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Professional Experiences of Women Administrators in Student Services

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

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College of Education

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Abstract

The number of women pursuing higher education now outnumbers that of men. However, the number of women in administration and faculty roles does not mirror that of the student population. Instead, women are often found in midlevel and low level positions, especially within student services and student affairs. This thesis is a qualitative study that employs the phenomenological method to explore and examine the professional experiences of seven midlevel administrators in student affairs and student services at GVSU. The constant comparative method of coding was used to analyze the data, identify themes, and articulate assertions. The themes that emerged from the study included the path to the administrator role, experiences as an administrator, negotiating work life balance and mission/motivation. The findings of this study exhibited that midlevel women administrators at GVSU experience an environment that is supportive of women.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

The number of women students enrolled in American colleges and universities now outnumbered that of male students. Enrollment patterns in higher education include increasing numbers of women, creating a student environment that is increasingly characterized as feminine (Engstrom, McEwen, & Williams, 1991). The national ratio of female to male students in the United States is 57 to 43 percent (McGlynn, 2007). However, in many institutions of higher education, the number of women employed in faculty and administrative positions is not representative of the student body (Thomas, Bierema, & Landau, 2004; Twombly, 1998). Progress has been made and female administrators' standing has improved since the mid-twentieth century (Duffy, 2010). As of 2010, half of the Ivy League institutions are led by women and six of the Big 10 universities either have or have had female presidents.

However, it is a false impression to believe that gender equity in higher education and student affairs administration has been achieved (Duffy, 2010). As Duffy (2010) points out, even though higher education and student affairs graduate programs continue to attract more women, it is still men that hold the majority of roles of deans, vice presidents, and senior administrators. Women remain clustered in midlevel administrative positions or low level positions. Those who are committed to seeing women achieve administrative leadership positions in higher education have been hopeful about the women who have been paving the way for increasing numbers of women to find opportunities as institutional leaders (Reisser & Zurfluh, 1987).

The number of female faculty also remains relatively low in comparison to that of male faculty. While the number of female faculty has grown steadily, many schools continue to have notably fewer women than men (Gmelch, 1998; Ward & Pamela, 2013). In most cases, female

faculty are overrepresented at schools with higher teaching loads and lower pay, but are underrepresented at elite colleges and research universities (Gmelch, 1998). For those women who are employed at major research institutions, they are paid less than their male peers (Thomas et al., 2004). Not only are they paid less than their male counterparts, it is difficult for women faculty to transfer positions from a two-year to a four-year college, from baccalaureate to doctoral institutions and from non-research to research universities (Rodin & Featherman, 1994).

Women are often found in higher education administration, but not at the higher levels because they have not been able to scale career ladders within higher education with the “speed, ease, or height of their male counterparts” (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 63). Instead, women dominate the lower and middle levels within the field of student affairs or student services as it is often considered a feminine profession (Duffy, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1991). The midlevel administrative positions inhabited by women are often the firing-line managers who have the responsibility to monitor and regulate policies and procedures but rarely have the authority to change, adjust, or develop the regulations they enforce (Rosser, 2000). The “nature of student affairs work is that of being, nurturing, care oriented, sharing, and facilitative, which is often a good fit for the kinds of attributes, interests, and skills frequently found in women” (Engstrom et al., 1991, p. 442). Difficulties arise because women working in higher education are faced with challenges that are not customarily encountered by men. Factors affecting women administrators include a lack of mentors, the struggle to balance work and family, and a lack of opportunities available to women (Aiston, 2011; Eberspacher, 1998; Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001; Twombly, 1998).

There has been extensive research addressing the experiences and challenges of female faculty who have moved into administrative positions such as department chair and dean (Allan

2011; Cummins 2012; Twombly 1998). However, there is very little research that has been published to examine the experiences of non-faculty women who work in midlevel higher education administration (Anderson, Guido-DiBrito, & Morrell, 2000). As of 2008, there were over 4,000 accredited institutions of higher education with more than 600,000 nonteaching professional staff in the United States (Jo, 2008). Many of the nonteaching staff are employed in the student services and student affairs sectors. The purpose of this research is to address this gap in the literature and explore the professional experiences of women administrators at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) who occupy midlevel positions in departments within student services, also known as student affairs.

Importance of the Problem

Institutions of higher education have been fundamentally structured to serve the interests and priorities of predominantly white men, leaving women in administrative positions feeling frustrated, isolated and underrepresented (Engstrom et al., 1991; Neale & Ozkanh, 2010). This practice cannot continue if female students are to be encouraged to pursue careers in higher education administration. Female senior administrators have long been a minority, despite affirmative action requirements of the 1970s (Reisser & Zurfluh, 1987). It is critical to examine and proactively investigate the experiences and address the challenges to professional success that women in midlevel student affairs administration endure in order to reduce the barriers that hinder the achievement of gender equity on campus in the twenty-first century (Duffy, 2010). Those in midlevel administrative positions are often promoted because “they emerge as the informal leaders within their work units, display strong interpersonal skills, work hard, have the technical skills to perform well in the position, and are dependable” (Rosser, 2000, p. 7).

The conditions of employment in higher education position women and men differently and unequally, even though women's representation in academic leadership has increased (Pyke, 2013). In the classroom, women are more likely to devote time to working hard and serving others while men are more likely to spend their time developing relationships to network and move up the administrative ladder (Allan, 2011). Because the traditional university workplace is "inherently patriarchal where power and authority largely rest with men," women have to work extraordinarily hard to succeed (Neale & Ozkanh, 2010, p.551). There is extensive research addressing the experiences and obstacles of female faculty. However, the challenges of women in midlevel administrative roles in higher education have not been widely studied (Allan, 2001; Bensimon, Glazer, & Townsend, 2011; Jo, 2008).

Background of the Problem

In the late nineteenth century, the faculty and presidents of the earliest colleges and universities were challenged by the needs of students outside of the classroom. Faculty "were not only charged with achieving the academic mission of their colleges but also expected to manage the seemingly inconsequential at the time social, athletic and co-curricular lives of students" (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010, p. 61). It was from this need to support and encourage the needs of students outside the classroom that the area of student services, also known as student affairs, was born.

The president and administrators of the oldest university in the United States, Harvard University, recognized the need for a student services administrator as early as 1890 when the first dean of men was appointed. According to Schuh, Jones, and Harper (2010), the primary role of the dean of men was to discipline the young men who did not abide by the university's rules in addition to being in charge of developing their lives outside of the classroom. The

authors also found that as institutions of higher education evolved and more students attended colleges and universities, students brought with them an increasing variety of needs that fell outside of the authority of the classroom faculty.

It was with this in mind that the realm of student services expanded to meet the needs of students' co-curricular interests to include such services as recruiting students, providing financial aid, housing them, feeding them, and providing health services (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010). As the administration of colleges and universities continued to evolve and students themselves developed into independent individuals, the services and experiences students required of college and university faculty and staff changed as well.

In the early days of higher education, female students were not originally permitted to enroll in colleges and universities. "Unlike men, who were never barred from attending college on account of their sex, women were unable to enroll in any college until Oberlin permitted them entrance in 1837" (Graham, 1978, p. 764). Advocacy for women's education grew because society realized that women's role as mothers of male citizens offered the first powerful rationale for higher education (Duffy, 2010). Graham (1978) describes how the civil war caused a shortage of male students which caused institutions to allow tuition paying female students to enroll as well, and they became 21 percent of the total undergraduate population by 1870. By 1920, the number of women enrolled in American colleges and universities had risen to 47% of all undergraduate students (Duffy, 2010).

As a result of the increase in female students and an inability of college presidents and male faculty to know what to do with female students, a dean of women position was added to the existing dean of men but with very different responsibilities. Rather than being responsible for advising and counseling male students like deans of men, deans of women were assigned to

more disciplinary and administrative functions including the housing of women students, training in etiquette and women's athletics (Duffy, 2010; Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010). As described by Nidiffer (2001), the Dean of Women position was first created at small midwestern liberal arts colleges in the early nineteenth century and was often called the dean of women but held other titles which included "Lady Principal of the Female Department" and "judicious matron" (pp. 136-137). Dean of women were tasked with ensuring that young women were closely supervised in their interactions with young men at the college. Oberlin College opened its doors to women in 1833 and hired their first "Lady Principal of the Female Department" to "supervise the living arrangements of and moral guardianship of the women students" (Nidiffer, 2001, p. 137). Since then, the scope of student services has broadened to include professionals working within housing, student unions, student activities, counseling, career development, enrollment management, minority support services, retention and assessment (National Association of Student Affairs Professionals Association [NASPA], n.d.). Though the number of personnel within student services has grown and changed, there has been minimal research conducted to document the experiences of women administrators in student services.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the professional experiences of women who serve as midlevel administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University. Midlevel administrators are defined as a nonexempt, noncontract group of administrative staff who rarely have the protection of tenure and typically report to a top-level officer, administrator or dean (Rosser, 2000). Due to the nature of the study, I employed a phenomenological method of qualitative study that describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences in terms of a concept or phenomenon (Creswel, 2012).

Phenomenological method involves the researcher collecting data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a combined description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Creswel, 2012). At the basis of phenomenological method is the philosophical approach of phenomenology which is concerned with how things appear to us in our experience and are perceived in our consciousness (Frost, 2011). Phenomenological method allows me, as the researcher, to gain insight into the experiences of the participants' lives through open discussion with them.

Research Question

As is the case with phenomenological research, this study attempts to more adequately understand the human condition as it manifests itself in lived experience (Spinelli, 2005). For that reason, it was guided by the following question:

What are the professional experiences of women administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University?

Design, Data Collection and Analysis

This thesis employs a phenomenological design, and research procedures involved a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study of the human experience (Charmaz & Wertz, 2011). "Phenomenology is a philosophic attitude and research approach, its primary position is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity, and that the person is integral to the environment" (Flood, 2010, p. 7). For that reason, the best method for gathering data using this method was through face-to-face interviews with midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University. To select the participants for my study, I used criterion-based sampling by which a researcher specifies a

set of characteristics in advance that the study must address (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The predetermined criterion included women who have not served as faculty, and currently serve as midlevel administrators within student services or student affairs.

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in the administrators' offices at GVSU and lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes. I asked the participants a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix A) about their background and experiences so that I could gain more insight into the professional experiences of women in administration. The semi-structured format of the interview allowed respondents to provide insight into their own view of the world while being flexible enough to raise issues that may not have been included in a predefined list of questions (Cohen et al., 2000). I taped the interviews with the permission of the participants.

I utilized the constant comparative method of coding recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to analyze the data, identify themes, and to articulate assertions. Final reports were written up in terms of themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis.

Definition of Terms

Administrator

A postsecondary staff position that requires competency as a leader and manager. They must also be creative, "fund and friend raisers" for their respective department (McClellan, 2009).

