topics within a mixed-gender group that are covered that were or were not covered in the all-women’s group? Are there priorities for learning in mixed gendered groups that were not a priority in the single-gendered groups? If there are similarities in how a participant’s identity is impacted by participation, it would support the initial findings of this study in regards to the aspects of identity that were identified by the research participants. However, if differences are seen between how participants’ identity is impacted based on the gender make-up of the group, it would help to further the argument for gender-specific communities of practice; as argued by the women who participated in this study.

With expanding our knowledge of how identity is shaped through participation in a community of practice from the participant’s perspective, adult educators can better understand how to structure and facilitate learning within a community of practice. From the
adult learner’s perspective, understanding the positive benefits to one’s professional and personal identity, participation in a community of practice could play in their career and home life may encourage better participation as well as the formation of additional communities of practice.

Summary and Final Thoughts

This qualitative case study explored how participation in an all-women community of practice impacts a woman’s identity as a president and what aspects of her role as president are revealed as most impacted from participation in the group. The theoretical framework proposed that communities of practice were linked to a participant’s identity and that a person’s identity is continually shaped throughout their participation in a CoP.

Interview data showed that the identities of women presidents are shaped by their participation in this community of practice, the WPO. Additionally, the women sought input and learned from other participants’ experiences in areas where they may not have had experience. The information gained helped them to grow within their own companies and made them more confident in their role as a women president.

While the individual women’s lived experiences within the group varied, the findings produced four themes that revealed characteristics of a women president’s identity that is influenced by her participation in an all-women, all-president community of practice; a) sisterhood, b) skills, c) role negotiation and d) self-assurance. From these themes three main conclusions were identified: 1.) Deep and meaningful relationships are integral to the formation of a community of practice; 2.) Membership composition in a professional role identity development community of practice has an impact on the topics that are raised and
discussed within the community; and 3.) Professional Role Identity development within a community of practice is the result of the interaction and interconnection of multiple identities which are socially constructed through participation. From this study an understanding that within a community of practice, professional role identity development is socially constructed through complex interactions of each of the identities that a member carries with them. Professional role identity development is directly informed by the relationships built within the community of practice which are dependent upon a non-competitive environment, confidentiality and length of time within the community.
References


Educational Association.


Green, J., & Stinson, S. W. (n.d.). Postpositivist research in dance. 91–123.


The Ohio State University Department of Human Resources (2007). Faculty
Demographics and Lists, 2007 [Data File]. Available from The Office of Human Resources, The Ohio State University.


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:
Georgina M. Ginn
Participation in an All-Women Community of Practice:
A Qualitative Case Study

Overview of Project:
- Introduce myself.
- Describe project and goals.
  - The purpose of this qualitative case study is to build an understanding of how participation in a practice based – professional identity development community of practice impacts her identity development as a president.
- Describe eventual product: a dissertation required for graduation requirements for a PhD in Workforce Development and Education from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.
- Describe eventual benefits: We are trying to learn more about the experiences of women who participate in a professionally based all-women community of practice.
- Explain consent form and have each participant sign prior to beginning interview. Tell participants that during the interview they will be asked if they would like to assign themselves and their company a pseudonym to use in the write-up of the research.
- Interviews will be audiotaped during this interview.

The interview that I will conduct with you today will focus on your involvement in the Women Presidents’ Organization.

1. Introductory and warm-up questions (building rapport):
   - Name?
   - Type of company in which you serve as the president?
   - Do you have a pseudonym that you would like to be referenced as in this study? Do you have a pseudonym that you would like your company to be referenced as if necessary in the write-up of the research?
   - How long have you been a member of the WPO?
2. **To start, tell me a bit about your experience when you joined the all-woman community of practice in which you are involved?**

Clarifying the questions if needed:
- How did you learn about the group? What steps did you have to take to become a member?

3. **Overarching Questions: What were the reasons you joined the WPO? What were your expectations of becoming a part of this organization? Have they been met?**

**Probing Questions:**
- Why did you join this all-women community of practice? Of what importance did it hold for you (personally and professionally)?
- What do you see as the stated purpose of the organization?
- How did you find out about the organization? How did you become a member of the group? Did you research the organization before you joined? Was there a reputation of this group that you discovered prior to joining? Was that reputation accurate?
- Are you a member of any other professional development organization? Why or why not?
- How do they differ from the WPO? Why is the support that you receive in this group important?
- How does the support that you receive in this group differ from the other groups in which you are a member?

