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Predictors of role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave among academic department secretaries

Rona J. Vrooman

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leave among academic department secretaries**

Vrooman, Rona J., Ed.D.

The College of William and Mary, 1990

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PREDICTORS OF ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY,
AND PROPENSITY TO LEAVE
AMONG ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARIES

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
Rona J. Vrooman
March 1990

PREDICTORS OF ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY,
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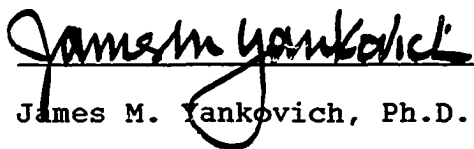
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	2
Introduction	2
Statement of the Problem	3
Significance of the Study	3
Definition of Terms	6
Limitations	7
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	10
Overview	10
Organization	11
Role of the Academic Department Secretary ...	11
Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity	13
Propensity to Leave	17
Decision Participation Level	20
Department Chairperson Communication Openness	21
Length of Service	23
Relationship Between Supervisory and Subordinate Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity	23
Summary	24

III. DESIGN OF THE STUDY	26
Population and Sample	26
Data Collection Procedures	27
Instrumentation	29
Research Questions	34
Research Design	35
Statistical Analysis	36
Summary	38
IV. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS	40
Background Information	41
Summary of Background Information	45
Research Question #1	46
Research Question #2	49
Research Question #3	52
Subsidiary Question #1	54
Subsidiary Question #2	55
Summary of Research and Subsidiary Questions Findings	56
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	66
Summary	66
Conclusions	69
Discussion	74
Implications for Policy and Practice	80
Implications for Future Research	84
APPENDICES	87
Appendix A Letter to Personnel Directors Requesting Permission to Survey Academic Department Secretaries	89

Appendix B	Introductory Letter to Eligible Subjects	91
Appendix C	Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire	93
Appendix D	Transmittal Letter	98
Appendix E	Postcard To Indicate Participation/ Non-Participation	100
Appendix F	Follow-Up Letter	102
REFERENCES	103
VITA	113

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
4.1	Background and Demographic Characteristics of Academic Department Secretaries (Categorical Data)	59
4.2	Background and Demographic Characteristics of Academic Department Secretaries (Intervally Measured Data)	60
4.3	Predictors of Academic Department Secretaries' Role Conflict (Research Question #1)	61
4.4	Predictors of Academic Department Secretaries' Role Ambiguity (Research Question #2)	62
4.5	Predictors of Academic Department Secretaries' Propensity to Leave (Research Question #3)	63
4.6	Relationship Between Academic Department Secretaries' Decision Participation Level and Preferred Decision Participation Level (Subsidiary Question #1)	64
4.7	Relationship Between Department Chairpersons' and Academic Department Secretaries' Communication Openness (Subsidiary Question #2)	65

PREDICTORS OF ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY,
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the contribution of five factors as predictors of academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. The five predictor variables were: 1) secretaries' decision participation level, 2) department chairpersons' communication openness, 3) department chairpersons' role conflict, 4) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and 5) secretaries' length of service. In addition, this study examined the relationship between academic department secretaries' report of decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level. It also examined the relationship between academic department secretaries' report of department chairpersons' communication openness and own communication openness.

Data was collected via the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire, an instrument developed by the author. A total of 121 usable questionnaires were obtained from academic department secretaries at five four-year

public institutions in Virginia. To address the three major research questions, three different multiple regression equations were written and the step-wise procedure was used to analyze the data. The two subsidiary questions were analyzed using a t-test.

Each of the five predictor variables investigated was found to be a significant factor in at least one of the multiple regression equations. The variable department chairpersons' communication openness was a significant factor in all three equations.

The two statistically significant predictor variables of academic department secretaries' role conflict were department chairpersons' role conflict ($r = .53$) and department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .37$). The three statistically significant predictor variables of academic department secretaries' role ambiguity were department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .52$), department chairpersons' role ambiguity ($r = .48$), and secretaries' decision participation level ($r = .43$). The two statistically significant predictor variables of secretaries' propensity to leave were department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .31$) and secretaries' length of service ($r = -.25$).

There was a statistically significant difference between secretaries' decision participation level and preferred decision level ($t = -6.17$). There was not a

statistically significant difference between academic department secretaries' and department chairpersons' communication openness.

This study found that the perceptions and behaviors of the department chairperson are related to the perceptions and behaviors of the academic department secretary. In addition, role conflict and role ambiguity emerged as distinct factors.

After identifying predictor variables of academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave, this study presented suggestions and strategies for reducing the negative impact of these factors.

Further study is needed to ascertain the level and breadth of secretarial responsibilities. It is also important to determine other factors that contribute to academic department secretaries' propensity to leave and to compare propensity to leave with actual turnover.

Another avenue to explore is to provide training for department chairpersons and to assess the impact of that training on secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave as well as the chairpersons' own role conflict and role ambiguity.

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PREDICTORS OF ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY,
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Soon after assuming the presidency of Virginia Tech, James D. McComas held a meeting with the institution's secretarial staff, noting that although secretaries are a vital part of the campus, people do not realize their importance (Baker, 1988). Bernotavicz and Clasby's (1985) review of research literature on the academic workplace confirmed a failure to include any discussion of clerical staff. This may be a serious omission since clerical workers form the largest single group of support staff on most campuses and are employed in every office and in all programs and departments (Bernotavicz & Clasby, 1985).

While considerable attention has been focused on the importance of the academic department (Booth, 1982; Dressel, 1981; Eble, 1978; Haynes, 1985; McHenry & Associates, 1977; Ramsey & Dodge, 1983; Tucker, 1986) as well as the role, function, and evaluation of department chairpersons (Atwell & Green, 1981; Bennett, 1983; Fisher, 1978; Heller, 1967 [as cited in Knight & Holen, 1985]), one member of the departmental unit -- the academic department secretary -- has virtually been ignored. Therefore, learning more about

this overlooked population may contribute to improved effectiveness of the department and the institution as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to analyze the contribution of five factors which may predict academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave their positions. The five predictor variables under investigation are: 1) secretaries' decision participation level, 2) department chairpersons' communication openness, 3) department chairpersons' role conflict, 4) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and 5) secretaries' length of service.

In addition, this study examines the relationship between academic department secretaries' report of decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level. It also examines the relationship between academic department secretaries' report of department chairpersons' communication openness and their own communication openness.

Significance of the Study

Academic department secretaries are often the main point of contact for both students and faculty. Previously, Dressel (1981) noted that:

Capable secretaries have relieved department chairpersons of many time-requiring tasks and have often achieved for a department a reputation for efficiency and respect for individuals ... (p. 114)

Since academic department secretaries play a vital role in assisting the department in meeting its objectives, it is important to identify factors that may affect their job performance.

Two factors which may have an adverse effect on job performance are role conflict and role ambiguity. Schuler (1975) reported that role conflict and role ambiguity are more evident at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy [cited in Frost, 1983]. According to Moore (1985), secretarial personnel employed by university departments experience uniquely ambiguous employee-employer relationships. Of 400 clerical workers at an eastern university, 40% reported feeling stressful "often" or "always" ("Secretaries suffer," 1984).

It is important to assess role conflict and role ambiguity among academic department secretaries because these factors have a detrimental effect on both the individual and the organization (Bergmann & O'Malley, 1979; Booth, 1982; Frost, 1983; House & Rizzo, 1972; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964; Keenan & Newton, 1984; Morris, Steers & Koch, 1979; Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970; Schwab, Iwanicki & Pierson, 1983). Specifically, role conflict and role ambiguity may impede people from attaining or completing a task successfully by decreasing overall

performance, decreasing job satisfaction and organizational confidence (Bergmann & O'Malley, 1979) as well as increasing mistrust and alienation (Booth, 1972). When employees experience role conflict and role ambiguity, they communicate less (Kahn et al., 1964), experience lower self-esteem, possess a higher sense of futility, and report greater tension (Sethi & Schuler, 1984). If role conflict and role ambiguity are significant factors among academic department secretaries, steps can be taken to eliminate the negative antecedents and reduce the negative consequences of these factors.

Of the three classes of predictor variables which have been previously studied (organizational, personality, and interpersonal), Newton and Keenan (1987) reported that the main focus has been on organizational variables. Few studies have investigated interpersonal variables. However, Kahn et al. (1964) noted that the behavior of the immediate supervisor does lead to perceptions of stress among subordinates. It is therefore important to determine whether behaviors of the academic department chairperson such as decision participation level and communication openness are related to secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave.

In addition, when department chairpersons experience role conflict and role ambiguity themselves (Booth, 1982; Falk, 1979; Schaffer, 1987), chairpersons may,

inadvertently, be contributing to secretaries' role conflict and role ambiguity. If certain behaviors of the academic department chairperson are found to contribute to secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave, once identified, steps can be taken to better prepare and train department chairpersons.

Finally, because it is difficult for colleges and universities to retain high quality support staff (Wheless, Wheless & Howard, 1983) and because position turnover translates into additional costs for the institution (Sethi & Schuler, 1984), it is important to identify factors that may affect secretaries' propensity to leave the job.

In light of this information, additional research is needed regarding the role of the academic department secretary as well as factors that may contribute to secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. According to Van Sell, Brief and Schuler (1981), a greater understanding of role conflict and role ambiguity may lead to enhanced understanding and improvement of the performance, attitudes, and physiological conditions of individuals within the organization.

Definition of Terms

Academic Department Secretary - individual who provides clerical support for the academic department and chairperson. Where more than one person supports a

department, this is the individual who occupies the most senior classified clerical position.

Communication Openness - extent to which a person engages in candid disclosure of feelings and/or facts.

Decision Participation Level - communication style which describes the amount of participation a manager allows his or her subordinate in decision making.

Department Chairperson - faculty/administrator responsible for heading an academic department.

Role Ambiguity - the lack of quantity or quality of information necessary for a worker to perform adequately in his or her given role within the organization.

Role Conflict - the simultaneous occurrence of two or more sets of role pressures such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it relies on data collected via a self-report instrument. In addition, all of the criterion variables and four of the predictor variables under investigation are constructs based on individual perceptions.

Borg and Gall (1983) advised that although self-reports can be obtained easily and economically, respondents often bias information they offer about themselves. In defense,

Pettegrew, Thomas, Ford and Costello (1982) noted that because people act according to their perceptions, it is reasonable to accept these types of measures. Van Sell et al. (1981) observed that most research in the areas of role conflict and role ambiguity has been based on perceptions obtained via a self-report questionnaire and that continued use of self-report instruments is warranted because role conflict and role ambiguity are viewed as general and objective perceptions rather than objective factors. In addition, Jackson and Schuler (1985) reported that the average correlations between affective reactions and role conflict and role ambiguity were greater than those between behavioral variables and role conflict and role ambiguity.