Midlevel Administrator

A nonexempt, noncontract group of administrative staff who typically report to a top-level officer. Midlevel administrators are tasked with maintaining a balance between their

supervisors' directions and the needs of faculty, students, and the public who require their support and services (Rosser, 2000).

Student Affairs Administrator

Professionals who attend to the services needed by college students such as financial aid, admissions, housing, etc. as well as those who attend to the development of residence life, academic and career advising and multicultural centers (Anderson et al., 2000).

Student Services

A term used to describe the work of contemporary student affairs professionals whose work includes but is not limited to the following : housing, student unions, student activities, counseling, career development, enrollment management, minority support services, retention and assessment (NASPA, 2013; Rosser, 2000; Schuh, Jones & Harper, 2011)

Delimitations of the Study

This was a qualitative, illustrative, and investigative study that explored the experiences of midlevel women administrators who work within student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University. The study focused specifically on women who did not begin their careers as faculty.

Limitations of the Study

This research study has several limitations. Since the participants were selected using criterion-based sampling, the findings may not generalize to a larger population. The sample size was small which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to all midlevel female administrators at Grand Valley State University. In addition, since all participants work at one

university, Grand Valley State University, it is difficult to directly correlate their experiences with those of midlevel women administrators at other institutions in different parts of the country.

Organization of the Thesis

In the next chapter, I will explore the theoretical framework that guides my study. I will also provide a review of the related literature. In the third chapter, I will describe the details of my research design, introduce the interview participants and explain the steps I followed to collect and analyze the data. Chapter four will present the results of my research as well as the process of data analysis. In chapter five, I will explore the conclusions that can be drawn from my findings as well as provide suggestions for future research and practice.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework for my research study. I also synthesize the research literature related to the study of the professional experiences of women administrators in higher education. I explore the few existing studies that examine women administrators in student services and demonstrate the need for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Women administrators, both past and present, work as organizational change agents but changing an institution as conservative as higher education is no easy task (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001). “The advancement of women is transforming both men’s and women’s roles in society, altering gender relations, and changing the size and nature of the family” (Wheeler, 2000, p. 47). In order to better understand the contributions of women administrators who have paved the way, feminist theory is used to explain the experiences of women administrators in higher education. Feminism focuses on injustices that have developed over time and currently exist in our society, and feminist theory places gender at the center of its analysis, suggesting that gender is a primary organizing characteristic in society (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). As described by Roper-Huilman and Winters (2011), feminist theory is founded on three main principles. First, women have something valuable to contribute to every aspect of our world. Second, since women as a group experience oppression, they have been unable to develop their full aptitude or benefit from the rewards of full involvement in society. Lastly, feminist research should foster change including activism, scholarship, policy-making, and individual action.

Some argue that there is a distinctive method used by feminist researchers in order to influence the direction and outcomes of research (Harding, 1987). However, Harding (1987) explains that the methods of feminist researchers are often used interchangeably by researchers with varying epistemologies. The goal of feminist research and the use of feminist theory is guided by methodologies rooted in epistemologies that seek knowledge about women's experiences (Harding, 1987) which is the goal of my research. Thus, although I am examining the experience of midlevel women administrators in higher education using feminist theory, my methods are the same as any other researcher.

Synthesis of Research Literature

Few studies have been conducted to explain the unique experiences of women administrators in higher education. The majority of studies focus on female faculty and the reasons why they are often in the minority (Bowker, Hinkle & Worner, 1983; Pyke, 2013). "Comparatively, few studies are specifically related to professional staff and data are lacking related to women in classified staff positions in higher education" (Allan, 2011, p. 76). Most significantly, very few research studies have focused on women administrators within the areas of student services and student affairs (Bensimon, Glazer, & Townsend, 2011).

Administrators Defined

In higher education, there are three dimensions along which administrators can be categorized. The first dimension deals with the level of responsibility and authority within the organization (Aleman & Renn, 2002). Customarily, the executive level administrators include senior level positions such as the president, provost, and deans. Aleman and Renn (2002) describe the next level in the administrative structure of colleges and universities consisting of

midlevel administrators. Positions included in this group are directors, associate directors and department chairs. The final category of administrators described by Aleman and Renn are professional positions that are not specifically designated with administrative authority. According to Aleman and Renn these positions are often entry level and the level at which woman are most highly represented.

A second dimension of administrative structure within universities and colleges is the distinction between academic and nonacademic administrative hierarchies as well as the professional positions included in each (Aleman & Renn, 2002). As described by Aleman and Renn (2002), the academic administrative group comprised of positions like provost, dean and department chair has control over and provides resources for the faculty. The nonacademic administrative units include positions that are closely related to the “academic heart” of the university, such as registrar and academic advising (Aleman & Renn, 2002, p. 460). According to Aleman & Renn, the nonacademic administrative units include a wide range of areas that support the academic mission of the college or university and often include the departments of financial management, human relations, and student affairs. “They may be classified as administrators, professionals, technicians, or specialists, and their positions tend to be differentiated by functional specialization, skills, training, and experience” (Rosser, 2000, p. 5). Yet, their commitment, dedication, and enthusiasm for their institution and the work they do make them invaluable. The primary difference between those that are employed within the two hierarchies is that those in the academic administrative group were previously faculty while those in the nonacademic administrative group were not.

Barriers

Since higher level academic administration positions like women college presidents have a faculty or academic track and extensive research already focuses on faculty, the focus of my research concentrated on those who did not pursue the academic track (Bensimon, Glazer, & Townsend, 2011). A recent study conducted by Human Education Resource Services found that “female higher education administrators still face subtle barriers, such as being held to different expectations than male counterparts, lack of support, discouragement and even sabotage” (Oguntoyinbo, 2014, p. 6). Of those studies that have been performed on women administrators that did not pursue the academic track, the most common barriers encountered by women administrators include a lack of mentors, the struggle to balance work and family, and a lack of opportunities available to women.

Lack of mentors. One obstacle that has been found to prevent women from moving into administrative positions is a lack of female mentors and role models in higher education. In a 1981 study of women administrators in southern institutions, almost all (92%) of the few women who have achieved leadership roles were supervised by males (Villadsen, 1981). This statistic substantiates the claim of women administrators who feel they have few female role models within the field of educational administration (Clarke, 1988; Eberspacher, 1998). It is difficult for women students who are attempting to plan careers, often in male dominated fields, to find the mentors to guide them in their journey. In truth, women students benefit greatly from the opportunity to view successful women managers and administrators on campus but the reality is that they often do not exist (Villadsen, 1981). “As long as women continue to be underrepresented as role models as teachers, researchers and managers at the higher levels of

academia, higher education institutions risk losing women from the sector generally” (Airini, Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson, & Wilson, 2011, p. 45).

Eberspacher and Sisler (1988) describe that although merit is usually thought to be the primary criterion for career advancement, social selection on any number of arbitrary variables plays a role in selection for initiation into a profession. “Within the literature, this process of initiation has been termed mentorship” (Eberspacher & Sisler, 1988, p. 27). Some observe that mentorship is the single most important key towards success in upper level administration in higher education.

Historically, mentor relationships have been primarily the territory of males. There are relatively few mentor relationships for women in higher education, though there are women employed in professional positions in higher education (Eberspacher & Sisler, 1988; Tomas, Lavie, del Mar Duran, & Guillamon, 2010). A survey from 2011 by the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management found that women consider male bosses most helpful in allowing women to succeed against gender bias (Davis, 2011). Of the 300 professional women surveyed, all of them said they received the most help from their spouses or partners and got more help from women rather than men in their professional lives. However, it was the male supervisors whose help the women found most effective (Davis, 2011). It calls into question if male supervisors are considered more effective simply because there are more of them. Federal legislation and affirmative action programs have provided incentives for institutions of higher education to hire women administrators. However, “the number of female educational executives remains negligible, in part because of a critical lack of mentors” (Eberspacher & Sisler, 1988, p. 28).

Clarke (1988) made an important distinction in reference to the way men and women in academia define mentor relationships. In her research, Clarke found that almost as many women as men said they had a relationship with someone who they considered to be a mentor. However, there was a difference in definition in regards to the degree of closeness or length of the mentor relationship which resulted in positive assistance to career advancement (Clarke, 1998). “Men tended to understand the term in its traditional sense, that is a mentor being someone in a position to teach, guide and promote the career of a protégé. Women most often took the term in the sense of a role model, rather than as an active supportive relationship” (Clarke, 1998, p. 49).

As Holt (1981) argues, mentors are the single most important factor in an administrator’s career development. Mentors can be helpful in a myriad of ways. They can suggest strategies for career mobility, act as a protégé’s toughest critic, and also open doors (Holt, 1981). In addition, female mentors can provide invaluable contacts and offer firsthand advice about handling sensitive situations that may be unique to a woman in administration (Holt, 1981). The success of a young female administrator in higher education could depend on the availability of more established female mentors.

In addition to a lack of women at the upper levels of administration to serve as mentors, there is another issue that affects women administrators from having female mentors. In some instances, where there are women at higher levels, female misogyny can develop. Cummins (2012) points out that female misogyny is a reality that exists but little attention is paid to it. “This much under-researched area must be explored to ascertain how and why women may work against each other” (Cummins, 2012, p. 6). Cummins described Queen bees as women who hold other women back or block them on the ladder of success. Queen bees often look like a woman

but think like a man and are able to perform a traditional and a nontraditional role simultaneously but effectively (Benton, 1980). A Queen bee believes she gained her high level administrative position through her own determination and is not usually supportive of other women (Cummins, 2012). They believe that women get to the top on their own without the help or support of others. For that reason, a Queen Bee is unwilling to offer her knowledge or experience to female administrators following in a similar path. “Ironically, the Queen bees in higher education are in excellent positions to recruit, support, and recommend other women, but are not inclined to do so” (Benton, 1980, p.6).

Work and family. A second factor that contributes to women’s inability to advance is the conflict between the expectations of an administrative role in higher education and the traditional societal roles of women. Women are often tasked with being the primary care taker for their families making it difficult to fulfill professional obligations. On the other hand, fatherhood is not seen as damaging to academic careers nor does it prevent men in academia from advancing (Aiston, 2011; Pyke, 2013). Due to the responsibilities that women have at home, they are much more likely than men to abandon their plans for a career in higher education because of the long hours and demanding workloads. For female faculty, this is due to the constant demands of research and a “disillusionment with academia” brought about by inadequate compensation, political infighting and severe competition (Allan, 2001, p.78). For woman administrators, it is often due to long hours, demanding workloads or an inability to move into higher positions. In some cases, women decide that they are not willing to take on administrative roles because they have adopted the traditional social roles of women and prioritized their roles as wife and mother over their careers (Neale & Ozkanh, 2010).