4. **Overarching Question: In your view, what value have the meetings provided?**

**Probing Questions:**
- What is the process for choosing the topic that is discussed at each of the meetings?
- From your perspective, how do the topics chosen help you in your role as a president?
- What is your role in the organization?
  - Follow up question for members that have been in the group longer than 5 years. Has your role in the group changed throughout your membership?
- How do you integrate what you learn from the meetings into your work?
- How has what you have learned influenced how you approach learning within your own organization?
- Have you formed any learning groups like the WPO within your organization?

5. **Overarching Question: What has being a member of this organization done for you?**
Probing Questions:

- Has participation in this group shaped how you view yourself and your professional identity?
- What does it mean to you to be a woman president?
- Do you identify yourself as a woman president?
  - Follow up question: Are you identified as a woman president when you do community events, receive awards, etc.
- How has your participation in this group helped you to define yourself as a woman president?
- How has participation in this group impacted your definition of what it means to be a woman president?

Closing the Interview:

Is there anything that you would like to restate or re-discuss? Any final thoughts we wrap things up? Any final questions before we say good-bye?

Thank you for the opportunity you have given me today. I appreciate you allowing me to learn about your experience in this all-women community of practice. Please know that your honesty will help to add to the field of community of practice and help to build an understanding about why all-women CoP are needed. I will respect your privacy about you, your company, and your experiences as a member accordingly.
Appendix B: Demographic Survey

Demographic Information Survey
Gina M. Ginn – Researcher

Title of Study: A Woman President’s Identity, How Participation in an All-Women Community of Practice Influences Professional Identity: An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study

Purpose of the Survey: The purpose of this survey is to provide demographic information of the study’s research participants. The information gathered will be used to show the depth and breadth of the industries you represent, your place in your career and personal characteristics.

Estimated time to complete the survey – 5 – 10 minutes

Survey Questions:
Section I: Personal and Household Information:

1) Name: __________________________________________

Note: The researcher will use the pseudonym assigned to you for the purpose of documentation within the research write-up.

2) Age: ______________

3) What is the highest level of education you have earned?
   □ Less than high school
   □ GED/High school diploma
   □ Technical training beyond high school/Some college
   □ Associate’s degree
   □ Bachelor’s degree
   □ Some graduate school
   □ Master’s degree (e.g. MA, MS, MBA etc.)
   □ Professional degree (e.g. MD, JD, DDS, etc.)
   □ Doctoral degree (e.g. Ph.D, Ed.D)

4) What is your race/ethnicity:
4a) Please select one:
□ I am Hispanic or Latino. _____
□ I am not Hispanic or Latino

4b) Please select one or more:
□ American Indian or Alaska Native
□ Asian
□ Black or African American
□ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
□ White
□ Other. Please specify: __________________

5) What is your current relationship status?
□ Never-married □ Married/Partnered □ Divorced/Separated
□ Widowed □ Divorced/Separated AND Remarried/Repartnered

6) What is your parental status?
□ I have children
□ I do not have children

7) How many children (18 years or younger) currently live in your household? ______

Section II: Women Presidents Organization Information

1) How many years have you been a member of the WPO?
_________________________________

2) In the last year, how many monthly meetings have you attended?
_________________________________

3) How many other professional organizations are you a member of?
_________________________________
3a) How many of these are all women organizations?
_________________________________

4) Has membership in the WPO resulted in growth for your company? Yes or No

Section III: Company/ Employment Information

1) Company
Name: ____________________________________________

Note: The researcher will use the pseudonym assigned to your company for the purpose of documentation within the research write-up.
2) Describe the type of organization/company you own/ work for (3rd Party Business Administration, Office Furniture Sales, etc.):

______________________________

3) How long have you worked for or owned your company? _____ years _____ months

4) How long have you worked in your current position? _____ years _____ months

5) What is your official job title? ________________________________

6) Do you and your spouse/partner own your company together? _____Yes _____ No

8) Including you, how many people work for your company? _____