Another limitation is the availability of an instrument to measure role conflict and role ambiguity. While the most frequently used measure is the Role Questionnaire (RQ) developed by Rizzo et al. (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985; Breaugh, 1980; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tracy & Johnson, 1981), its continued use has been questioned. In his examination of three measures of role ambiguity, Breaugh (1980) concluded that no one ambiguity measure was clearly superior to the others and warned researchers to exercise caution. Tracy and Johnson (1981) proposed that the RQ scales may be confounded by the effect of stress and comfort wording differences and also suggested that researchers explore alternative measures of role

conflict and role ambiguity such as projective or behavioral indices.

Despite the objections discussed above, Schuler, Aldag and Brief's (1977) psychometric evaluation of the RQ concluded that the scales possess sufficient reliability and construct validity. When House, Schuler and Levanoni (1983) re-wrote the RQ items to include both stress and comfort worded questions, they found that the correlations between the original and subsequent role conflict and role ambiguity scales were .94 and .88 respectively. Although other measures besides the RQ are available, Beehr and Bhagat (1985) admit that those instruments require further psychometric development.

Another limitation concerns this study's research design. Jackson (1983) cautioned about an overreliance on concurrent correlational designs and suggested that alternative designs be utilized. While a longitudinal study may have provided additional insight, time and financial constraints precluded such an undertaking.

Finally, as a researcher in Virginia, the accessible population was employees at public institutions within this state. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings may be limited.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The purpose of the literature review was to assess the current state of knowledge regarding academic department secretaries. More specifically, it was to discover how five variables may contribute to secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. The five variables were: 1) secretaries' decision participation level, 2) department chairpersons' communication openness, 3) department chairpersons' role conflict, 4) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and 5) secretaries' length of service.

While attempts were made to focus on research and findings specific to academic department secretaries, as mentioned earlier, little has been written about this population. As a result, this review incorporated resources from books and refereed journals from the areas of human resource development, management, organizational communication, psychology, and public administration as well as higher education.

Classic studies of the 1960's and 70's as well as current findings were included. Although several studies

completed during the 1970's and 80's were consulted as primary references, it was fortunate that three extensive summaries of the literature on role conflict and role ambiguity were available: Van Sell et al. (1981), Fisher and Gitelson (1983), and Jackson and Schuler (1985). Fisher and Gitelson (1983) included 43 studies in their investigation and Jackson and Schuler (1985) referenced 96 studies.

Organization

The review begins by examining the role of the academic department secretary. It is followed by a general discussion about role conflict and role ambiguity which includes: an overview of the theoretical framework of these two variables, the importance of viewing the variables as two separate factors, and antecedents and consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity. After the general discussion of role conflict and role ambiguity, the specific variables related to this study are then addressed. In closing, the review describes how the proposed study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge of higher education research.

Role of the Academic Department Secretary

The role of the academic department secretary appears more complex than one might anticipate. Bernotavicz and Clasby (1985) found that secretaries' duties at the

University of Southern Maine varied from office to office and there were striking differences among groups of secretaries. Therefore, while this population may share many similarities, it is erroneous to assume that all secretarial positions within higher education are alike.

In the past, secretarial duties were limited to typing, filing, and taking dictation. According to Dodd (1982), in today's business world, secretaries have become extensions of their executives. A survey of advertisements revealed that secretaries need competencies in oral and written communication, organizational skills, and human relations as well as typical office support tasks (Luke, 1985). Using the two approaches of Task Analysis and Competency Identification, Bernotavicz and Clasby (1985) found that the competencies in their model for secretaries had many similarities with those identified for managers in studies using the same techniques.

Previously, it has been noted that academic department secretaries play a vital yet often neglected role in higher education. This oversight was clearly illustrated by Bernotavicz and Clasby (1985):

Clerical workers form the largest single group of support staff on most campuses. They are employed in every office, in all programs and departments. Often on the front line, they interact with the public and students as well as with faculty and staff. Despite their pervasive and essential role, the contribution of clerical workers is neither fully recognized nor understood. (p. 16)

Freeman and Roney (1978) concurred that non-faculty

personnel have a low priority in the concerns of policy makers in higher education. Dressel (1981) agreed that the role of the clerical and secretarial staff of an educational institution is much more important than is realized. By far, the most negative finding was Gillett's (1987) claim that higher education supports a caste system in which clerical employees are treated as "non-persons."

It is especially important to learn more about academic department secretaries because this population appears to be susceptible to role conflict and role ambiguity. A 1977 OSHA report ranked secretary as the second most stressful job category ("Secretaries suffer," 1984). More specifically, Moore (1985) observed that secretarial and clerical personnel employed by university departments experience uniquely ambiguous employee-employer relationships because secretaries are often simultaneously accountable to several faculty members.

Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity

Since the 1950's, there has been significant interest in role theory (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). According to Beehr and Bhagat (1985), the publication of Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964) marked the beginning of the growing importance of stress, coping, social support, and other related topics in the organizational sciences. Although the authors

identified three types of role stressors (role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload), the majority of subsequent studies, including this one, focus on the two variables of role conflict and role ambiguity.

Pearce (1981) noted that Kahn and his colleagues visualized role ambiguity and role conflict as intervening variables between the structural characteristics of an individual's organizational position and personal, behavioral, and affective consequences. According to classical organizational theory, when an individual lacks the necessary information (role ambiguity) or when expected behaviors are inconsistent (role conflict), the role incumbent will experience role stress and adopt coping behaviors (Rizzo et al., 1970).

The next milestone for role conflict and role ambiguity research was the development of the Role Questionnaire (RQ). It provided systematic measurement and empirical testing of these two constructs (Rizzo et al. 1970). Since that time, several hundred studies have investigated hypothesized antecedents and consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity in a variety of settings. Krayter (1986) reported that role conflict and role ambiguity are two of the most vigorously studied variables in modern complex organizations. [For a qualitative review of the literature, see Van Sell et al., 1981; for a quantitative review, see Fisher & Gitelson, 1983 and Jackson & Schuler, 1985]

While role conflict and role ambiguity are often examined concurrently and the two variables are consistently and positively correlated with each other (Schuler et al., 1977), it is important to note that role conflict and role ambiguity were conceptualized and identified as two distinct variables (Rizzo et al., 1970). Fisher and Gitelson (1983) found that the degree to which these two variables were related varied across samples and other researchers have urged that role conflict and role ambiguity be treated separately (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Pearce, 1981; Schuler et al., 1977; Van Sell et al., 1981). Generally speaking, role conflict appears to be a function of intrapersonal and interpersonal perceptions while role ambiguity appears to be a function of job-content, leader behavior, and organizational structure (Van Sell et al., 1981). In addition, Miles (cited in Zahra, 1985) indicated that role ambiguity is more pervasive in current organizations and that role conflict is often temporary. As a result of these findings, this study views role conflict and role ambiguity independently.

It has been noted that previous research has focused primarily on antecedents and consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity. The antecedent variables investigated were generally classified as: 1) individual or personal, 2) interpersonal, and 3) structural or organizational (Kahn et al., 1964; Van Sell et al., 1981), with the

emphasis on the later two categories. Individual characteristics which have been investigated include age, tenure in the position, and educational level. Structural characteristics which have been investigated have focused on formalization within the organizational structure, participation in decision making, and organizational level of the individual (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Newton & Keenan, 1987).

Hypothesized consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity have included both affective and behavioral responses (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Some examples of affective responses are job satisfaction, tension/anxiety, commitment, and propensity to leave while examples of behavioral responses include absenteeism and quality of performance.

Thus far, the most frequently studied issue has been the relationship between role conflict/role ambiguity and job satisfaction (Jackson & Schuler, 1985).

As the number of studies have increased, the variables of role conflict and role ambiguity have been the subject of criticism. Pearce (1981) charged that the measurement of role conflict and role ambiguity may be confounded by other variables. Subsequently, both Fisher and Gitelson (1983) and Jackson and Schuler (1985) employed the Schmidt-Hunter method of meta-analysis, a procedure designed to recognize and correct artifactual and methodological problems

underlying population correlations. Both meta-analyses found that a substantial proportion of variance unaccounted for exists in many of the previous studies involving role conflict and role ambiguity. In response, Jackson and Schuler (1985) suggest that bivariate studies using role ambiguity and role conflict should be replaced with theoretically based moderator studies when the following conditions exist: 1) a sufficient number of studies exist (e.g. more than five), 2) there is a substantial variation in results across studies (e.g. S.D. greater than .10), and 3) a substantial proportion of variance accounted for exists (e.g. more than 25%).

Despite Beehr and Bhagat's (1985) suggestion that the variables of role conflict and role ambiguity need to be refined and the introduction of Newton and Keenan's (1987) four role stress variables (role conflict, role ambiguity, quantitative role overload, and qualitative role overload), the study of role conflict and role ambiguity continues to be a popular topic of inquiry today.

Propensity to Leave

A high turnover rate among academic department secretaries can be dysfunctional to the department and the university as a whole. Not surprisingly, employee turnover has been hypothesized as one of the major negative consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity (Jackson &

Schuler, 1985). The underlying assumption is that individuals who experience role conflict and role ambiguity will adopt coping behaviors such as leaving the job that is causing the stress (Frost, 1983; Kahn et al., 1964).

While most research has focused on propensity to leave rather than actual termination, the relationship between propensity to leave and existent turnover appears to be supported. Price and Mueller (1981) identified intention to leave as an important precursor to turnover in nurses [cited in Jackson, 1983]. Kemery, Mossholder and Bedeian (1987) reported that intention to quit and eventual turnover are typically correlated at a weighted average of 0.50 and further suggested that turnover intentions are reasonably predictive of actual attrition.

Rizzo et al. (1970) reported a slight positive correlation between role conflict and role ambiguity and propensity to leave, a relationship subsequently supported by Krayter (1986) and affirmed by Brief and Aldag (1976) [cited in Jackson & Schuler, 1985], Gupta and Beehr (1979) [cited in Beehr & Bhagat (1985)], and Lyons (1971) [cited in Jackson & Schuler, 1985]. Beehr and Bhagat (1985) concluded that turnover is linked with job stressors among adult workers. In addition, Jackson and Schuler (1985) summarized that several studies reported positive correlations between turnover intentions and role conflict ($r = .34$) and role ambiguity ($r = .34$).

More recently, Kemery et al. (1987) found that propensity to leave has been linked with role stressors. They reported that role conflict and role ambiguity accounted for a meaningful proportion of the variance in turnover intention, models of turnover, and absenteeism. The most directly related study was Johnson and Graen's (1973) longitudinal causal investigation which reported a relationship between increased role conflict with supervisors and voluntary termination of employment for secretaries.