In a study that surveyed women administrators at southern United States institutions, it was found that the stereotype of “administrator as spinster” is false (Villadsen, 1981, p. 60). Of the 263 women administrators surveyed in the study, 75% of the women were or had been married. Women who had children usually had small families: 68% had only one or two children and very few (18) reported having pre-school children (Villadsen, 1981). As Villadsen states, the number of women administrators is representative of the number of mothers within the overall workforce and more of them are being forced to balance the two demanding jobs of manager and mother.

Clark (1988) demonstrated how woman struggle to find a position in higher education if they choose to take an extended leave after the birth of a child. Those who decided to take more than a year’s break followed a common pattern of difficulty to reenter the job market (Clarke, 1988). If suitable employment could not be found, some woman returned to school or had to start all over again with “more serious career goals” (Clarke, 1988, p. 48). This is a challenge often experienced by women who were faced with the decision whether or not to return to work soon after the birth of a child.

Anderson et al. (2000) report a study of student affairs middle managers in Colorado that indicated that female participants experience higher levels of stress, both at work and away from work, than their male colleagues. The “stressors away from work were frequently related to caregiving activities and health concerns with children, aging parents, or friends” (Anderson et al., 2000, p. 105). Though men participate in caregiving, women often take up the greater share of caregiving in society and often shoulder a greater burden for this work (Allan, 2011). “It has been the woman’s responsibility to raise a family and manage a household, these are roles which consume time and energy” (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008, p. 266). The burden is one that can

disadvantage women professionally as well as take a personal toll on them (Allan, 2011). In addition, families may not be willing or supportive of the household managers and caregivers to the family to pursue greater roles in their professional careers (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008).

For some women, having children made it difficult for them to compete for promotions and higher level positions. In Clarke's (1988) research, two women reported that having children, and not being able to put in the extra hours when needed, was a factor in their not being hired or promoted. When asked about discrimination, several women said they experienced "condescension" rather than discrimination (Clarke, 1988). Those women felt that less was expected of them intellectually than their male counterparts, and that they had to work extra hard to correct their male supervisors' impression of how well they could handle technical material (Clarke, 1988).

Cummins (2012) uses boundary theory to explain the burdensome interaction between a female administrator's work and home responsibilities. When work life encumbers home life and vice versa, the female administrator becomes burdened and exhausted (Cummins, 2012). It is often demanding schedules and work overload that is frequently responsible for family and time conflicts which can reduce job satisfaction and increase stress for student affairs administrators (Anderson et al., 2000). When the burdens of administrative positions become too much to bear, women are more likely than men to leave for noneconomic reasons while men are more likely to leave for higher-paying jobs (Jo, 2008).

Lack of opportunities. A tertiary factor affecting women's ability to be successful in administrative roles in higher education is a lack of opportunities available to them. Studies examining administrative careers in higher education have demonstrated that the mobility and

attainment of administrative careers are influenced by structural variables that include region, affiliation, size, institutional type, prior position, and administrative specialties, among others (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994). In addition to those factors, studies have produced specific evidence to suggest that women are disadvantaged and men are advantaged in the promotion process (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994).

One theory used to explain the absence of women in significant leadership roles is similarity attraction (Gallant, 2014). Gallant (2014) explains that similarity attraction is based on the idea that familiarity is a powerful force that affects who gets employed and promoted. Similarity attraction perpetuates the cycle of men hiring and promoting men which fosters unequal representation (Gallant, 2014). There is a disparity in the number of women in senior administrative positions in universities compared to men (Airini et al., 2011). “Women have been overrepresented at director, associate, and assistant levels in student affairs but notably missing from senior leadership in education” (Biddix, 2011, p. 444).

Male vs. Female Traits

“Even the physical characteristics of leaders such as height and appearance are frequently male, and also typically white and middle class” (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001). Women who do take on administrative roles experience tension between masculine and feminine societal norms. For example, if they use what would be considered a typically masculine approach depicted by decisiveness and assertiveness, they are labeled as noncompliant and controversial. On the other hand, if they behave in a typically feminine way, they are seen as vulnerable and ineffective (Allan, 2001).

Summary

Women managers and administrators in higher education face issues characterized by the need to shape women's positions in roles traditionally occupied by men (Priola, 2007). Women have proven themselves to be capable and competent of achieving and occupying administrative positions, but their experiences and challenges differ greatly from those of their male counterparts. In an environment created for and by males, women find many challenges in being successful administrators. Women administrators experience a lack of supportive, female mentors and also a difficulty in balancing the demands of being successful at work while also managing all the responsibilities of their home and family. In addition, there is a lack of opportunities for women to move up into higher level administrative roles and pressure for them to display traits traditionally labeled as masculine in order to be recognized for promotion.

Conclusion

Women administrators tend to be in the minority in most institutions, with most reaching middle management primarily in student services and external affairs (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). However, very little has been studied in regards to the women who occupy the non-academic administrative roles and the challenges they experience. The proportion of females in managerial roles, particularly at lower-middle level positions, may increase but this does not necessarily produce a change in institutional practices (Priola, 2007). "Women have a higher rate of employment but a lower likelihood of professional advancement" (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 198). In order to determine the reason why women administrators experience more challenges, it is important to gain insight into their professional experiences.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the professional experiences of midlevel women administrators who hold positions in departments housed within student services or student affairs at GVSU. To accomplish this goal, the research explored the following major question:

What are the professional experiences of midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University?

In this chapter I describe the research design that was used to answer this question. I begin with a description of the data collection procedures, including a description of the sampling and interview processes. This is followed by a discussion of the data analysis procedures.

Research Design

This study employed the phenomenological research design, where the researcher seeks to uncover how individuals experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The phenomenological approach is most suitable “where it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experience of a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 61). Phenomenology focuses on studying human experiences “in order to clarify their role in the process of meaning-construction, and, as well, attempts to set them aside – or ‘bracket’ them – in order to arrive at a more adequate knowledge of reality” (Spinelli, 2005, p.5).

The study began by identifying the phenomenon to study – the experience of being a midlevel woman administrator at Grand Valley State University. The next step was to identify

and solicit the participation of individuals who had experienced the phenomenon, and to determine the data collection procedures (Creswell, 2012). Research procedures I selected were qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory. They consisted of face-to-face interviews with seven midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University. In the following section I provide details about the data collection process including a description of how I selected participants and the interview process. This is followed by a description of the data analysis procedures.

Data collection

After I received approval from the Human Research and Review Committee, I began data collection. I requested participation from seven midlevel women administrators who all agreed to participate. Prior to the start of the study, during the consent process, all participants were informed of their rights and procedures that would be taken to maintain the confidentiality of the information. Interviews were conducted during the fall 2014 semester.

Sampling. To select the participants for my study, I used criterion-based sampling by which a researcher specifies a set of characteristics in advance that the study must address (Cohen, et al., 2000). The predetermined criterion included women who had not served as faculty, and currently serve as a midlevel administrator in a student services or student affairs department. I selected the criteria based on the fact that very little has been done to study the experiences of women who work as higher education administrators and did not begin their careers as faculty (Allan, 2011).

At GVSU, the departments traditionally considered student services or student affairs are housed within two divisions, Student Services and the division of Academic Services and

Information Technology. As noted by McClellan, Stringer & Barr (2009), there are some distinct differences in regards to which service and support units are part of the student affairs or student services division. In most cases, it includes student activities, student counseling, residence life, multicultural student services, and advocacy services. Like GVSU, some student affairs or student service divisions also include enrollment management (which often includes the registrar, financial aid and admissions), career services, retention programs and learning centers, and general student advising services. Between the two divisions, there were a total of 13 departments in 2014 and within those 13 departments; there were 32 non-faculty women administrators (P. Batty, personal communication, January 31, 2014). From those 32 non-faculty women administrators, I purposively selected seven women in midlevel administrative positions to interview. As an ethnically diverse group of midlevel female administrators, the participants represented a wide range of knowledge with five to 18 years of experience in student services and student affairs. The population is restricted to this group because I am focusing my research on midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs who did not begin their careers as professors.

The interview process. I conducted face-to-face interviews with each participant; each interview lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes. The interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participant. During the interview, I asked the participants a series of open-ended questions about their background and experiences. The interviews provided the women administrators the opportunity to share their personal stories about how each of them gained the experience, skills and expertise necessary to be successful in their current role.

The interview questions were semi-structured. I had some initial questions that were open ended to allow the interviewees' responses to drive the discussion. As is customary with

qualitative interviews, the discussions were more like conversations than formal, structured interviews. I, as the researcher, explored a few general topics but I also respected how the participant structured their responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I was interested in learning about each woman's professional history, challenges she may have encountered as well as factors that were helpful along her career path. The questions that I used in the interviews are listed in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Michigan. All interviews were conducted in the administrators' offices at GVSU which were all on the Allendale campus. As a midlevel women administrator who has worked at GVSU in student services for over eleven years, I had access to the participants and was able to identify with their experiences.

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed the conversations. The recordings and the transcriptions were kept in a locked cabinet in my locked office in the Student Services Building on GVSU's Allendale campus. The audio tapes were deleted once data analysis was complete. All electronic data was stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office. The signed consent forms and other materials related to HRRC approval were also kept in the secure cabinet.

Data Analysis

I used the constant comparative method of coding recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to analyze the data, identify themes, and to articulate assertions. Constant comparative method relies on the fact that comparison is necessary to develop findings that are grounded in data (Boeije, 2002). The constant comparative method of data analysis is an inductive process of open coding. The researcher identifies codes that capture the essence of the data. Using the

process of axial coding, these codes are then combined into categories and categories are combined into themes that explain the phenomenon being studied. Final reports were written in terms of themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis.

After all data was collected, I transcribed the audio recordings. Transcriptions were then printed and reviewed in order to write summaries of each administrator's interview that highlighted the main points of their experiences. After writing the summaries, I read each interview again line by line and listed in vivo codes next to each section. In vivo codes are "the words and phrases used by informants themselves, catchy ones that immediately draw your attention to them" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 69). In vivo coding allowed me, as the researcher, to honor the participant's voice, which was my intent (Saldana, 2009). To ensure that I represented the story and voice of each participant accurately, I sent my findings to the participants for their review.