In contrast, Fisher and Gitelson (1983) raised doubts as to the relationship between these variables. Their meta-analysis found that a significant amount of unexplained variance remained after a chi-square test was performed on 12 samples (n = 1814) which investigated the relationship between role conflict and propensity to leave and 14 samples (n = 1963) which investigated role ambiguity and propensity to leave.

The non-significant findings of Fisher and Gitelson (1983) may be due to the fact that when employees recognize leaving the job as an alternative, role conflict and role ambiguity may not be generated (Rizzo et al., 1964). More importantly, if employees who experience role conflict and role ambiguity do leave their jobs, those who remain (and are subjects of research studies) are therefore less likely to report role conflict and role ambiguity.

Decision Participation Level

It is important to determine the extent that academic department secretaries participate in the decision making process within their departments because the relationship between participation in decision making and reduced role conflict and role ambiguity is generally supported (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Morris et al., 1979).

When employees participate in decision making, communication between the superior and subordinate is likely to increase (Jackson, 1983). According to Richmond and McCroskey (1979), employees who viewed their supervisor's decision participation level as more participative (consults or joins) reported greater job satisfaction than those who viewed their supervisor as non-participative (tells or sells).

Morris et al. (1979) found that participation in decision making reduced role conflict and role ambiguity for 127 non-academic employees. Jackson's (1983) investigation of clerical employees in a hospital also concluded that increased participation in decision making was an important factor in reducing role strain and enhancing individual and organizational outcomes.

Role ambiguity tends to be more negatively and inconsistently related to decision participation level than role conflict (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983). This is

understandable because participation in decision making is a structural variable and thus, more related to role ambiguity (Nicholson & Goh, 1983).

Although increased decision participation level appears to reduce role conflict and role ambiguity, Wheelless et al. (1983) cast some doubt on the comparative value of participation in decision making as a strategy for enhancing job satisfaction for non-professional university employees. The authors noted that such employees may neither expect nor prefer a high decision participation level.

Wheelless et al.'s (1983) observation is especially interesting because academic department chairpersons appear to favor participative decision making. According to Taylor (1982), two-thirds of the chairpersons surveyed preferred using a consultative decision making style.

Based on these findings, it is important to assess department chairpersons' decision making style and to determine whether secretaries' decision participation level is a significant factor in secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave.

Department Chairperson Communication Openness

There is sufficient evidence that satisfaction with supervisor communication reduces role stress (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Schuler, 1985; Smeltzer, 1987; Wheelless et al., 1983). Using the Stress

Diagnostic Questionnaire A & B developed by Ivancevich and Matterson, Smeltzer (1987) found that at the individual level, communication was the most predominant variable in reducing role conflict and role ambiguity. However, it is unclear what specific supervisory communication behaviors are most effective.

One such characteristic may be department chairpersons' communication openness. Openness is a vital element of organizational climate. Employees are more satisfied when communication is open (Jablin, 1978).

French and Caplan (1973) [cited in Frost, 1983] found that perceptions of role conflict and role ambiguity were positively correlated with the boss showing a lack of trust and negatively correlated with supervisor supportiveness and communication. In their study of leader consideration, a behavior closely related to openness, Valenzi and Dessler (1978) reported that employees who viewed their supervisor as considerate and supportive experienced less ambiguity. Newton and Keenan (1987) found that a supportive interpersonal climate and social support from the superior were important predictors of low role conflict and role ambiguity.

Since role conflict and role ambiguity are characterized by competing and unclear messages, it is important to determine the relationship between department chairpersons' communication openness and role conflict, role

ambiguity, and propensity to leave among academic department secretaries.

Length of Service

Ideally, the longer an academic department secretary occupies that position, the lower the incidence of role conflict and role ambiguity. In practice, the relationship between length of service and role conflict and role ambiguity is still unclear.

Medrand (1978) found no significant relationship between longevity and role conflict and role ambiguity among non-academic higher education middle managers. Fisher and Gitelson (1983) reported that length of service was slightly negatively correlated to role ambiguity (-.13) but not related to role conflict (.03). These findings were supported in the subsequent meta-analysis by Jackson and Schuler (1985).

It is important to further explore the relationship between academic department secretaries' length of service and role conflict and role ambiguity because it appears that tenure does not significantly diminish role conflict and role ambiguity.

Relationship Between Supervisory and Subordinate Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity

Currently, little is known about the specific

relationship between department chairpersons and academic department secretaries. Previously, Van Sell et al. (1981) noted that the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the role sender (department chairperson) and the focal person (academic department secretary) had not been investigated, however, based on the role episode model, the authors suggested that the feedback loop from focal person to role sender illustrates a transactional relationship which may result in reciprocal causality. Later, Frost's (1983) investigation found that the behavior of the immediate supervisor is clearly related to subordinates' perceptions of role conflict and role ambiguity.

Because academic department chairpersons experience role conflict and role ambiguity themselves (Booth, 1982; Falk, 1979; Schaffer, 1987), it is important to determine whether chairperson behaviors are related to department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave.

Summary

Amidst the wealth of information on role conflict and role ambiguity, empirical findings have often been inconsistent or contradictory. Following this review of the literature, it is evident that the proposed study will make several significant contributions.

First and foremost, it will increase understanding

about academic department secretaries, helping to fill the void that currently exists. Second, this study will address the issue of reciprocity by investigating the relationship between supervisory and subordinate behaviors. Although no attempt will be made to suggest causality, it is important to investigate the relationship between department chairpersons' and academic department secretaries' perceptions and behaviors. In addition, this study will address Jackson and Schuler's (1985) call for investigating more homogeneous populations in order to more accurately assess the strength of hypothesized relationships. Finally, this study will go beyond reporting findings and will focus on the application of its findings in the final chapter. Specifically, it will offer suggestions for department chairpersons to reduce the negative impact of role conflict and role ambiguity and will offer guidelines for helping to reduce turnover among academic department secretaries.

These practical suggestions will answer Morris et al.'s (1979) concern that although the unfavorable effects of role conflict and role ambiguity have been widely reported, corrective action will be hampered until more is known about their respective sources. They will also address Kraye's (1987) observation that the literature has provided no specific training strategies for reducing role conflict and role ambiguity among subordinates in an organization.

CHAPTER 3
DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Population and Sample

For this study, the target population was academic department secretaries at 4-year public institutions in Virginia. In addition to being an accessible population, this group also provided the type of homogeneous sample advised by Jackson and Schuler (1985).

Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, there is no official job category labeled as academic department secretary. Therefore, it was necessary to operationally define academic department secretary as the individual who provides clerical support for the academic department and chairperson. When more than one person supports a department, the academic department secretary is the individual who occupies the most senior classified clerical position.

In order to obtain the names of eligible subjects, the first step was to contact the Personnel Director at each institution to request permission to survey their employees. [see Appendix A] The institutions that agreed to participate in this study were: George Mason University, James Madison University, Old Dominion University,

the University of Virginia, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Only one Personnel Director declined to participate.

Names of subjects were then obtained via two methods. In two instances, the Personnel Director provided a list of incumbent secretaries' names and departments. For the other three institutions, the author visited the campuses, called each department, and obtained the names over the telephone. Through these two methods, a total of 187 names was secured.

Because this process entailed on-site visits as well as waiting for others to fulfill their assignments, a period of six weeks elapsed between obtaining the first group of names and sending out the introductory letter to all eligible participants. It is therefore estimated that 3 - 5 positions may have been vacated prior to receiving the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedures

This study relied on data that were collected via a questionnaire that was mailed. Therefore, a number of steps were taken to improve the response rate while assuring that participant responses remained confidential.

After obtaining the names via the methods described above, eligible subjects were mailed an introductory letter which outlined the purpose of the project, advised subjects that participation was voluntary, and requested assistance

in this study. [see Appendix B] The following week, a copy of the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire [see Appendix C], a transmittal letter [see Appendix D], a self-addressed stamped postcard [see Appendix E], and a self-addressed stamped return envelope were sent.

The purpose of the postcard was to assure anonymity while monitoring the response rate. Participants were asked to send back the self-addressed stamped postcard indicating that they had either returned the survey under separate cover or did not wish to participate in this project. Use of the self-addressed stamped postcard was moderately successful.

While this technique assured anonymity for those who completed and returned a questionnaire and narrowed down the number of people who were sent a follow-up mailing, one drawback was that returned postcards did not necessarily correspond with returned questionnaires. Of 119 volunteers who returned the postcards, 68% (n = 81) indicated that they had completed and returned the questionnaire. This was less than the actual number of surveys returned.

The initial response rate for the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire was 63 percent (n = 118). Of the questionnaires returned, 111 (94%) were completed and 7 (06%) were not completed.

One week following the deadline for the return of the questionnaires, a follow-up letter [see Appendix F], an

additional copy of the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire, and a self-addressed stamped return envelope were sent to the 68 individuals who had not returned the postcard. In response to the follow-up mailing, twelve completed questionnaires were subsequently returned. As a result, the total number of completed questionnaires was 123 (66%).

Two weeks later, quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and transferred to optical scanning forms. After cross-checking the print-out of the data with the original questionnaires, the information was then loaded into the appropriate data file for analysis.

Instrumentation

Data were collected from academic department secretaries via a questionnaire that was designed by the author. Entitled the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire, the instrument contained both closed and open-ended items. [see Appendix C]

To assess similarities and differences among respondents, section I, items 1 - 6 requested the following demographic and employment information: gender, age category, number of years in current position, number of years department chairperson has held current position, number of faculty members supported, and percentage of time providing support to the department chairperson.

Secretaries' role conflict and role ambiguity were assessed via questions in section II of the questionnaire. Items 3, 7, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, and 24 measured role conflict and included statements such as "I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently" and "I receive incompatible requests from two or more people." Items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 measured role ambiguity and included statements such as "My planned goals and objectives are not clear" and "I feel certain about how much authority I have."

Secretaries' perceptions of academic department chairpersons' role conflict and role ambiguity were measured via questions in section III of the questionnaire. Again, items 3, 7, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, and 24 measured secretaries' perceptions of department chairpersons' role conflict and included statements such as "S/he has to buck one rule or policy in order to carry out another" and "There are unreasonable pressures for better performance." Meanwhile, items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 measured secretaries' perceptions of department chairpersons' role ambiguity and included statements such as "S/he doesn't know how s/he will be evaluated for a raise or promotion" and "S/he knows exactly what is expected."

These items were based on an updated version of the Role Questionnaire (RQ). Originally developed by Rizzo et al. in 1970, the RQ was later modified by House et al.

(1983). Using a scale of 1 (not at all true) to 5 (extremely true), respondents first indicated how well each of the 24 statements described their job and then indicated their perceptions about how well each statement described their department chairperson. Because items 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, and 22 were worded positively, these were scored in a reverse direction. As a result, the higher the overall score, the more role conflict or role ambiguity that is indicated.