Through the course of carefully reading the seven interviews line by line, a total of 221 codes were created from the data. I then reviewed the codes and combined those that were identical or very similar. Codes that appeared multiple times but used different wording were merged into one code. For example, "work experience" and "body of work" were combined into one code. I also removed codes that appeared only once that could not be easily grouped with related codes. After careful review, the codes were narrowed down to 51 codes that were grouped into 12 categories, and four themes (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: *Coding Analysis*

<u>Codes</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Themes</u>	
Attention to detail	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Path to the administrator role</i>	
Confidence			
Observervant			
Looking for a challenge			
Motivation			
Career focused			
Responsibility			
Work experience			<i>Professional Connections</i>
Lateral move from similar position			
Moved up the ladder			
Seek out mentors	<i>Educational Preparation</i>		
Advanced education			
Acquired additional education			
College			
Right place, right time		<i>Serendipity</i>	
Invited to apply			
Boss' support			
Position just opened up			
Someone took a chance on me	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Experiences as administrators</i>	
Opportunities			
Acceptance/encouragement			
Camaraderie/support			
Powerful coalitions			
Personal fulfillment			
Stereotypes			<i>Challenges</i>
Women are their own worst enemies			

Sexism		
Being pigeon holed		
Being young		
Belittled		
Mother/aunt	<i>Mentors</i>	
Provide constructive criticism		
Support		
Role models		
Boss, colleagues and staff as mentors		
Child care/sick child	<i>Stressors</i>	<i>Negotiating work-life balance</i>
Missing things with kids/guilt		
Lack of time for self/exhausted		
Stress/lack of joy		
Emotional toll of caring for staff/family		
Stay at home spouse	<i>Family Support</i>	
Supportive partner/spouse		
Family support/mother		
Accept you can't have it all	<i>Strategies for coping</i>	
Doesn't have to be perfect		
Use of vacation time		
Working nights/weekends		
Setting an example	<i>Advocate for students</i>	<i>Mission/Motivation</i>
Serve as a mentor		
Change climate/see change happen	<i>Change agent</i>	
Make a difference		

Chart 1 lays out the organization of codes, categories and themes. Codes are listed according to their in vivo indicators. Codes that were similar were grouped into related categories. The categories were then grouped into themes.

Summary

This research study involved face to face interviews with seven midlevel women administrators who were employed within student services and student affairs. Questions posed during the interviews were semi-structured and open ended to allow for a free flowing discussion during the interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gather data regarding the professional experiences and possible challenges experienced by women in non-academic administrative roles. To compare the results of the interviews, a causal comparative method was used to look for similarities in the respondents' answers and the responses were categorized to identify common themes. The findings will be offered in chapter four, and a discussion of the findings will be presented in chapter five.

Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter I present the findings of the study. In order to set the scene for the study, I first describe the context in which the study was conducted. This is followed by a description of each of the major themes that emerged during the analysis of the data.

Context

Grand Valley State University is a liberal arts institution of higher education located in Allendale, Michigan. In addition to the main campus in Allendale, Grand Valley has a large metropolitan campus located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, approximately fifteen minutes from the main campus in Allendale. In addition, there are three small regional centers located in Muskegon, Holland and Traverse City, Michigan. As McClellan (2009) explains, the United States has no standardized system of postsecondary education, unlike other countries in the world. However, the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education has become the most widely recognized system for categorizing colleges and universities using an institutions' mission to group it with similarly focused institutions. Grand Valley State University is categorized as a Master's Large University because the student population, at approximately 25,000, is well over what is considered a midsize university and the majority of graduate degrees are awarded at the Master's level (McClellan, 2009). Participants in my study were all midlevel women administrators in departments that are housed within two divisions, Student Services and the division of Academic Services and Information Technology.

Though the majority of institutions have fewer women in administration than men, Grand Valley State University is the exception. Of the 208 positions classified as management occupations at Grand Valley, 122 of them are held by women but only nine were former faculty

(see Appendix B). Of the 87 men who hold positions classified as management level, only 10 of them previously held faculty positions (P. Batty, personal communication, December 2, 2014). The number of women in administration could be due, in part, to the fact that GVSU has a woman provost. While many institutions suffer from a lack of female faculty, the number of male and female faculty at Grand Valley is fairly balanced. As of the winter 2014 semester, the total number of faculty was 1604, and 50% of them were female providing evidence that Grand Valley's ratio of female to male faculty is more balanced than most institutions (P. Batty, personal communication, December 3, 2014).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional experiences of midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs. The findings are presented in the following order: path to the administrator, experiences as administrators, negotiating work-life balance, and mission/motivation. The method of organization allowed me to include the many facets of the women administrators I interviewed while also discovering their similarities and differences.

Path to the Administrator Role

The path that each participant traveled to become an administrator in student services varied, but there were similarities in how they eventually achieved their current positions. These similarities included personal characteristics, professional connections, educational preparation, and serendipity.

Personal characteristics. In interviewing the participants it was clear that each of the women had strong personal characteristics that drew them to a job in administration. Though

they all described themselves in slightly different ways, terms like a strong attention to details, confidence, observant, looking for a challenge, motivation, career focus and responsibility were mentioned by several participants.

Confidence and initiative were mentioned as important personal characteristics necessary for success as an administrator. As a young professional who had just graduated from college, participant 5 described the daunting experience of giving presentations in front of large groups of prospective students. “I had this big, tall woman that I would take out of a suitcase and do dress for success presentations. Talk about a hard way to make a living!” She recognized that she had to demonstrate that she knew what she was doing in order to gain respect. “If you don’t go in with confidence, they will eat you alive.” That was a skill participant 5 learned early in her career that served her well as she moved into higher administrative roles. Participant 1 echoed that sentiment when she said “I showed a lot of initiative” which allowed her to get noticed by others in high level positions. Participant 2 described how she “successfully demonstrated a plan of action” which made her a natural candidate to move into a higher position.

The need to be observant was a personal characteristic valued by Participant 5. “I’m the quiet one who takes it all in,” she said. Participant 6 commented on the importance of knowing when to be observant and when to speak up. “Things in the university ebb and flow at some points, just based on things that have happened, you have more cover than other times,” she stated. Participant 6 also said “there’s times that you’ve spent your currency all the way down to the bottom so you let other people, you know, do the speaking and you build it back up again.” Knowing the right time to say something versus the appropriate time to remain observant was important to the success of an administrator.

Looking for a challenge and motivation were two other personal characteristics mentioned by participants. Participant 1 mentioned that she had been happy in her previous positions but was “just ready for more of a challenge” when she applied for her current position. Participant 5 also remarked on how she decided to apply for her position because “I don’t want folks at Grand Valley to think that I’m not interested in any type of leadership position.” Participant 4 talked about how she took a break from her career to be a stay-at-home mom but realized after a few years “I was ready, to, you know, have something new” and was looking for more of a challenge.

Lastly, being career focused and having an ability to handle responsibility were two other personal characteristics mentioned. Participant 3 talked about how her mom was “always career, career, career” but she described herself as “I’m definitely career but I have a family too.” Participant 1 stated “You know, I guess I am a little career focused.” Participant 5 mentioned a previous position at another institution that prepared her well for her current role because she “was really fortunate to have a lot of responsibility” that allowed her to demonstrate that she could handle her current administrative position at Grand Valley.

Professional connections. Professional connections played a large role in the professional experiences of women administrators in student services. It was professional connections that got them the job and allowed them to move up the ladder.

Work experience was one facet of professional connections that participants discussed in their interviews. For example, participant 5 talked in great detail about her work experience at a previous institution and how that “was really beneficial” in teaching her the skills she needed to acquire her current position. “We had really experienced (job title) and I had an opportunity to

learn from them. “ Participant 6 discussed how she was recognized because “There was a body of work (that she had completed) at that point and that was what he (former supervisor) was looking for.....People who were actually doing the work.”

Lateral moves to different positions were also the result of professional connections. Participant 1 was working at another institution but had “philosophical differences” and felt like “I knew that career wise I couldn’t do that for long term and then that’s when an adjunct position became open at Grand Valley.....and I had some connections here which probably enabled me to get a job.” As a result, she made a lateral move from her position at another institution to GVSU. Less than a year after being hired as an adjunct employee at Grand Valley, she said “a permanent position opened up here” and she was moved into that position.

Moving up the ladder was an experience shared by participant 2, 3 and 4. “I think, again, when there was talk of replacing a previous (administrator), there were people who were very encouraging and said that it would definitely be a natural transition for me to move from one to the other,” explained participant 2. Participant 3 talked about how she progressed up the ladder in her department from occupying three different positions over the course of twelve years before she moved into her current position. “I mean, I started here as a trainee and I kind of grew up here and I had a lot of support along the way.” Participant 4 mentioned a similar experience of growing up at Grand Valley when she said “they know who I am. I know who they are.” She continued “I think that, you know, I have advanced in my career.....at the pace that I should be.”

Educational preparation. Educational preparation played a large role in how the women became administrators. Educational preparation included college, acquiring advanced education, and already possessing an advanced degree.

All of the participants I interviewed had completed college. Some came to GVSU right after they completed their undergraduate degree. Participant 4 explained how she had recently graduated from another institution in Michigan and “So, I was looking through the paper, the newspaper and saw an opening.....here at GVSU.” She was quickly interviewed and hired. Participant 2, 3, 6 and 7 attended universities outside of Michigan. Participant 2 stated “my bachelor’s degree is from a big school” in another state. Participant 3 attended GVSU for her undergraduate degree and admitted “you know when I first started undergrad, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do,” and eventually pursued and completed two advanced degrees. All seven of the participants had a minimum of a master’s degree. Two possessed doctorate degrees while two more were in the process of earning a doctorate. It was their advanced level of education that helped them to acquire their administrative positions.

Serendipity. The final category of experiences that led the participants to become administrators in students services was serendipity. The serendipitous events included being invited to apply for a position, being at the right place at the right time, a position just opening up and someone taking a chance on them.

Participant 4 described how she was invited to apply for a position after being out of work to raise her child. “There was an opening, and he (former colleague) wanted me to come work in the office.” She described that time in her life saying “I was ready to come back to GVSU. I knew that I would come back to GVSU when my daughter went to kindergarten and I

also knew that I wanted to work in student services.” Participant 6 had a similar experience of being asked to accept a position, “they didn’t do any kind of looking for anyone. They just hired me.”

Other administrators found themselves in the right place at the right time to fill a position. Participant 3 described how she felt torn between deciding what type of position to apply for because professionals in her field needed to choose one of two specific routes to follow. She explained “...so I applied to both kinds of jobs. And just ended up, you know, with the position that felt right and fit. They created a position here for me and I ended up staying. So, twelve years later...” Participant 1 remarked that she felt as though her life often took turns that were a result of being in the right place at the right time. “So then I had been not necessarily (looking for a new job), well, this is the story of my life. I don’t necessarily always look for opportunities but if they kind of present themselves, um, I’m not opposed to looking at them.” She also said “I was given a lot of opportunities that I don’t think people in my position would have always been given...because I was, once again, kind of in the right place at the right time.”

Another example of serendipity took the form of having an opportunity when a position just opened up. Participants 3, 4, 5 and 6 were all moved into interim roles as administrators because the position was suddenly vacated by the previous person. Participant 5 talked about how she held two positions when her boss “made me interim (administrator) so I was actually doing (the two jobs) for about five months.” Participant 6 talked about how she had to prove herself when she was moved into an interim role. “So, at that point, I became interim and I was interim for about ten months and I was either going to get the position or not have a job. So, I definitely gave it my all and Grand Valley hired me for a second time.” Participant 3 faced a life changing decision when she was moved into her interim role. “And then some things happened

with my boss and she unexpectedly left and usually your (her current position at the time) is the fill-in person. So, I ended up being kind of on this whole journey of ‘Do I want to do this or not?’ It really changes your life a lot, so now it’s been two years and I still have that question sometimes.”

The last example of serendipity was an experience where someone took a chance on them. This was a re-occurring theme in participant 1’s interview. She described how she applied and was hired for a previous administrative position saying “I applied to that job with obviously zero experience even though I thought I had some at the time. And got hired by the luck of the draw, I suppose.....during that time, I had a lot of ability to grow.” She talked about how her current administrative position became open and though she was not qualified she applied for it. “And so I just kind of thought what would be the risk?...talking to my boss that I have now....she definitely didn’t say anything to me to lead me to think that I shouldn’t apply...I just kind of went for it.” She reflected on that experience saying “you know I see that now looking back, I was probably a pretty big risk for my boss to take.” She recognized how important it was to her career that someone was willing to take those chances on her saying “going into this role of when do you know to take those chances on people, and when do you know not to (be)cause, you know, definitely I believe twice I’ve had chances taken on me and I hope that those people would say were good....that they took the right risk.”

Experiences as Administrators

The second theme that emerged from the data was commonality in the women’s experiences as administrators. I categorized them into the benefits and rewards, challenges, and the role of mentors.

Benefits and rewards. The first category that emerged when analyzing the data was the benefits and rewards experienced by the women administrators as a result of their positions. Benefits and rewards included opportunities, acceptance/encouragement, camaraderie/support, and powerful coalitions.

Participant 2 discussed the opportunity she was given to travel overseas as a benefit of her position. She said she was “selected to be on our international exchange team. I was very excited about that. The Student Affairs division selects....people over the years to participate in study abroad or travel exchange to Dresden, Germany.” She described the trip by saying “It was quite an experience....I would have decided to do that, you know, on my own with my family, but it was definitely my work, my job that gave me that first experience.” Participant 6 mentioned the opportunity to have her daughter attend GVSU at half price as a benefit.

My daughter came to Grand Valley the second year I was here as a first year student...(It was) a lovely way to connect with her. You know, she'd always come in, you know, at lunch time and she knew the staff and the students and she was involved in some of the programming...Having the opportunity to have her come here at half price really impacted that she could stay. You know, that we could have this close relationship and that was lovely.

Another benefit mentioned by multiple participants was acceptance and encouragement of colleagues at GVSU. Participant 1 said “I always had people that were really, really supportive.” She mentioned a former supervisor who “would always sing my praises... I took his kudos as still appreciative and it was helpful at the time.” She mentioned the encouragement she received from another former supervisor saying “she was very, very...just like, you're doing

a great job.” Participant 5 talked about a performance evaluation written by a former supervisor that was very encouraging because “he wrote an evaluation that was most reflective of my skills and abilities-good and bad. I really felt like this was me and no one has ever taken the time to write an evaluation like that for me.”

The next benefit, camaraderie and support, was mentioned by four of the seven participants. Participant 3 said “when I think about the positives, I would say it’s probably getting that connection with other female administrators. You know, kind of identifying the similarities and how we think, how we feel about things and really supporting each other.”

Participant 2 echoed that sentiment when she said the following:

Understanding that and relying on that support and that network that we can be for each other. And I appreciate that and being acknowledged by each other and supported by one another. That has been something that has been very powerful, seeing other women leaders.

Participant 6 stated something similar when she said “there is a camaraderie among many of the woman administrators and I’ve really appreciated that. Um, I’ve really enjoyed building those relationships. They’re very meaningful. They give the work a lot of meaning.”

Similar to the camaraderie that was experienced between fellow administrators, Participant 6 also mentioned the powerful coalitions that were often made. She talked about those relationships saying “it’s a way that we can figure out how to best support ourselves so those are really powerful coalitions that not only support each of our career trajectories but the work we do and ourselves, our whole selves. You know, our families, we care about each other’s families.” Participant 7 also mentioned the powerful coalitions that her department had

made with other departments within her division that had allowed them to approach the work they did in a new way. “It’s hard work for sure but it’s fun in that it kind of positions us in sort of a different place in higher education.”

Challenges. Though participants mentioned many benefits to being a woman administrator in student services, they also described many challenges as well. The main challenges that were mentioned included stereotypes, being pigeon holed, women as their own worst enemy, sexism, being belittled, and being treated differently because they were young.

Nearly all of the participants mentioned being stereotyped or pigeon-holed at some point in their professional career. Participant 7 said “I think a lot of it had to do with being a woman because it was really easy to be dismissive and want to kind of push me over into this kind of clerical role when that wasn’t the kind of work that I did at all.” Similarly, participant 2 said “I think I have experienced what some may call being pigeon-holed....While it is a role I worked really hard to be in, and it is a role that I’ve worked really hard to redefine....I’ve reached that point where, for myself personally, I’m now looking for something but I’m not sure if others are able and willing to see me outside of (my current) role.”

Participant 5 described how she’s experienced women administrators acting as women’s own worst enemy. “And I know for a fact that people, even on campus, said things like (former supervisor) just hires, uh, these little girls he can control. And it was primarily women who made those comments, and that’s not what (former supervisor) did.” She also said “it’s interesting that sometimes women can be women’s worst enemy in some of this.”

Sexism manifested in different ways was another challenge mentioned by nearly all of the participants. It could take the form of traditional gender roles, old boys’ network, or feeling

as though they are working in a male dominated field. Participant 6 said specifically “it’s very sexist in our division.” Both participant 3 and 5 mentioned that they noticed a shift in composition of fellow administrators at other institutions from mostly male to include more females when they attended statewide conferences.

So I think the field has changed. More women are getting advanced degrees has helped equal it out. Maybe just having a field that has become equally dominated by women, slowly working their way into leadership roles. I think it’s a field that’s more open to exploring some of that; gender roles and gender bias. (Participant 3)

Participant 5 mentioned how evident it was that gender roles had shifted, saying “when I first became (her position title), many of the (administrators) for the fifteen publics were male around the table. Then, all of the sudden, over half were female and then three quarters were female.”

The existence of an old boy’s network was also cited as a form of sexism they had witnessed in their division. Participant 3 said “there are a lot of administrators that have been here a long time that have known each other 20-25 years and they tend to be in the male gender category so I don’t know if I would go as far to say an old boys network, but there has been that feeling at times.” She also mentioned how it could seem isolating at times when attending meetings with her male colleagues. “You know, you could sit in our (administrator) meeting and you could see how much time the men spent talking. How much they would throw out an idea that a woman had just thrown out but it would be acknowledged there.”

Working in a male dominated environment creates challenges especially when women administrators are treated differently. Participant 6 described a meeting she attended in which gender dynamics were especially pronounced. “I would like to name something that happens

here and that is that female colleagues are treated differently and there were four male colleagues in the room and I saw we are not called on even when we raise our hand. We are interrupted. You know, all kinds of things that say what you have to say doesn't matter." She voiced her concerns to her colleagues when she witnessed an event that would have been treated very differently if the participants had been women.

A male colleague said, was explaining something and another male colleague interrupted the first colleague and said "Wait" and he stopped. And then as soon as he was done, I said "that dynamic that just happened right there is a male, a gender dynamic and we don't have permission to do that."

Afterwards, other women administrators voiced their agreement, both privately and publicly, with what she had said. They agreed that they too had experienced similar injustices.

Being young was the another challenge that was mentioned by participant 1 and 5. Participant 1 mentioned the reaction of some fellow administrators at Grand Valley when it was announced she was hired into her position when she was only thirty. "I don't always notice that but I'm confident that from when I started my role of walking in pretty much looking like I was (her boss') assistant and then she'd introduce me as the new (administrator). Everyone was like 'that one? That I thought was coming in to take your notes?'" She believed it was the combination of being a woman and her young age that caused her to get the reaction she did. "Age and because I was female. I mean, I'm confident. I'm making some stereotypical assumptions but I'm confident it was mostly an age thing but I do think if I was....a male walking in with a suit and (my boss) introduced me that way, there wouldn't have been nearly as many...jaws hitting the floor." Participant 5 shared a similar experience when she was hired into

her current role at the age of thirty as well. “Age was a little bit...people were more skeptical. You know, and it’s funny because I never felt too young but now I look at someone who’s thirty and I think you’re such a baby.”

Role of mentors. The role of mentors was the final main category that was presented as part of the experience of being a woman administrator in student services. Within that category, participants described the various types of mentors they had including family, bosses, colleagues and staff. They also discussed the importance of constructive criticism and the support provided by mentors.

When asked about the importance of mentors in their lives and who their mentors were, participant 2, 3 and 5 mentioned influential family members. Both participant 3 and 5 mentioned their mothers as important mentors in their lives. “I think, probably, my mother has been good, kind of a female role model for career.” She also said “I probably wouldn’t have gotten the graduate degree without her because nobody in our family (besides her mother) went to college.” Participant 5 described working with her mom in a flower shop when she was in high school when she said “I could tell you to this day her attention to detail and what she taught me is probably the reason why I am the way I am. And she worked so darn hard her whole life to support our family.” Seeing her mom and how hard she worked also motivated participant 5 to get her college degree. Participant 2 spoke about her aunt and the mentor role that she played in her life. “I’ve always aspired to be like my dad’s little sister, my aunt ...she’s been a high school teacher....her degree is in speech pathology....But she’s an educator so I thought, well maybe that’s where all this came from...she was a huge influence in wanting to be like her.”

While some women had mentors, others deliberately sought them out. Participant 4 advised “you know you have to seek out your mentor. You know you want somebody to mentor you, it’s to be someone who is above the level that you are.” For participant 4, she sought out other women administrators at GVSU as well women she met through community involvement. She also warned that “they don’t have the time and.....they really don’t have the energy or time.....You know, I invited them to be my mentor” and they were willing.

Constructive criticism and support were also topics when discussing mentors. Participant 1 talked about the constructive criticism she receives from her mentors, both male and female. “I feel I can be pretty candid and honest with all of them and I don’t have to deal with repercussions or feel, you know, should I not have said something or should I trust them? And, you know, they are always honest with me as well.” Participant 5 talked about the support she received from her mentor and former boss who was male. “I honestly never felt limited because I’m a woman. I’ve never felt, in fact, I think that (he) treated me actually quite the opposite.” She also mentioned “I run my show and I’ve been fortunate that I’ve always had great leaders to go to when I need assistance but I don’t have people looking over my shoulder.”

Mentors as role models was another common topic within the experience of being a woman administrator. Participant 5 talked about a woman administrator she met when she was an undergraduate student needing help with her financial aid that made a big impression on her.