The RQ is the most frequently used measure of role conflict and role ambiguity (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985; Breugh, 1980; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tracy & Johnson, 1981). Nicholson and Goh (1983) reported that the reliability of the original role conflict and role ambiguity scales were both .84 as estimated by Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Using the same measures, Jackson and Schuler (1985) noted that the reliability for the revised role conflict and role ambiguity scales were .82 and .86 respectively. When House et al. (1983) compared the original and revised role conflict and role ambiguity scales, they found extremely high correlations of .94 and .88 respectively.

Secretaries' perceptions of their decision participation level and their preferred decision participation level were assessed via questions in section IV. These questions were taken from the Management

Communication Style Instrument (MCS), a 2-item instrument developed by Richmond and McCroskey (1979).

The MCS is simple to administer. Subjects read a brief description of four decision communication styles and then indicate the level of their participation in supervisory decision making as well as their preferred level of participation in supervisory decision making. After obtaining permission from Dr. James McCroskey, the descriptions were revised slightly so that they specifically mentioned the department chairperson rather than a general reference to supervisor.

Respondents indicated their level of participation in supervisory decision making and preferred level of participation in supervisory decision making by circling the appropriate numerical values. The MCS scale is a 19-point continuum with values that range from 10 - 28. Along the continuum, the four decision communication styles are indicated and scoring is as follows: Tell (10), Tell-Sell (11-15), Sell (16), Sell-Consult (17-21), Consult (22), Consult-Join (23-27), and Join (28).

Based on the Tannenbaum-Schmidt continuum of leadership behaviors, Richmond and McCroskey (1979) reported a test-retest reliability of .85 and an internal reliability estimated to be .92. According to Wheelless et al. (1983), the reliability of this instrument ranges from .85 to .87. One advantage of the MCS is that it allows a broader range

of responses than a traditional forced-choice instrument.

Secretaries' communication openness and secretaries' perceptions of department chairpersons' communication openness were assessed in section V. Using a scale from 1 (completely open) to 5 (mostly closed), respondents first indicated how free and open they were in communicating their feelings and ideas with their department chairperson and then indicated how free and open the department chairperson was in communicating with them. These questions were based on the work by Burke and Wilcox (1969). There is no information available regarding its reliability and validity.

In section VI, propensity to leave was assessed via one item based on the work of Jackson (1983). Using a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 5 (extremely likely), respondents indicated the likelihood of making a genuine effort to find another job within the next 6 months. As indicated previously, turnover intentions appear to be reasonably predictive of actual attrition.

Finally, section VII provided respondents with the opportunity to share their subjective feelings concerning their position as an academic department secretary. The three open-ended questions addressed reasons for choosing to work in an academic setting, differences between academic department secretaries' positions and other academic support positions, and other factors that may affect job performance

or cause academic department secretaries to leave their job.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following three major research questions:

- Q1 To what extent do secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service predict academic department secretaries' role conflict?
- Q2 To what extent do secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service predict academic department secretaries' role ambiguity?
- Q3 To what extent do secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service predict academic department secretaries' propensity to leave?

In addition, the following subsidiary questions were investigated:

1. Is there a difference between academic department secretaries' report of their decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level?
2. Is there a difference between academic department secretaries' report of department chairpersons' communication openness and secretaries' communication openness?

Research Design

This correlational study employed a survey design. For the three major research questions, five predictor variables were correlated with three criterion variables to determine significant relationships. As mentioned earlier, the five predictor variables were: 1) secretaries' decision participation level, 2) department chairpersons' communication openness, 3) department chairpersons' role conflict, 4) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and 5) secretaries' length of service. The three criterion variables were: 1) secretaries' role conflict, 2) secretaries' role ambiguity, and 3) secretaries' propensity to leave.

To address the two subsidiary questions, this study examined the difference between secretaries' report of their

decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level as well as the difference between secretaries' report of their own communication openness and department chairpersons' communication openness.

Statistical Analysis

All computer-assisted statistical analyses were performed using the software package SPSS-X (Version 3.0).

Questionnaire items relating to background information (section I, items 1 - 6), were analyzed using a frequency distribution. A frequency count and percentage were obtained for categorical data such as gender, age group, and percentage of time supporting department chairperson. A frequency count, percent, mean, and standard deviation were obtained for interval data such as number of years in current position, number of years chairperson has held current position, and number of faculty members supported. According to Borg and Gall (1983), a frequency distribution can provide the most frequently occurring score, or mode, as well as the dispersion, or variability, of other scores around this central value.

Because the three major research questions sought to correlate five predictor variables with each of three different criterion variables, multiple regression analysis was selected as the statistical method for data analysis.

Borg and Gall (1983) describe multiple regression as a multivariate technique for determining the correlation between a criterion variable and some combination of two or more predictor variables. Through this procedure, it is possible to obtain a measure of the proportion of the variance in the criterion variables accounted for, or explained by, the predictor variables.

Three different multiple regression equations were written. The stepwise regression procedure entered the five predictor variables in order of strength, re-evaluating each variable at each stage to determine the extent of reduction in the unexplained variance. The minimum level of significance for including a predictor variable in the equation was set at the 0.05 level.

This study met the requirements for the use of multiple regression because all of the data were interally measured. Categorical data such as gender, age category, and percentage of time providing support to department chairperson were coded using binary or dummy variables (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973). For example, 'female' was coded as 1 and 'male' was coded as 2 so that the frequency and percentage of each value could be calculated.

The two subsidiary questions were analyzed using a t-test. The first investigated whether there was a significant difference between secretaries' communication openness and secretaries' perceptions of chairpersons'

communication openness. The second examined the relationship between secretaries' report of decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level. In both cases, the minimum level of significance was set at the 0.05 level.

The open-ended questions (items VII, 1 - 3) provided qualitative data which was designed to enhance the quantitative data collected. Responses to these questions were reviewed carefully and examined for trends.

Summary

Through administering the Academic Department Questionnaire, an instrument comprised of items which have already been utilized in the field, this study collected data from academic department secretaries at five 4-year public institutions in Virginia. Using a correlational design, the purpose was to examine the relationships between the variables of secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave and secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service. In addition, this study compared secretaries' communication openness with department chairpersons' communication openness. It also compared secretaries' decision participation level with preferred decision

participation level.

By using the stepwise procedure of multiple regression analysis, it was possible to determine the extent to which the predictor variables contribute to the amount of variance in the criterion variables.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As stated previously, the purpose of this study was to learn more about academic department secretaries, a vital yet often neglected population within the field of higher education. In order to accomplish that goal, information was gathered from academic department secretaries who were employed at selected four-year public institutions within Virginia. The vehicle used to collect that data was the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire, an instrument that contained both closed and open-ended items. [See Appendix C]

Of the 187 questionnaires sent out, 67 percent (n = 125) were returned. Two questionnaires were eliminated due to incomplete responses and two were eliminated because they arrived after the data had been analyzed. Therefore, this study yielded 121 usable questionnaires which represented a final return rate of 65 percent. As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that 3 to 5 of the academic department secretary positions may have been vacant at the time of the study.

This study was exploratory in nature because little was known about academic department secretaries. Therefore,

this chapter first presents the findings that address the subjects' background and demographic information. [See Tables 4.1 and 4.2] Following the discussion of participant characteristics, the results relating to each of the three major research questions and the two subsidiary questions are reported and analyzed.

Background Information

In order to learn more about this population, the following background and demographic information was collected from the academic department secretaries: gender, age group, length of service, department chairperson length of service, number of faculty supported, and percentage of time spent supporting the department chairperson. Based on the responses received, a number of generalizations can be made.

Gender:

The first characteristic investigated was gender. Not surprisingly, respondents were primarily women. In fact, 99 percent (n = 120) of the subjects were female while only 1 subject was male. This is consistent with Bernotavicz and Clasby's (1985) study which found that secretaries at the University of Southern Maine were exclusively female. Other writings consulted also indicated that secretaries were predominantly female (Butler, 1983; Gillett, 1987; Kagan &

Malveaux, 1986; Moore, 1985; "Secretaries suffer," 1984).

Age Category:

The next characteristic investigated was age. According to this study, the most represented category was 36 - 45 years of age. Thirty-five percent (n = 42) of the respondents reported their age in this category. The second most represented age category was 26 - 35 years of age. Thirty-one percent (n = 37) of the respondents reported that they were in this age range. Approximately one-fourth, or twenty-four percent of the respondents (n = 29) reported their age category as 46 - 55 years of age. Finally, the two extremes of the age continuum were the least represented by this population. Seven percent (n = 9) of the respondents reported their age as over 55 while only 3% (n = 4) reported their age category as 18 - 25 years.

The average age of academic department secretaries in this study is consistent with the average age of all Commonwealth of Virginia employees. According to Weaver (1989), at the time of this study, the mean age of State employees was 41.1 years. Employees specifically in secretarial classes, which include positions other than academic department secretaries, had an average age of 40.9 years.

A closer look at the age breakdown reveals that 33 percent of the respondents reported their ages as 18 - 35

while 66 percent of the respondents reported their ages as 36 or older. Again, this is consistent with 65.8 percent of all State employees who are 36 and older and 67.2 percent of employees in secretarial classes who are 36 years and older (Weaver, 1989).

Length of Service:

Because the majority of the sample population was generally "middle-aged," it was therefore interesting to find out that the length of service for academic department secretaries was comparatively short. The mean length of service was 6.4 years, however, the range was extremely broad. While 19 percent (n = 30) of the respondents reported 10 or more years in their current position, 59 percent (n = 72) reported 5 years or less. It is important to note that this survey addressed the number of years in the current position but not the total number of years of State service.

In comparison, the mean length of service for department chairpersons was 5.6 years, with the majority falling in the low end of the range. Academic department secretaries reported that 69 percent (n = 72) of the department chairpersons had 5 years or less and 55 percent (n = 67) had 4 years or less in their current position.

This finding is consistent with McLaughlin and Montgomery's (1976) survey of 1,200 department chairpersons

from 32 public doctoral-granting universities [cited in Booth, 1982]. They found that about one-half of all department chairpersons had been in office for fewer than four years. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that academic department secretaries reported their length of service as approximately one year longer than department chairpersons. According to Fife (1982), chairpersons generally view their position as temporary, intending either to return to the faculty or move to a higher administrative position [cited in Singleton, 1987.] Booth (1982) noted that there is clearly a rapid turnover and that uncertainty of status and ambiguity with regard to authority may help to account for the short term of chairpersons.

Number of Faculty Supported:

Although Moore (1985) previously indicated that academic secretarial personnel are simultaneously accountable to several faculty members, it was still extremely surprising to find that, on the average, secretaries in this sample reported that they provided support for 16 faculty members. Again, it is important to note that the range was extremely broad, with 36 percent (n = 44) reporting 10 faculty or less and 28 percent (n = 39) reporting 20 or more faculty supported.

Because the literature consulted has not addressed the issue of number of faculty supported, these findings should

be viewed as preliminary and no comparisons can be made.

Percentage of Time Supporting Chairperson:

As indicated above, academic department secretaries clearly provide support for individuals other than the department chairperson. When asked to indicate the percentage of time spent supporting the chairperson, 14 percent (n = 17) reported that they spend 0 to 20 percent of their time supporting the chairperson. Twenty-six percent of the respondents (n = 31) reported that they spend 21 to 40 percent of their time supporting the chairperson and 18 percent (n = 22) reported that they spend 41 to 60 percent of their time in that capacity. Twenty-six percent (n = 32) reported that 61 to 80 percent of their time was spent supporting the chairperson. Finally, 16 percent (n = 19) reported that 81 to 100 percent of their time was spent supporting the department chairperson. Again, these findings are preliminary and no comparisons can be made.

Summary of Background Information

Based on the data collected, a number of generalizations can be made concerning the academic department secretaries who participated in this study. First of all, the population is almost exclusively female. The most populous age group is 36 - 45 years, with two-thirds of the population reporting their ages as 36 and

older.

The average length of time these academic department secretaries have been in their current position was 6.4 years. However, it is important to note that more than half reported that they had been in their current position for 5 years or less. While this population exhibits a relatively short length of service, as a group, these academic department secretaries have occupied their positions approximately one year longer than the department chairpersons have occupied their positions.

Academic department secretaries appear to "serve many masters." The average number of faculty served by one academic department secretary was 16. In addition, 58 percent of the population reported that they spent less than 60 percent of their time supporting the department chairperson.

The preceding findings provide insight into the role of the academic department secretary in higher education.

Research Question #1

The first major research question examined the extent to which secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service contributed to academic department secretaries' role conflict. [See

Table 4.3] Of the five predictor variables entered in this first multiple regression equation, two factors were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level. The two significant variables were department chairpersons' role conflict and department chairpersons' communication openness.

The strongest predictor of academic department secretaries' role conflict was department chairpersons' role conflict. It was significantly and positively correlated with secretaries' role conflict ($r = .53$). With a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = .53$, department chairpersons' role conflict accounted for 28 percent of the variance.

Of the studies reviewed, none had specifically examined the relationship between superior and subordinate role conflict. In a closely related investigation, Frost (1983) identified a factor he labeled as "boss conflict" and described as a situation in which a boss forces his subordinates to deviate from the standard operating procedures. Frost (1983) found that boss conflict was positively and significantly correlated with role conflict ($r = .36$).

The second significant predictor of secretaries' role conflict was department chairpersons' communication openness. According to this study, when the department chairperson's communication was perceived as not being free and open, it contributed to academic department secretaries'

role conflict. Department chairpersons' lack of communication openness was significantly and positively correlated to secretaries' role conflict ($r = .37$). The multiple correlation coefficient was $R = .59$.

When combined, the two predictor variables of department chairpersons' role conflict and department chairpersons' lack of communication openness accounted for 35 percent of the variance.

These findings are consistent with French and Caplan's findings (1973) [cited in Frost, 1983]. They reported a significant correlation between superior lack of communication and subordinate perceptions of role conflict. Wheelless et al. (1983) found that communication satisfaction with supervisor and supervisor receptivity to information proved to be the best predictors of job satisfaction. More recently, Smeltzer (1987) found that communication was the most predominant variable in reducing role conflict and role ambiguity among employees.

While department chairpersons' role conflict and department chairpersons' communication openness proved to be significant predictor variables, the three factors of secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service did not significantly contribute to the prediction of academic department secretaries' role conflict.

Research Question #2

The second research question examined the extent to which academic department secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service predict academic department secretaries' role ambiguity. [See Table 4.4] For this multiple regression equation, three of the predictor variables were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level.

The strongest predictor of low secretaries' role ambiguity was chairpersons' communication openness. When academic department secretaries' perceived the department chairperson as engaging in open and free communication, it contributed to low academic department secretaries' role ambiguity. In contrast, when chairpersons were perceived as lacking open and free communication, it contributed to high secretaries' role ambiguity. Department chairpersons' lack of communication openness was significantly and positively related to secretaries' role ambiguity ($r = .52$). This variable accounted for 27 percent of the variance.

This finding is consistent with Kraye's (1986) observation that employees experience role ambiguity when they perceive that their supervisor's task related messages are ambiguous. In addition, French and Caplan (1973) [cited in Frost, 1983] found that perceptions of role ambiguity

correlated with perceptions of the boss showing a lack of communication. Smeltzer (1987) reported that communication was the most predominant variable in reducing role ambiguity.

Chairpersons' role ambiguity was the second significant variable in predicting secretaries' role ambiguity. It was significantly and positively correlated with academic department secretaries' role ambiguity ($r = .48$).

With a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = .62$, chairpersons' role ambiguity explained an additional 12 percent of the variance. As a result, at the second step in the multiple regression equation, the two variables of chairpersons' communication openness and chairpersons' role ambiguity combined to account for 39 percent of the variance.

While the relationship between subordinate and superior role ambiguity has not previously been investigated, as stated earlier, Frost (1983) found that the behavior of the immediate supervisor is clearly related to the subordinate's perceptions of role ambiguity. In his investigation, Frost identified the variable "boss ambiguity" and defined it as the lack of providing clarity to subordinate roles. Boss ambiguity was found to be significantly and positively correlated with role ambiguity ($r = .36$). In addition, Valenzi and Dessler (1978) previously reported that employees who viewed their supervisor as considerate and

supportive experienced less ambiguity.

The third significant predictor of academic department secretaries' role ambiguity was academic department secretaries' decision participation level. When secretaries perceived that they were included in department chairpersons' decisions, it contributed to lower academic department secretaries' role ambiguity. Decision participation level was significantly and negatively correlated with academic department secretaries' role ambiguity ($r = -.43$). In other words, low participation in chairperson decision making contributed to high role ambiguity while high participation contributed to low role ambiguity. The multiple correlation coefficient was $R = .65$ and this variable explained an additional 3 percent of the variance. At the third step in the multiple regression equation, the three predictor variables of department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' decision participation level combined to account for 42 percent of the variance.

Both Fisher and Gitelson (1983) and Jackson and Schuler (1985) previously reported a positive relationship between participation in decision making and reduced role ambiguity. Morris et al. (1979) found that participation in decision making reduced role ambiguity for 127 non-academic employees. Jackson's (1983) investigation of clerical

employees in a hospital also concluded that participation in decision making was an important factor in reducing role stress.

While decision participation level proved to be a significant predictor of role ambiguity in this study, it was not a major factor in predicting secretaries' role conflict. Again, this is consistent with Fisher and Gitelson's (1983) finding that role ambiguity tends to be more negatively related to decision participation level than does role conflict.

The two factors of department chairpersons' role conflict and academic department secretaries' length of service did not significantly contribute to the prediction of academic department secretaries' role ambiguity.

Research Question #3

The third research question examined the extent to which secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' communication openness, department chairpersons' role conflict, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service predict academic department secretaries' propensity to leave. [See Table 4.5] Of the five predictor variables, two were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level. The two variables were chairpersons' communication openness and secretaries' length of service.

The strongest predictor of propensity to leave was department chairpersons' lack of communication openness. The absence of free and open communication was significantly and positively correlated with academic department secretaries' propensity to leave ($r = .31$). The multiple correlation coefficient was $R = .31$ and this variable accounted for 10% of the variance. This is consistent with Wheelless et al. (1983) which reported that interactions with the supervisor is a communication-related variable that significantly contributes to employee job satisfaction.

Although secretarial length of service was significantly and negatively correlated with propensity to leave ($r = -.25$), with a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = .39$, this second variable accounted for only 6% of the variance.

Neither secretaries' role conflict nor secretaries' role ambiguity emerged as a significant predictor of secretaries' propensity to leave. This further supports Fisher and Gitelson's (1983) review of the literature which raised doubts as to the relationship between these variables. They reported a significant amount of unexplained variance after a chi-square test was performed on 12 samples ($n = 1814$) which investigated the relationship between role conflict and propensity to leave and 14 samples ($n = 1963$) which investigated role ambiguity and propensity to leave.

Subsidiary Question #1

The first subsidiary question examined the relationship between academic department secretaries' report of their decision participation level and their preferred decision participation level. [See Table 4.6] As indicated earlier, decision participation level was determined via the MCS scale, a 19-point continuum with values that range from 10 to 28. Along the continuum, four decision communication styles are indicated and scoring is as follows: Tell (10), Tell-Sell (11-15), Sell (16), Sell-Consult (17-21), Consult (22), Consult-Join (23-27), and Join (28).

When asked to report on their participation level in chairperson decision making, academic department secretaries reported a mean decision participation level of 19.4. This value corresponds with a hybrid style labeled "Sell-Consult." While the chairperson who utilizes the selling style tries to persuade subordinates of the desirability of his/her decisions, the consulting chairperson solicits advice, information, and suggestions from subordinates before making a decision (Richmond & McCroskey, 1979).

When asked to indicate their preferred decision participation level, academic department secretaries reported a mean decision participation level of 22.1. This value corresponds with the style labeled "Consult," one which allows for increased participation in chairpersons' decision making. The difference between academic department

secretaries' decision participation level and preferred participation level was significant at the .05 level, indicating an important discrepancy between actual participation level and preferred decision participation level.

Although academic department secretaries indicated that additional participation and input into department chairperson decision making is desired, the Sell-Consult style does allow for participation. This parallels Taylor's (1982) findings that two-thirds of the department chairpersons surveyed indicated that they employed Vroom and Yetton's consultative decision process, a style which allows for participation from others. In light of these findings, academic department secretaries in this sample appear to view department chairpersons in a manner that is consistent with department chairpersons' perceptions of themselves.

Subsidiary Question #2

The second subsidiary question examined the relationship between department chairpersons' communication openness and academic department secretaries' communication openness. [See Table 4.7]

When asked to indicate the extent to which they are free and open in communicating their feelings and ideas about their job and situation with their department chairperson, on a scale of 1 - 5, where 1 means completely

open and 5 means mostly closed, academic department secretaries reported a mean value of 1.9669. This corresponds most closely with the description "mostly open."

When asked to indicate the extent to which their department chairperson is free and open in communicating with them, using the same scale, academic department secretaries reported a mean value of 2.0909. This also corresponds most closely with the description "mostly open." As a result, the difference between academic department secretaries' and department chairpersons' communication openness was not statistically significant.

The similar levels of communication openness between the employee and the supervisor are consistent with Jablin's (1978) finding that regardless of the perceived openness or closedness of the communication relationship, subordinates expect a complementary response from their superior. In addition, Jablin (1978) found that a substantial degree of reciprocity exists for confirming messages between subordinate and superior. These findings also support Van Sell et al.'s (1981) view that there is a transactional relationship between the focal person and the role sender. In other words, communication behaviors between people tend to parallel or mirror each other.