I had no idea what I was going to do and I will never forget how she treated me. It was so kind and generous, and just top notch professional from head to toe. I later learned that her husband was a physician. And so, when you talk about class, she was way up

here and I was way down here....when I realized that, it meant even more to me because she treated me like I was an equal and she was so helpful.

Bosses, colleagues and staff were also mentioned as being meaningful mentors.

Participant 6 talked about her former boss, who has since passed away, as being an important mentor. "He didn't have the student affairs background but he did have 40 years' experience working at this institution and he had a lot of currency as a result of that, really good relationships, respect." It's not only bosses that were mentioned as good mentors, but colleagues and staff as well. Participant 1 said "there are colleagues that I work with that are, I would consider mentors." She also described the way she saw her staff as mentors.

I learn a lot from a lot of members of my staff, especially the ones that challenge me so as far as like a mentor goes, I think some people are probably mentors to me and they don't really even know they are...they teach me a lot about how I can get better or self-reflect or they make me better at my job so I appreciate those mentors as well. (Participant 1)

Negotiating Work-Life Balance

The third major theme that emerged from the data was the need to negotiate the work-life balance. Participants described the stresses they experienced, and the supports and strategies that they used for coping with the stresses.

Stressors. Stressors associated with negotiating the work-life balance include the following: child care/sick child, guilt about missing things with their kids, lack of time for self-care leaving them exhausted, stress/lack of joy, and the emotional toll of caring for staff/family.

Caring for children, either on a daily basis or when their child was sick, was a common stressor mentioned by the women administrators I interviewed. Participant 3 described it when

she said “I think there’s the sickness or probably being out more than I ever was before I had a child.” Participant 5 mentioned how different it was now that her children were older. “Part of my constraint though is having to pick up a child from child care. And, so most days, I had to pick up. This is the first year, after 15 years, that I don’t have to pick anybody up.” She also mentioned the stress of deciding who would stay home when a child was sick.

We would take turns staying home. Yeah, when it was something that we knew was going to be a long duration we would see if a grandparent two hours away could come....so we did what we could, but it was always a feeling like if I were home with a sick child, I felt guilt that I wasn’t at work. If I was at work, I felt guilty that I wasn’t at home with a sick child. It just....you couldn’t win.

Guilt about missing important events with their kids was another common stressor. Participant 7 described how she made it clear in her interview for her current position that she could be an excellent employee and still not miss things with her kids. “I’m going to have to take my kids to doctor’s appointments and I want to attend their Halloween parade... I want to do all those things and I still think I can be a phenomenal worker at the same time.” Participant 1 also mentioned the guilt of missing things with her kids but she recognized that she was doing what was necessary for her family. “Sure, you have guilty moments but it works for our life.” She also said “I just have to have a positive outlook on it because I know that this is the best for my family but, yes, you miss a lot.... I miss mommy and me nights because I signed up for a (work) dinner three months ago and the schedule came out for school (after she had already committed to the dinner).” Participant 3 echoed that sentiment when she said “Even the daycare has events during the day like come and have a picnic with mommy, and I never go to those things.”

Another stressor that was a result of negotiating a work-life balance was a lack of time for self-care, leaving the women administrators exhausted. Participant 4 said “you know when you are working in student services....in terms of hours, is a very demanding job. On average, during the academic year, we average about 50-55 hours a week” because of the many evening events she needed to attend for her position. As a result, she explained “but I’m just always exhausted.” Participant 3 explained how she felt a difference in the time she could devote to herself when she moved into her current position. “I don’t know how much it changes what I do at work. I still do a pretty good job and I think I’m a pretty good mom, but my self-care is probably much less than it was before.” She also said “just the stress of balancing it all. I don’t think it affects the quality of my work a whole lot. I think I’m able to kind of focus when I’m here but I’m tired all the time.”

The other stressors that were mentioned were stress and a lack of joy, and the emotional toll of caring for staff/family. Participant 3 talked about a former position she occupied and how it had been less stressful and had given her more joy than her current administrative role. “I don’t have a lot of just, enjoyment, and it probably was not like that before.” When I asked her if she felt like she got more enjoyment out of her previous position, she replied “I did. I had more time.” Participant 2 also mentioned the stress of an administrative position and the way in which it took an emotional toll on her. “It would be, you know, there were challenging moments and, like I said, it’s just specifically in this role.” She also talked about how the stress of her job affected her ability to have patience when caring for her family. “And so there were times that I would definitely say that I was, little kids are doing the little kid things and not the things that I wanted to do, but it did not, it wasn’t because my passion wasn’t there. It wasn’t because my interest or my care, just more of a, I need that time to decompress.”

Family support. Although the job of administrator was stressful, all the women acknowledged the support they received that enabled them to be successful in their jobs. The supports included having a stay-at-home spouse, a supportive partner/spouse, as well as other family support.

Two of the participants, Participant 1 and 7, had stay-at-home spouses. Participant 1 said “I don’t know how I would do this job without having someone at home who does the rest of the stuff” and “I feel that because of the choices we’ve made, I’m able to find a balance.” When asked about home responsibilities, she said “That’s all left to him. So if I had to find time to do that, I wouldn’t enjoy my job as much and I wouldn’t enjoy my life as much.” Participant 7 talked about a need to have a parent at home full time to care for their special needs child. “Our daughter.... has some special needs. My partner was like ‘It doesn’t make sense for me to work anymore.’” She admitted, that even with a stay-at-home parent, it did not mean that it made everything easy. “There’s only so much that two people can do. I mean, we don’t have extended family that takes care of our kids. So, a lot of times, it’s a lot of me taking off work and that kind of thing.”

In addition to supportive spouses, other family supports also played a major role in the success of women administrators. “I have a husband that carries a big brunt of this. Again, if I wasn’t married to someone who wasn’t equally involved with the kids, it would not have happened.....(He) would be the one who was at all the baseball games and all the basketball games. So, his job, his employer, his boss allowed him to do that” said Participant 1. Participant 6 also described her partner when she said “he really understands and is 100% supportive.” She said it was essential for her because “I think it’s really hard for me sometimes not to take this job home with me because I really do care deeply about it....I don’t think that I could be in a

relationship with someone who didn't care deeply." Participant 4 said "I kept my kids very busy...when they were in school...Luckily, my mom and dad live here in (local suburb) so they were able to chauffeur them to different activities, so I just try to make sure I balance my schedule with their schedules."

Strategies for coping. The last category that emerged from the data that allowed women administrators to negotiate a work-life balance were the strategies they used for coping.

Strategies they mentioned included a need to accept that you can't have it all, that you don't have to be perfect, the way they used vacation time and worked nights and weekends.

The realizations that you can't have it all and that you don't have to be perfect were two strategies for coping with the demands of an administrative position in student services. Participant 5 was very clear in how she felt about the topic. "First of all, if anyone ever tells you that you can have it all as a woman, it's a big fat lie. You can't have it all and I've always felt...I've always felt the strain of being pulled in different directions." In addition to acknowledging that you can't have it all, the idea that you don't have to be perfect to be successful was a coping strategy mentioned by participant 2. She described a mentor who she often observed and tried to emulate. "To juggle it all and to make it, to do so with ease, but also to do it well...It made me feel like it doesn't have to be perfect but it can be done well; working, having a family, being involved."

The way that vacation time was used and a need to work nights and weekends were also mentioned as common strategies for coping with the demands of their roles as women administrators. Participant 5 described how her son asked her why she did not attend his basketball games.

So, more than once, him saying, and he didn't mean it in any mean way but "how come you never attend my basketball games?" That's really hard. So, this year, you know what?....I'm going to take an hour of vacation time and leave at 4 o'clock and I did that, I think six different times. And so, for me, there's no guilt because I recorded vacation and I walked out the door.

Participants 3 and 7 both talked about how they negotiated a work-life balance by working some nights and weekends. When I asked participant 3 if she has to work while her son was awake or if she waited until he was in bed, she responded "It can be both. It's more....so after he goes to bed is more when I might write reports or do projects but I'm pretty much always checking the email." Participant 7 made a similar comment when she stated "You know, I work every night. I work every weekend, um, when the kids are asleep."

Mission/Motivation

The last theme that emerged from my study was the mission and motivation that inspired the woman administrators to work in student services. Categories included in the final theme were advocating for students and acting as change agents.

Advocate for students. As has been discussed previously, there were numerous challenges and stressors for women administrators in student services. However, the mission of advocating for students helped to outweigh the negative aspects. The midlevel woman administrators I interviewed discussed being motivated by their ability to set an example for students as well as serve as mentors.

Setting an example was the first aspect of being an advocate for students that was discussed. When asked about the positive aspects of her current position, participant 1 said "it's

a positive that other young women professionals can look at me and see that it's okay to have a career and a family. It's okay to be driven." She continued saying "I think it's just good for young women professionals, in general, to see that if you want to work, it's okay. If you want to have kids, it's okay, you can still work and you can still be successful and it's okay to still have drive and ambition." Participant 4 responded similarly when she said "I think one of the most positive experiences for me is to be the role model."

Participants were also driven by a motivation to serve as mentors for students. "I have 2 students that I mentor (who) decided to go into student services....They started out with French (as a major)...at Michigan State University (and now) they major in student services," said Participant 4. She described how students looked up to her as a mentor. "I think I'm making a difference. People look at you. I mean, students look at you and they are like 'Yeah, some day, I'm going to grow up and be like (you).'"

Change agent. The other category that fell within the theme of mission and motivation was the ability to act as a change agent. As change agents, the midlevel women administrators described their ability to change the campus climate, see change happen and to make a difference.

Changing the campus climate was not always easy. Participant 6 pointed out that she sometimes paid a price for speaking up but she felt as though she was making a difference in the lives of students. "I do push forward and I name it (sexism) and is there a price for that? Yup, you bet there is but I also feel like....my self-esteem is not based on this job. My self-esteem is based on am I doing good work with the students? Do they feel (I'm doing good work)? Are their needs being met?" She continued that sentiment by saying "if we're doing work that has

any hope of being just, we have to address what is happening right now and are we creating relationships that are just?"

In addition to changing campus climate, participant 7 described her motivation that was brought about by seeing change take place. "I think being able to see change happen...is always really fulfilling." She described an initiative in which she took part at her former institution that involved multiple departments working together to form a research institute. "Before I left, we were able to do that." However, change did not always come quickly. Participant 7 remarked "university time works really funny. It's either super slow or then bursts of insane craziness so I didn't know if it was ever going to come to fruition because it kept stalling so seeing that actually happen was really great."

The desire to make a difference was mentioned by participant 4 as a motivator for her. "That is one of the most gratifying....experience(s) is to be able to help students." Participant 2 also mentioned the importance of feeling that she was making a difference. "Being right here gives me face to face contact with students. It gives me a more formalized relationship." She explained, "the personal connection is here. I'm seeing you on a day to day basis. We're getting to know each other..." Because of work she did with student parents, participant 2 also described how she was able to make a difference in the lives of the children of students. "You're trying to escape a perpetual cycle that if you don't go to school...not only is your life changed, the likelihood of him or her (the child) going to school. That significantly is reduced." So, not only is a difference being made in the life of the college student, but in the life of their children as well.

Summary

I interviewed seven midlevel women administrators who work within the Student Services division and the division of Academic Services and Information Technology at Grand Valley State University. Though their stories were different, there were major themes that emerged as common threads to their experiences. The themes that emerged involved the paths that led them to their roles as administrator, their experiences as administrators, how they negotiated a work-life balance, and their personal missions and the motivations that sustained their professional endeavors.

Though the paths that led the participants to their current midlevel administrative positions in student services differed, they shared similar personal characteristics and professional connections. Their high level of educational preparation prepared them well and laid the groundwork for their professional paths. Some felt that it had been serendipity or being in the right place at the right time that had enabled them to attain their position. In order to be successful within the field of student services, participants exhibited personal characteristics that included attention to detail, confidence, being observant, motivated and career focused, and seeking challenges, and responsibility. Meaningful professional connections were also crucial on the path to becoming a midlevel administrator. They came in the form of work experience, a lateral move from a similar position, and being moved up the ladder. In addition to professional connections, educational preparation emerged as a prerequisite for advancement in student services and it came in the form of advanced education, acquiring additional education and college. Lastly, serendipity was exhibited by being in the right place at the right time, being invited to apply, boss' support, a position just opened up and someone took a chance on me.

After examining the path to become an administrator, the experiences of administrators emerged as a shared experience among the participants. They shared the joys and benefits they receive as administrators as well as the challenges. The importance of mentors, both male and female, was mentioned by all as well. The benefits they have enjoyed include opportunities, acceptance/encouragement, camaraderie/support, powerful coalitions and personal fulfillment. Though not as enjoyable as the benefits, all of the administrators have experienced challenges as well. The challenges of being a midlevel woman administrator came in many forms including stereotypes, women as their worst enemies, sexism (traditional gender roles, old boys' network, male dominated), feeling belittled, being pigeon holed and being young. Being mentored was the final shared experience for the administrators. Mentors took many different forms including a mother or aunt, role models, boss, colleagues, and even staff. Mentors also provided constructive criticism and much needed support.

After gaining insight into the path to administration and the common experiences of the women administrators, negotiating work-life balance was the third theme that emerged from the data. Negotiating a work-life balance meant different things to different participants but there were commonalities that could be categorized into stressors, supports, and strategies for coping. All seven of the participants had children and discussed stressors that included child care/sick child or missing things with kids/guilt. In addition to the stressor of child care or missing events with their children, a lack of time for self-care and a feeling of being exhausted were often mentions. Similarly, stress/lack of joy, and the emotional toll of caring for staff/family took a toll on women administrators. While stressors are sometimes difficult to manage, the participants also shared stories of the support systems they had in place to lessen the stress. A stay-at-home spouse, a supportive partner/spouse and family support/mother all describe

supports experienced by the woman administrators I interviewed. Strategies for coping included the need to accept you can't have it all, knowing that one doesn't have to be perfect, use of vacation time, and working nights/weekends.

The final theme that emerged from the midlevel women administrators' stories was the motivation and mission of woman administrators in student services. Beyond all the stressors and difficulties they may experience along their path to become a women administrator and while in their current positions, participants had a dedication to serving students and felt as though they made a difference for those that may follow in their footsteps. As an advocate for students, woman administrators found great joy in their ability to set an example and serve as a mentor. Being able to change the campus climate, see change happen and make a difference were all experiences that participants mentioned as a means of being a change agent at GVSU.

The next chapter will summarize the entire study as well as discuss the finding in relation to feminist theory and relevant literature. I will provide recommendations for changes in practice. In addition, I will make suggestions for future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Summary of the Study

Though there are increasing numbers of women in administration in institutions of higher education, we still have a long way to go. The number of female students is on the increase, but the number of female faculty and women in academic leadership is not representative of the student body (Rodin & Featherman, 1994). Rodin and Featherman (1994) describe the current state of institutions of higher education as a caste system that makes it difficult for women faculty and administrators to cross from one type of institution to another, stating that downward but not upward mobility is the only option. Women are forced to practice a balancing act in which they must constantly weigh the benefits and challenges of being a women administrator in a male-dominated field along with the personal demands of a home and family. Women are often required to make choices that involve sacrifice above and beyond that required of their male counterparts (“Women in Academic,” 2010). Specifically, women administrators in student affairs often work in an environment that requires long hours of hard work for compensation levels that are not competitive with working in the private sector (Manning & Nobbe, 1997). That is why it is imperative that more efforts are made to fully support and provide opportunities for advancement to young women professionals in student affairs and student services before we lose them completely.

The theory used to examine my study of the professional experiences of women administrators in student services is feminist theory. Feminist theory, and in turn, feminist research is dedicated to considering how women experience various aspects of their lives (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). It also causes researchers to “consider the ways in which gender norms are maintained or disrupted by current institutional practices” (Ropers-Huilman &

Winters, 2011, p. 671). As Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011) describe, when conducting a study using feminist theory, researchers do not approach their research with the answer to the question already formulated in their mind. Rather, they recognize that because they exist in a society that tends to place a higher importance on men's knowledge and viewpoints, they may not necessarily have the opportunity to experience women's lives unless they intentionally seek them out. It was with this aim that I conducted my study of the experiences of midlevel women administrators at GVSU. Because so little is known regarding their professional experiences, I felt the need to give women administrators in student services an opportunity to share their stories as a method to provide insight for other young women professionals with aspirations of advancing in the field of student services or student affairs. Without this knowledge, future women administrators could find themselves entering into a profession for which they were not prepared. As participant 3 stated in her interview, as a young administrator, she had not been mentored to move into a higher level position and had little idea what it entailed. "I will say it came up unexpectedly. I wasn't really being mentored for it at that point" and, as a result, she stepped into a role that now, two years later, she's unsure if the benefits outweigh the costs.

The results of this study are intended to help colleges and universities to create policy and implement practice that allow for more women to advance into administrative roles within the fields of student services and student affairs. To accomplish this goal, this study focused on one major research question:

What are the professional experiences of women administrators in student services and student affairs at Grand Valley State University?

In order to answer this key research question, a qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological design in which the discussion and dialogue regarding the experiences of an individual are used to expand knowledge base (Manning & Kunkel, 2013). Using this method, I conducted interviews with seven midlevel women administrators who were not previously faculty. All of the participants work in departments housed within the division of Student Services and the Academic Services and Information Technology division at Grand Valley State University. Data was gathered through face to face interviews using a series of semi structured, open ended questions and all interviews were recorded. Audio recordings were then manually transcribed and coded. The data was analyzed and grouped into related categories and themes, resulting in a 51 codes, 12 categories and four main themes.

Discussion

Through the course of this study and the interviews that I conducted, I gained insight into the professional experiences of midlevel women administrators in student services and student affairs at GVSU and how their experiences compared to the literature that was examined earlier in this thesis. While some similarities emerged, there were also differences that surfaced. As was previously mentioned, Grand Valley State University is a unique institution in that it has many women in administrative and faculty positions in addition to a female Provost. Though challenges and stressors for the woman emerged from the data, there was also substantial evidence that midlevel women administrators at Grand Valley enjoyed benefits of working in an institution that supports and promotes women.

The struggle to balance work and family was a common stressor for women administrators who work in student services. Though women administrators value the work that

they do, they often feel pulled in opposite directions when it comes to managing their personal and professional lives. Though men participate in caregiving and managing the household, the bulk of the burden often falls on the woman (Allan, 2011; Leatherwood & Williams, 2008). The stress of trying to balance it all was mentioned by all of the participants in the study. The challenge of trying to find someone to stay home with a sick child was mentioned repeatedly. For those who did not have a stay at home spouse, participants reported a need to negotiate with their spouse or to find alternative options for care so that they can still go to work. They also mentioned the guilt they feel when they stay home because they are missing work. Conversely, if they do go to work when a child is sick, they feel the guilt of not being home with the sick child.

Many women administrators feel the need to balance professional and personal life, but it is difficult because one often encumbers the other and vice versa (Cummins, 2012). The demanding schedule and ever expanding responsibilities make it difficult for any women administrator in student services to feel as though their life is balanced. As a result, women administrators are often pulled in multiple directions, left feeling exhausted with little time for themselves. Participants remarked that they felt as though they “could sleep more” and the demands of their job and home life left them with little time for self-care. Some participants mentioned the need to leave work immediately at the end of the day in order to pick up their children from daycare. There were also comments regarding events held at daycare in which parents were expected to attend and participate, but the demands of an administrative position make it very difficult or impossible to attend. As a result, women administrators sometimes wonder if the stress and demands of an administrative position is worth it.

According to the literature many women administrators in institutions of higher education experience difficulty in advancing up the career ladder because many upper level administrators are male. As explained by Gallant (2014), women's inability to advance can sometimes be explained by similarity attraction. Similarity attraction exists because familiarity often dictates who gets employed and promoted. As a result, the large numbers of men in senior administration perpetuates unequal representation. The experiences of the women in this study do not support Gallant's argument.

Conversely, women administrators at GVSU did not have difficulty being promoted or advancing in their careers. In fact, two participants mentioned that they felt as though they were unqualified or disinterested in moving up into a higher level administrative position until they were encouraged to do so by a supervisor. Multiple participants also mentioned that they felt as though they were given professional opportunities at a young age and multiple participants mentioned the concept of growing up at GVSU. This could be due, in part, to the fact that GVSU has more women than men in professional and administrative positions. As of January of 2014, there were 394 women in professional positions compared to 338 men. Of those men and women in professional positions, 122 women and 87 men hold administrative positions with management responsibilities (P. Batty, personal communication, December 3, 2014). The larger number of women in administrative positions at GVSU is likely a major reason the participants of my study did not feel as though they experienced a lack of opportunities for advancement. While women must often leave an institution to gain promotion, participants in this study at GVSU described experiences of being promoted from within and moved into interim administrative roles quite often.

It is important to note that although women can act as supporters and mentors to fellow women administrators, there are certain women who are not promoters of other women (Benton, 1980; Cummins, 2012). Often referred to Queen Bees, these women do not work towards the equality of women other than themselves, and may possibly even be opposed to programs that do (Cummins, 2012). “Instead, the Queen Bee prefers to denigrate the efforts of other women and protect her own image of ‘superwoman’” (Benton, 1980, p. 6). This idea was affirmed by the responses of participant 5 when she discussed how women are often their own worst enemy. Though she had never felt limited in her role or her ability to advance because of her gender, she would often hear stories of Queen Bees on campus who remarked that she and others like her were only hired because her former supervisor “just hires little girls he can control.” In reality, it was the Queen Bee mentality of not supporting other women to advance into administrative positions that was at play.