Summary of Research and Subsidiary Questions Findings

Each of the five predictors investigated was found to

be a significant factor in at least one of the multiple regression equations, however, the variable department chairpersons' communication openness emerged as the most noteworthy. Chairpersons' communication openness was a significant factor in all three multiple regression equations.

The importance of communication openness was previously illustrated by Newton and Keenan (1987) who reported that a supportive interpersonal climate and social support from the superior were important predictors of low role conflict and role ambiguity. These findings clearly support the current emphasis on effective communication in the workplace.

While chairperson communication openness emerged as a significant predictor of academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave, it is important to note that, overall, secretaries' viewed their chairpersons as being free and open in their communication. In addition, academic department secretaries reported that they felt free and open in their communication with the department chairperson.

This study also found that role conflict and role ambiguity are viewed as distinct factors. Department chairpersons' role conflict was a significant factor in predicting secretaries' role conflict but not secretaries' role ambiguity. Similarly, department chairpersons' role ambiguity was a significant factor in predicting

secretaries' role ambiguity but not role conflict. This supports the previously stated position that role conflict and role ambiguity should be treated as two separate variables (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Pearce, 1981; Schuler et al., 1977; Van Sell et al., 1981).

In review, this study unveiled a number of factors which affect academic department secretaries' job performance and may cause secretaries to think about leaving their jobs. The next step is to identify strategies which may help reduce secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave.

Table 4.1
 Background and Demographic Characteristics
 of Academic Department Secretaries
 (Categorical Data)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	120	99.2
Male	1	.8
Total	121	100.0
 Age Group		
18 - 25	4	3.3
26 - 35	37	30.6
36 - 45	42	34.7
46 - 55	29	24.0
over 55	9	7.4
Total	121	100.0
 Percent of Time Supporting Chairperson		
0 - 20%	17	14.0
21 - 40%	31	25.6
41 - 60%	22	18.2
61 - 80%	32	26.4
80 - 100%	19	15.7
Total	121	100.0

Table 4.2
 Background and Demographic Characteristics
 of Academic Department Secretaries
 (Intervally Measured Data)

Characteristic	Mean	Range	S.D.
Secretaries' Length of Service	6.38	0 - 26	6.00
Chairpersons' Length of Service	5.64	0 - 32	5.55
Number of Faculty Supported	16.26	1 - 60	11.78

Table 4.3
 Predictors of
 Academic Department Secretaries' Role Conflict
 (Research Question #1)

Variable Entered	MultR	R ²	r
Step 1			
Department Chairpersons' Role Conflict	.5304	.2814	.5304*
Step 2			
Department Chairpersons' Communication Openness	.5894	.3474	.3702*

* p < .001

Table 4.4
 Predictors of
 Academic Department Secretaries' Role Ambiguity
 (Research Question #2)

Variable Entered	MultR	R ²	r
Step 1			
Department Chairpersons' Communication Openness	.5231	.2737	.5231*
Step 2			
Department Chairpersons' Role Ambiguity	.6232	.3884	.4778*
Step 3			
Decision Participation Level	.6497	.4221	-.4307*

* p < .001

Table 4.5
 Predictors of
 Academic Department Secretaries' Propensity to Leave
 (Research Question #3)

Variable Entered	MultR	R ²	r
Step 1			
Department Chairpersons' Communication Openness	.3107	.0965	.3107*
Step 2			
Secretaries' Length of Service	.3950	.1560	-.2543*

* p < or = .001

Table 4.6

Relationship Between Academic Department Secretaries'
Decision Participation Level and
Preferred Decision Participation Level

(Subsidiary Question #1)

Variable	Mean	S.D.	t
Decision Participation Level	19.39	5.33	
Preferred Decision Participation Level	22.04	3.25	-6.17*

* p < .001

Table 4.7

Relationship Between Department Chairpersons' and
Academic Department Secretaries'
Communication Openness

(Subsidiary Question #2)

Variable	Mean	S.D.	t
Department Chairpersons' Communication Openness	2.09	1.14	
			1.52**
Academic Department Secretaries' Communication Openness	1.96	1.18	

** p > .05

CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Academic department secretaries play a vital yet neglected role within higher education. Despite Dressel's (1981) observation that secretaries are often the main point of contact for both students and faculty, previous higher education studies have failed to include any discussion of academic clerical staff (Bernotavicz & Clasby, 1985). Therefore, by learning more about this overlooked population, this study has taken an important step in rectifying this oversight.

The intent of this project was to learn more about the role of academic department secretaries in higher education. Specifically, the three major research questions in this study investigated the relationship between the three criterion variables of academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave and five predictor variables. The five predictor variables were: 1) secretaries' decision participation level, 2) department chairpersons' communication openness, 3) department chairpersons' role conflict, 4) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and 5) secretaries' length of service.

In addition, this study investigated two subsidiary

questions. The first examined the difference between academic department secretaries' report of decision participation level and secretaries' preferred decision participation level. The second subsidiary question examined the difference between academic department secretaries' own communication openness and department chairpersons' communication openness.

To address these questions, this correlational study employed a survey design. Because the three major research questions sought to correlate five predictor variables with each of three different criterion variables, three different multiple regression equations were written. The step-wise regression procedure entered each of the five predictor variables in order of strength, re-evaluating each variable at each stage to determine the extent of reduction in the unexplained variance. The two subsidiary questions were analyzed using a t-test.

Based on the responses from 121 academic department secretaries from five four-year public institutions within Virginia, a number of interesting observations can be made.

First and foremost, this study revealed that this sample experienced role conflict and role ambiguity, two factors which have an adverse effect on the individual as well as his or her organization. In this investigation, it was found that the factors that contributed significantly to academic department secretaries' role conflict were:

1) department chairpersons' role conflict and 2) department chairpersons' lack of communication openness. It was also found that the factors that contributed significantly to academic department secretaries' role ambiguity were:

- 1) department chairpersons' lack of communication openness,
- 2) department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and
- 3) secretaries' decision participation level.

In addition to investigating factors that predict academic department secretaries' role conflict and role ambiguity, this study also focused on factors that are related to academic department secretaries thinking about leaving their jobs. It was found that the factors that contributed significantly to secretaries' propensity to leave were: 1) department chairpersons' lack of communication openness and 2) secretaries' length of service.

The two subsidiary questions also yielded interesting results. There was a statistically significant difference between academic department secretaries' decision participation level and preferred decision participation level. Respondents indicated that they wanted department chairpersons to include them to a greater degree in the decision making process. In the area of communication openness, it was found that there was no significant difference between academic department secretaries' and department chairpersons' level of communication openness.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the data collected, a number of conclusions can be drawn concerning academic department secretaries, and more specifically, this sample's role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. The conclusions are presented as follows: 1) background and demographics of academic department secretaries who participated in this study, 2) role conflict among academic department secretaries and department chairpersons, 3) role ambiguity among academic department secretaries and department chairpersons, 4) propensity to leave among academic department secretaries, 5) decision participation level among academic department secretaries and department chairpersons, and 6) communication openness among academic department secretaries and department chairpersons.

Background Information:

1. This sample is almost exclusively female as indicated by 99.2 percent of the respondents.
2. The sample is generally "middle-aged." The most represented age group was 36 - 45 years (35%) and 66 percent of the respondents indicated that they were 36 years or older.
3. Length of service in current position varied considerably within the sample (S.D. = 6.0). While the mean length of service was 6.4 years,

the majority of the sample fell in the low end of the range. Fifty-five percent reported having 4 years experience or less. On the average, academic department secretaries occupied their current position approximately one year longer than did the department chairpersons.

4. Academic department secretaries "serve many masters." The sample indicated that they provide support for an average of 16 faculty members. Fifty-eight percent of the population reported that they spent less than 60% of their time supporting the department chairperson.

Role Conflict:

1. Academic department secretaries in this sample experienced role conflict and reported that department chairpersons experienced role conflict as well.
2. The two statistically significant predictor variables of academic department secretaries' role conflict were department chairpersons' role conflict ($r = .53$) and department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .37$).
3. Secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' role ambiguity, and secretaries' length of service were not

statistically significant predictors of secretaries' role conflict.

Role Ambiguity:

1. Academic department secretaries in this sample experienced role ambiguity and reported that department chairpersons experienced role ambiguity as well.
2. The three statistically significant predictor variables of academic department secretaries' role ambiguity were department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .52$), chairpersons' role ambiguity ($r = .48$), and secretaries' decision participation level ($r = - .43$).
3. Department chairpersons' role conflict and secretaries' length of service were not statistically significant predictors of secretaries' role ambiguity.

Propensity to Leave:

1. Despite the incidence of role conflict and role ambiguity, the majority of this sample (58%) indicated that it was "extremely unlikely" or "somewhat unlikely" that they would make a genuine effort to find another job within the next 6 months.

2. Turnover is still a potentially serious issue. One-third (33%) indicated that it was "extremely likely" or "somewhat likely" that they would make that effort. Ten percent indicated that they were "unsure."
3. The two statistically significant predictor variables of secretaries' propensity to leave were department chairpersons' lack of communication openness ($r = .31$) and secretaries' length of service ($r = -.25$).
4. Secretaries' decision participation level, department chairpersons' role conflict, and department chairpersons' role ambiguity were not statistically significant predictors of secretaries' propensity to leave.

Decision Participation Level:

1. Overall, academic department secretaries in this sample view department chairpersons as having a participative decision making style. On a scale with values that ranged from a low of 10 to a high of 28, the mean decision participation level was 19.4. This translates into a hybrid style labeled "Sell-Consult." While the chairperson who utilizes the selling style tries to persuade subordinates of the desirability of his/her

decisions, the consulting chairperson solicits advice, information, and suggestions from subordinates before making a decision (Richmond & McCroskey, 1979).

2. Although academic department secretaries view department chairpersons as participative in their decision making, this sample indicated that they preferred to be included in decisions to a greater extent. The preferred mean decision participation level was 22.1. This translates to a style labeled "Consult." A department chairperson who employs this style allows for increased participation in decision making. The chairperson makes the ultimate decision but not until the problem has been presented to subordinates and their advice, information, and suggestions have been obtained (Richmond & McCroskey, 1979).
3. There was a statistically significant difference between academic department secretaries' decision participation level and preferred decision participation level ($t = -6.17$).

Communication Openness:

1. Academic department secretaries in this sample reported that they were free and open in communicating their ideas and feelings about their

job and situation with their department chairperson. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "completely open" and 5 means "mostly closed," the mean value was 1.9669. This corresponds most closely with the description "mostly open."

2. Academic department secretaries viewed department chairpersons as "mostly open" as well. The mean value was 2.0909.
3. Communication openness appears to be a reciprocal behavior. There was not a statistically significant difference between academic department secretaries' and department chairpersons' communication openness.