This study was guided by feminist theory. As explained by Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011), feminist theory seeks to understand the ways in which the diversity among women affects what can be claimed to be known about women as a group. Though it is impossible to use the experiences of one group of women to generalize that of the entire population, feminist researchers believe that women’s perspectives, activities and behaviors are crucial to understanding and taking action on improving social situations (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Within this study, I was able to learn more about the professional experiences of midlevel women administrators at GVSU, thus providing greater insight into the realities of women as a whole. A major purpose of feminist research and the use of feminist theory requires the “hearing and authoring women’s stories and information about diverse women’s lives, and

valuing multiple ways of knowing” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011, p. 674) which is what was accomplished in this study.

One aspect of feminist theory that was supported by the findings of this study relates to traditional gender roles. Equity feminism is one aspect of feminist theory that demands full equity for all gender roles (Bensimon, Glazer, & Townsend, 2011). This is exemplified by the responses of two participants of the study who discussed their ability to focus more on their work because they had a spouse who stayed at home. In that way, the two participants occupied the role that is normally associated with a man who goes to work while the spouse stays home. Having a stay-at-home spouse allowed the participants to stay later at work, if needed, knowing that they did not need to pick a child up from daycare. They also had less stress related to managing a household because their stay-at-home spouse was responsible for those tasks. One participant remarked “I feel super fortunate to have a stay-at-home person in my life because that makes my life awesome because I don’t have to spend time on the weekend running errands....it’s a constant non-stressor for me and I know that I don’t ever take that for granted.”

At the same time, the findings of the study differed from another perspective of feminist theory referred to as liberal feminism (Bensimon, Glazer, & Townsend, 2011). Liberal feminism relies on the belief that women are excluded from the academy and that their full contribution to society is then left unfulfilled. Bensimon, Glazer, and Townsend (2011), explain that the liberal feminist perspective illustrates the benefits of a level playing field in which women are free to seek the same opportunities as men. The responses of participants in my study differed in how much they felt as though they were, in fact, on a level playing field. While some participants mentioned that they felt as though they were never treated as anything less than equal to their male colleagues, other participants discussed the outright sexism that they had experienced when

interacting with men in their division. One participant mentioned how she participated in a budget meeting in which each administrator was called on to defend their request for budget increases. She remembers “I don’t think I once raised my voice but I didn’t back down.....And, I remember then, in a meeting with my boss, he said to me, ‘you know, you were a little assertive or a little too defensive.’ And I really wonder if a male would have gotten that feedback.” Given that the women administrators at GVSU presented different experiences, it appears that some departments have achieved gender equity, while an old boys’ network is still perceived to be prevalent in other departments.

Conclusion

Those in midlevel positions constitute the largest administrative group within most college and university systems, yet they have little input in administrative policy decisions and no formal structure of governance. Despite their significant numbers and professionalism, they lack visibility throughout the academy and have been of little concern to educational researchers (Rosser, 2000). As Rosser (2000) notes, midlevel administrators can significantly “affect the tone, manner, and style of the entire institution, and their daily performance levels can determine the quality of relationships with faculty, students, and the public they serve,” (p. 7). For these reasons, it is essential that a better understanding is developed regarding the professional experiences of women in midlevel administrative positions. As role models and change agents for future women administrators, the understanding of these women’s stories and paths to administration play an essential role in creating an environment in which the stressors and barriers are minimized so that women may benefit from advantages that are commonly experienced by male administrators.

Recommendations for Practice

After a 1994 climate study was performed at GVSU, it was determined that women faculty and staff felt discontent because of the way they were treated. As a result, the Women's Commission was formed in 1996 to advocate on behalf of all women on campus by acting on their issues and promoting equity and social justice. The Commission strives to provide a support system for all women and to serve as a forum where women can meet to discuss and share information on issues and concerns of common interest (Grand Valley State University Women's Commission, n.d.). After the women's commission was formed, a task force was assembled to determine the feasibility of establishing a Women's Center on campus which was successfully created in 2001. Since then, the Women's Commission and the Women's Center have worked collaboratively to provide programming and networking opportunities for women at GVSU.

While the goals of the Women's Commission are very valuable, the findings of this study suggest that it needs to expand its presence on campus. With such a large number of women who work at GVSU as professional support staff, administrators, and faculty, there is a large audience who could benefit from the workshops and receptions that are offered. While Grand Valley currently offers annual mentoring receptions, a more formalized mentoring program would greatly benefit young women who are currently in administrative positions or aspire to be in administrative positions in the future.

In addition to increasing the visibility of the Women's Commission, the findings of this study also suggest the need for a more formalized mentoring program for women administrators at GVSU. The program would be modeled after a program at Purdue University called Campus Women Lead, a leadership alliance affiliated with the Association of American Colleges and

Universities (Pope & Snyder, 2009). Purdue created two one-day programs, one created for staff at the director level and above and one for faculty members in administrative positions or with administrative responsibilities. The programs had similar agendas with topics related to identity, inclusive excellence and collaboration. It also included time and space for a facilitate discussion about the unique challenges facing each group (Pope & Snyder, 2009). Creating a leadership program modeled after the successful program at Purdue would allow women administrators from various departments and divisions across the campus to come together, share their stories and develop strategies for success. Participants in Campus Women Lead remarked how powerful it was to have so many powerful women together in one room, and many participants knew of each other's roles on campus but had never met outside of specific projects (Pope & Snyder, 2009). A similar program would be extremely beneficial for women administrators to create meaningful relationships and develop networks with other successful women at GVSU.

Recommendations for Further Research

To further the research on the topic of the professional experiences of women administrators who work in student services and student affairs and were not previously faculty, it would be essential to address some of the limitations to this study. First, using a larger sample size would provide a richer body of data that could be generalized across a larger audience. Further research would also benefit from performing a qualitative study that involves women administrators from multiple institutions. With its large number of female faculty and administrators, it is difficult to compare the experiences of women administrators at GVSU with many colleges and institutions that have significantly less women administrators and faculty.

The findings indicate that the experiences are mostly positive. But there is more work to be done. Unless we gain an understanding of the pressures they face, and provide aspiring

leaders the tools they need, women administrators may find themselves in a “revolving door” in which they are looking for a way out of the influential position they worked hard to achieve (Reisser & Zurfluh, 1987).

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your educational background?
2. Could you tell me a little about your professional background and the journey that brought you to your current position?
3. Where there specific experiences or opportunities that enables you to acquire your current position and be successful in it?
4. How long did it take you to become administrator and what other positions did you have that led to the administrator role?
5. Did you have mentors and other support that helped you? Tell me about them.
6. What have been some positive experiences in being a woman administrator in Student Services or Academic Services?
7. Have you experienced challenges because of your gender?
8. How have your family responsibilities affected your job?

Follow up to question 8: Do you have children? What are their ages? What has been the most difficult part of being an administrator and having children?

Appendix B

GVSU Administrators by Sex, Department, and Faculty History: January 2014

		F		M	
		Total	# Past Faculty	Total	# Past Faculty
Academic & Student Affairs Division	Provost Office	4	4	3	2
	Pew Faculty Teaching/ Learning Ctr	1	1	.	.
	TRIO Program Office	.	.	1	0
	Vice Provost Office	1	0	.	.
	Academic Services Office	6	0	5	0
	Financial Aid Office	12	0	4	0
	Records and Registration Office	6	0	2	0
	Information Technology Office	2	0	.	.
	Student Services Office	4	0	2	0
	University Counseling Center	1	0	.	.
	Career Center Office	1	0	.	.
	Children's Center Office	1	0	.	.
	Housing and Residence Life Admin	10	0	7	0
	Student Life/Event Services Office	3	0	1	0
	Women's Center Office	2	0	.	.
	University Libraries Office	1	0	.	.
	Graduate Studies Admin	.	.	1	1
	Vice Provost for Health Office	3	0	.	.
	SCB Seidman College of Business	1	0	1	0
	SCB Center for Entrepreneurship	1	0	2	0
	SCB Family Owned Business Institute	5	0	5	0
	College Community Public Services	1	0	1	1
	CCPS CJS School of Criminal Justice	1	0	.	.
	CCPS HTM - Hospitality and Tourism	1	0	.	.
	CCPS Johnson Center for Philanthrop	5	0	5	1
	COE - College of Education	3	1	3	0
	College Liberal Arts and Sciences	2	0	1	1
	CLAS COM School of Communications	.	.	1	0
	Regional Math and Science Center	4	0	.	.
	CLAS Autism	3	0	.	.
	Padnos Engineering and Computing	.	.	1	1
	CHP - College of Health Professions	.	.	1	1
KCON - Kirkhof College of Nursing	4	1	.	.	
KCON Academic Nurse Health Center	.	.	1	0	
Ctr for Adult & Continuing Studies	2	0	2	0	

	CE Grand Forum Office	1	0	.	.
	CE Program Development	1	0	.	.
	CE Regional Center	1	0	.	.
	COIS Deans Office	1	1	1	0
	COIS HNR - Honors College Office	1	0	.	.
	COIS WRT - Writing Center Office	.	.	1	0
	Ctr-Excel in Schlrship & Creativity	1	0	1	1
	Grants Support Services	2	0	.	.
	Human Research Review	1	0	.	.
Central Admin Division	Central Admin Office	4	1	2	1
	Office of University Counsel Office	.	.	2	0
	Charter Schools Office	4	0	1	0
Finance and Admin Division	Intercollegiate Athletics Office	.	.	2	0
	Facilities Services Office	.	.	3	0
	Facilities Planning Office	.	.	2	0
	Pew Campus and Regional Centers	1	0	.	.
	Public Safety Office	1	0	.	.
	Pew Campus Security Unit	.	.	1	0
	Human Resources	2	0	2	0
	Business and Finance Office	.	.	2	0
	Controllers Office	1	0	.	.
	Procurement Services	.	.	1	0
	Business Services Office	.	.	2	0
	Budget / Financial Analysis Office	.	.	1	0
	The Meadows	.	.	1	0
	MAREC Unit	1	0	1	0
Inclusion and Equity Division	Affirmative Action Office	.	.	1	0
	Disability Support and ADA	1	0	.	.
	Intercultural Programming	.	.	1	0
University Development Division	University Development Office	1	0	1	0
	Special Giving Office	1	0	.	.
	Hauenstein Center Presidential Stud	1	0	2	0
University Relations Division	WGVU-TV / WGVK-TV Unit	2	0	5	0
	University Communications	1	0	.	.
	Institutional Marketing Office	1	0	1	0
Total		122	9	87	10