Discussion

Academic department secretaries in this sample reported that they experience role conflict and role ambiguity. This presents serious problems because role conflict and role ambiguity may impede people from attaining or completing a task successfully by decreasing overall performance, job satisfaction, and organizational confidence (Bergmann & O'Malley, 1979). These negative factors increase an employee's mistrust and alienation (Booth, 1972). When employees experience role conflict and role ambiguity, they communicate less with their co-workers and supervisors (Kahn

et al., 1964), experience lower self-esteem, possess a higher sense of futility, and report feelings of greater tension (Sethi & Schuler, 1984). Clearly, these consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity create grave problems for the secretary, the academic department, and the institution as a whole.

Turnover among academic department secretaries is also a serious concern for the department and the institution. Previously it has been mentioned that it is difficult for colleges and universities to retain high quality support staff (Wheless et al., 1983). Also, position turnover translates into additional costs for the institutions (Sethi & Schuler, 1984).

When the factors that significantly contributed to secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave were examined closely, some important trends emerged. One important finding is that the perceptions and behaviors of the department chairperson are related to the perceptions and behaviors of the academic department secretary. In other words, supervisory actions and beliefs contribute to negative consequences such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave among subordinates.

The most notable contributing factor in this study was department chairpersons' lack of communication openness. It proved to be a statistically significant variable in predicting academic department secretaries' role conflict,

role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. Clearly, effective communication is an integral component of effective leadership.

Another important finding was that role conflict and role ambiguity emerged as distinct factors. Previous researchers (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Pearce, 1981; Schuler et al., 1977; Van Sell et al., 1981) urged that role conflict and role ambiguity be treated separately in spite of the fact that these two variables are consistently and positively correlated with each other (Schuler et al., 1977). This study confirmed that the two variables were indeed viewed differently. While department chairpersons' role conflict was a statistically significant predictor of academic department secretaries' role conflict, it was not a predictor of secretaries' role ambiguity. Although department chairpersons' role ambiguity emerged as a statistically significant predictor of academic department secretaries' role ambiguity, it was not a predictor of secretaries' role conflict. As a result, future research should continue to treat the variables of role conflict and role ambiguity distinctly.

Upon reviewing the findings, this investigation clearly issues a warning signal. One-third (33%) of the respondents indicated that it was "extremely likely" or "somewhat likely" that they would make a genuine effort to find another job within the next six months. In light of these

findings, academic departments and institutions must take steps to retain competent department secretaries.

While department chairpersons' lack of communication openness and secretaries' length of service were statistically significant in predicting secretaries' propensity to leave, when combined, these two variables only accounted for 16 percent of the variance. Needless to say, the decision to leave the job is affected by many other factors. Some of these factors were revealed in the open-ended portion of the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire.

The decision to leave the job may be motivated by neutral or positive factors. For example, one person indicated that her family was moving out of state. On a positive note, two participants indicated that they had completed their undergraduate studies and would be entering graduate school elsewhere. This later reason is extremely important because this sample often cited educational opportunities and tuition reimbursement as benefits of their position.

Not all of the comments were as positive. The most frequently cited reason for leaving the job was insufficient compensation for the level of responsibilities. The position of academic department secretary was described as "dead end" where additional responsibilities did not translate into additional money. Many indicated that they

had reached the top of the pay scale and had no where to go. There were numerous complaints that the individual's position description did not accurately describe the breadth and scope of actual responsibilities. One respondent described the position as follows:

My position is unique in the fact that I am also a data entry operator, research statistician, receptionist, assistant to the graduate program director and software expert for the department. I feel that being called a secretary is a big mistake.

Other respondents indicated that their job duties included researching and editing manuscripts, counseling and advising students, and managing the department budget. Another respondent stated that a more accurate title would be "administrator." The job duties described by this sample clearly go beyond the traditional stereotype of a secretary.

Another reason cited for leaving the job was a lack of respect from faculty and the department chairperson. A number of respondents noted that faculty members took advantage of them. One example was that a faculty member telephoned the secretary to ask her to place a call for him. Several respondents indicated that chairpersons asked them to do personal chores. Another example was that while faculty get summers and semester breaks off, they can't understand why secretaries want to take one day off. Regrettably, these anecdotes echo Gillett's (1987) claim that higher education supports a caste system in which clerical employees are treated as "non-persons."

Many respondents complained that the chairperson lacked the necessary administrative skills. This confirms previous findings that department chairpersons are generally ill-prepared and inadequately trained (Booth, 1982; Haynes, 1985; Lee, 1985; McKeachie, 1968; Whetten, 1984). Lack of effective leadership certainly makes it more difficult for academic department secretaries to do an effective job.

Another issue identified was lack of training and resources. While some indicated that they had personal computers but were not afforded the opportunity to obtain training, one respondent indicated that the department chairperson refused to consider purchasing a personal computer for her because he did not like them.

Although the majority of respondents who included written remarks cited negative factors, a handful of respondents noted that they were extremely satisfied in their current position. One of the reasons given was mutual respect and inclusion in decisions. Another respondent noted that rather than placating her with empty words, this individual's department chairperson utilized her talents and respected her input. Still another noted that the department worked together as a team.

While many factors may influence an individual's decision to leave the job, steps must be taken to retain quality employees. Excessive turnover can only add to the already existing strains and pressures within the

departmental unit.

At first glance, these findings may present some discouraging news for higher education. A vital member of the departmental unit, the academic department secretary, is suffering from role conflict and role ambiguity. These two factors clearly detract from the individual's effectiveness and have a negative impact on the organization as well. In addition, one-third of the sample surveyed indicated that they were considering leaving their jobs within the next six months. The outlook certainly appears bleak.

There is, however, a possible solution on the horizon. Because many of the factors that contributed to academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave can be classified as supervisory behaviors and attitudes, training for department chairpersons may provide relief. Specific suggestions for such training will be identified in the following section.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study identified factors that contributed to academic department secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave. According to Jackson and Schuler (1985), the next step is to correct problems related to role conflict and role ambiguity.

How Can Department Chairpersons Reduce Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Among Academic Department Secretaries?:

The findings in the study suggest that role conflict and role ambiguity may be "contagious." Therefore, before department chairpersons attempt to reduce role conflict and role ambiguity among academic department secretaries, it is essential that they reduce these negative factors within themselves.

Singleton (1987) suggested a few of the steps that could be implemented to clarify the role of the department chairperson, thus helping to reduce his or her role conflict and role ambiguity. The suggestions are as follows:

1. clearly defining the chairperson's responsibilities, not only to his or her faculty, but also to the dean and other higher-level administrative personnel
2. opening lines of communication so that expectations concerning the faculty's and administration's view of the department chairperson's position are congruent
3. developing orientation programs for new chairpersons and in-service training for other chairpersons who need it

After clarifying his or her position, the department chairperson can take a number of steps to assist the academic department secretary in reducing role conflict and role ambiguity. As supported by the findings in this study,

the major weapon for combating role conflict and role ambiguity is effective communication. Krayter (1986) noted that the problem often lies not with the subordinate but rather with the superior's communication of instructions.

If information is vague, contradictory, incomplete, or the responsibilities and duties for the position are not clear, the role incumbent experiences role ambiguity (Krayter, 1986). Therefore, the first suggestion is that department chairpersons practice giving clear oral instructions. In order to accomplish this objective, the following techniques may prove helpful:

- 1) organize thoughts carefully
- 2) use techniques such as summarizing information given throughout the conversation and restating key points
- 3) check understanding by having the other person repeat or paraphrase the instructions in their own words

In addition to giving clear job instructions, it is vital that department chairpersons provide ongoing feedback on job performance. Previously, Moore (1985) found that there was an absence of systematic performance review for academic department secretaries. While the Commonwealth has a formal performance appraisal system in place, several respondents stated that they did not receive ongoing feedback on their performance. One individual noted that

she is kept in the dark and not apprised of her progress until the annual performance appraisal.

Lack of clear and ongoing feedback results in negative consequences for the individual and the department. When feedback is not provided, the employee assumes that performance is satisfactory (Moore, 1985). In addition, employees tend to rate themselves higher than they are rated by their supervisors or peers (Shapiro & Dessler, 1985). Effective performance is dependent on effective communication of expectations and ongoing feedback.

How Can Academic Department Secretaries Be Retained?:

Academic department secretaries view their responsibilities as being very broad and involved. Currently, most feel that their efforts are undervalued both financially and interpersonally. As a result, an important first step for department chairpersons is to re-assess the contribution of the academic department secretary. While chairpersons cannot increase secretaries' compensation on their own, they can ensure that position descriptions accurately reflect the current duties of the individual.

Compensation is not the only answer. Department chairpersons must assure that they and their faculty members treat the academic department secretary with respect. The secretary is an important part of the team and should be viewed as such. Other agencies within the Commonwealth have

training programs specifically designed for managers and their secretaries. Higher education should invest in similar workshops.

Academic department chairpersons must also acknowledge that their current role is that of administrator or manager. Although chairpersons tend to view themselves as faculty rather than administrators (Booth, 1982), department chairpersons are responsible for as much as 80% of all administrative decisions made in colleges and universities (Knight & Holen, 1985). In addition, Fife (1982) noted that chairpersons view their role as temporary [cited in Singleton, 1987]. With an average length of service of 5.6 years, department chairpersons must stop seeing this as an interim position.

Implications for Future Research

Needless to say, this study is just the first step in understanding the role of academic department secretaries in higher education. At this time, it is still unclear as to what specific tasks and job duties are actually performed by academic department secretaries. In some instances, respondents indicated that they have assumed responsibility for tasks traditionally assigned to the chairperson. Therefore, it is important to ascertain the level and breadth of academic department secretaries' responsibilities.

While this project identified several factors that contributed to role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave among academic department secretaries, there are still many unanswered questions. First of all, what are the other factors that contribute to academic department secretaries' propensity to leave? Secondly, do those secretaries who indicate a propensity to leave actually leave their positions?

In this study, the issue of gender was not addressed. However, because the sample was almost exclusively female, future research should try to determine if there are significant differences between female secretaries who work for female department chairpersons and those who work for males.

Clearly, this sample indicated that they experienced role conflict and role ambiguity and wanted more participation in decision making. Additional research is needed to determine whether the respondents' desire for more involvement is the result of a cohort effect.

This study also provided department chairpersons with some suggestions for reducing the negative consequences of role conflict and role ambiguity. The next step is to identify department chairpersons who are effective managers and to determine what specific behaviors make them successful. Another avenue to explore is to provide training for department chairpersons and assess the impact

of that training on secretaries' role conflict, role ambiguity, and propensity to leave as well as the chairperson's own role conflict and role ambiguity.

Whatever the future direction of higher education research, it is clear that the role of the academic department secretary can no longer be ignored.

APPENDICES A - F

Appendix A

**Letter to Personnel Directors Requesting Permission
To Survey Academic Department Secretaries**

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARY PROJECT
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Dear :

I know that you will agree that academic department secretaries play a vital role at your institution. Unfortunately, little is known about this group or the factors that affect their job performance and/or may cause them to leave their jobs. As a result, I am undertaking a research project which will help address these issues and I need your assistance in the following:

- 1) I request your permission to survey academic department secretaries at your institution. (This project and all of the instruments have been approved by the human subjects committee at the College of William and Mary.)
- 2) I request the names and campus mailing addresses for your institution's academic department secretaries. For the purpose of this study, an academic department secretary is defined as the individual who provides clerical support for the academic department and chairperson. Where more than one person supports the department, this is the individual who occupies the most senior classified position.

Please send the listing of names and addresses to me at the address listed above. To assure anonymity, no identification will be requested on the survey form and only aggregate data will be reported.

Thank you for your assistance. Learning more about academic department secretaries can enhance your institution's effectiveness and help retain a valuable member of your staff. Upon completion of this study, a summary of the results will be sent to you. In the interim, if you have any questions, please contact Rona Vrooman or Roger Baldwin at (804) 253-4434.

Sincerely,

Rona J. Vrooman
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B
Introductory Letter To Eligible Subjects

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARY PROJECT
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Dear :

As an academic department secretary, you play a vital role within your institution. Therefore, it is important to learn more about some factors that may affect your job performance and/or may cause you to think about leaving your job.

In approximately one week, you will receive a questionnaire that will take about 30-45 minutes to complete. The same questionnaire will be sent to your colleagues at four other universities in Virginia. All responses will be completely confidential -- no identification will be requested, questionnaires will be sent directly to me, and only group results will be reported. The sole purpose of the survey is to learn more about your perceptions and opinions and it will not be used for performance appraisal or any other reason. Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating.

This project has been approved by your institution. When the questionnaire arrives, I hope you will participate in this very important project. Your contributions will be extremely valuable and will aid others in understanding the significant role you play.

If you have any questions, please contact Rona Vrooman at (804) 225-2019 or Dr. Roger Baldwin at (804) 253-4434.

Sincerely,

Rona Vrooman
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C
Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire

Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn more about factors which may affect your work performance and/or cause you to think about leaving your job. Please answer all questions honestly.

I. Background Information

1. Gender (circle one) Male Female
2. Age (circle one) 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 over 55
3. As of June 1, 1989, number of years in your current position? _____ year(s)
4. As of June 1, 1989, number of years your department chairperson has held his/her current position? _____ year(s)
5. Within your department, how many faculty members do you support? _____
6. What % of your time is spent providing support to your department chairperson? (circle one)
 0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

II. The following questions ask you to describe your particular job. For each characteristic, circle the number that best reflects your opinion about what your job is like.

	NOT AT ALL TRUE	SLIGHTLY TRUE	MODERATELY TRUE	QUITE TRUE	EXTREMELY TRUE
1. My authority matches the responsibilities assigned to me.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My planned goals and objectives are not clear.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I have to do things that should be done differently.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I don't know what is expected of me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I know what my responsibilities are.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Explanations are clear about what has to be done.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I have to buck one rule or policy in order to carry out another policy.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I feel certain about how much authority I have.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My department chairperson makes it clear how s/he will evaluate my performance.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I often have unclear orders from my department chairperson.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I am often asked to do things that are against my better judgment.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I have clear planned goals and objectives for my job.	1	2	3	4	5
14. My responsibilities are clearly defined.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I don't know how I will be evaluated for a raise or promotion.	1	2	3	4	5
16. There are unreasonable pressures for better performance.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I often get involved in situations in which there are conflicting requirements.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I don't know what opportunities there are for advancement and promotion.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I work under unclear policies and guidelines.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I don't know how to improve my performance on the job.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I know exactly what is expected of me.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I don't know how to develop my capabilities for future success in my job.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.	1	2	3	4	5

III. This set of questions asks you to think about how your department chairperson views his/her job. Based on your knowledge of your chairperson, circle the response that you feel best reflects his/her opinion about what his/her job is like. REMEMBER: Answer each item as you believe your department chairperson would answer it!

	NOT AT ALL TRUE	SLIGHTLY TRUE	MODERATELY TRUE	QUITE TRUE	EXTREMELY TRUE
1. Her/his authority matches the responsibilities assigned.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The planned goals and objectives are not clear.	1	2	3	4	5
3. S/he has to do things differently.	1	2	3	4	5
4. S/he doesn't know what is expected of her/him.	1	2	3	4	5
5. S/he knows what her/his responsibilities are.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Explanations are clear about what has to be done.	1	2	3	4	5

-Continued-

	NOT AT ALL TRUE	SLIGHTLY TRUE	MODERATELY TRUE	QUITE TRUE	EXTREMELY TRUE
7. S/he has to buck one rule or policy in order to carry out another.	1	2	3	4	5
8. S/he feels certain about how much authority s/he has.	1	2	3	4	5
9. The person s/he reports to makes it clear how her/his performance will be evaluated.	1	2	3	4	5
10. S/he often has unclear orders from the person s/he reports to.	1	2	3	4	5
11. S/he works with two or more groups who operate quite differently.	1	2	3	4	5
12. S/he is often asked to do things that are against her/his better judgment.	1	2	3	4	5
13. S/he has planned goals and objectives for her/his job.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Her/his responsibilities are clearly defined.	1	2	3	4	5
15. S/he doesn't know how s/he will be evaluated for a raise or promotion.	1	2	3	4	5
16. There are unreasonable pressures for better performance.	1	2	3	4	5
17. S/he receives an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.	1	2	3	4	5
18. S/he often gets involved in situations in which there are conflicting requirements.	1	2	3	4	5
19. S/he doesn't know what opportunities there are for advancement and promotion.	1	2	3	4	5
20. S/he works under unclear policies and guidelines.	1	2	3	4	5
21. S/he doesn't know how to improve performance on the job.	1	2	3	4	5
22. S/he knows exactly what is expected.	1	2	3	4	5
23. S/he doesn't know how to develop capabilities for future success in the job.	1	2	3	4	5
24. S/he receives incompatible requests from two or more people.	1	2	3	4	5

IV. This set of questions asks you to examine the management communication style of your department chairperson. Please read each of the 4 descriptions carefully and then respond to the 2 questions below the descriptions.

TELLS. The department chairperson who employs this style always makes the decisions (or receives them from above) and announces them to subordinates, with the expectation they will be carried out without challenge. There is little communication with subordinates. Questions about the job to be done are generally accepted, but questioning the decision is discouraged.

SELLS. The department chairperson who employs this style always makes the decisions (or receives them from above), but rather than simply announcing them, the chairperson tries to persuade subordinates of the desirability of the decisions. The chairperson communicates with subordinates and questions are actively encouraged. Challenges are often met openly with persuasive counter-arguments.

CONSULTS. The department chairperson employing this style also makes the ultimate decisions, but not until the problem has been presented to subordinates and their advice, information, and suggestions have been obtained. Subordinates communicate with the chairperson to help make the best decision and explore various options based on the needs of the employee and the university.

JOINS. The department chairperson employing this style does not make the decisions. Rather, the authority to make the decision is delegated to the subordinates, either in cooperation with the chairperson or in the chairperson's absence. The chairperson defines the problem and indicates the limits within which the decision must be made. Chairperson and subordinates communicate as equals or near equals.

Respond to the following items using the above descriptions:

- What management communication style does your department chairperson use? (Circle one NUMBER)
10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28
TELLS SELLS CONSULTS JOINS
- What management communication style would you prefer to work under? (Circle one NUMBER)
10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28
TELLS SELLS CONSULTS JOINS

-Continued-

V. This set of questions asks you to describe the communication openness of your department chairperson and yourself.

1. How free and open are you in communicating your feelings and ideas about your job and situation with your department chairperson? (circle one)

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| completely
open | mostly
open | half open,
half closed | somewhat
closed | mostly
closed |

2. How free and open is your department chairperson in communicating with you? (circle one)

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| completely
open | mostly
open | half open,
half closed | somewhat
closed | mostly
closed |

VI. This question asks if you are planning to leave your job in the near future.

1. Taking everything into consideration, how likely is it that you will make a genuine effort to find another job within the next 6 months? (circle one)

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| extremely
unlikely | somewhat
unlikely | unsure | somewhat
likely | extremely
likely |

VII. The following questions offer you the opportunity to share your opinion about your job. Use additional paper if needed.

1. Why have you chosen to work in an academic setting rather than other settings such as business or government?

2. Based on your knowledge of other non-faculty support positions within your university, is there a difference between those positions and your position? If so, what specific factors make your position as academic department secretary unique?

-Continued-

3. Use this space to provide any other information you feel would be helpful in understanding the role of academic department secretaries, factors that would affect job performance and/or reasons why academic department secretaries may leave their job.

Thank you for your assistance!!!

Please mail your completed survey in the self-addressed, stamped envelope by
Be sure to return the self-addressed postcard indicating that you have completed the questionnaire!

If you have any questions or comments regarding this study, please contact.

Rona J. Vrooman or Dr. Roger Baldwin
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185
(804) 253-4434

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Appendix D
Transmittal Letter

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARY PROJECT
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Dear Academic Department Secretary:

Recently, I wrote to you about a research project designed to learn about factors that affect your job performance and/or may cause you to think about leaving your job. At this time, I hope you will participate in this very important study and will complete the enclosed questionnaire.

Please ...

- 1) Complete the questionnaire and return via the self-addressed stamped envelope within 1 week.
- 2) Complete and return the enclosed self-addressed stamped postcard.

Remember, this project has been approved by your institution, all responses are completely confidential and participation is voluntary. If you decide not to complete the questionnaire, please complete and return the self-addressed stamped postcard indicating your decision so that I will not contact you again.

I sincerely hope you will take this opportunity to share your perceptions and opinions so that others can learn more about the significant role of academic department secretaries.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me at (804) 225-2019.

Sincerely,

Rona Vrooman
Doctoral Candidate

enclosures

Appendix E

**Postcard To Indicate Participation/
Non-Participation**

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARY PROJECT

_____ YES, I have completed and
mailed the questionnaire.

_____ NO, I do not wish to
participate in this study.

Appendix F
Follow-Up Letter

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SECRETARY PROJECT
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Dear Academic Department Secretary:

As of June 16, 1989, I have not received the postcard indicating that you have either returned the Academic Department Secretary Questionnaire or have decided not to participate in this study. Therefore, I am sending this follow-up letter.

If you have already completed the survey, please accept my sincere thanks and appreciation for your cooperation! If not, I hope you will take this opportunity to share your views and ideas by completing and returning the enclosed questionnaire. This is an ideal opportunity to assist others in understanding the significant role you play.

Once again, thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please call me at 8-225-2019.

Sincerely,

Rona J. Vrooman
Doctoral Candidate

enclosure

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Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in
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