



January 2014

# Standing In The Doorway: Role Complexity In The Position Of Senior Student Affairs Officer

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STANDING IN THE DOORWAY: ROLE COMPLEXITY IN THE POSITION OF  
SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICER

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

December

2014

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This dissertation submitted by Jasi O'Connor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Date

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Title            Standing in the Doorway: Role Complexity in the Position of Senior  
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Jasi L. O'Connor  
August 7, 2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who contributed to the completion of this degree and dissertation. Without the encouragement, challenge, and support of so many people, the outcome of this journey would have been uncertain.

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Margi Healy. Her unwavering challenge and support reignited my motivation when it was flagging. In addition to being an excellent academic advisor, she developed into a trusted personal advisor. Her questions and guidance have been invaluable to me over the last seven years.

Thanks are due to the members of my committee: Dr. Kathy Gershman, Dr. Joan Hawthorne, Dr. Lori Reesor, and Dr. Deborah Worley. They provided excellent feedback during the dissertation process, and their editing suggestions served a critical role in contributing to the quality of this paper.

I would also like to thank Jim Meier for his support at the outset of this journey. His unconditional support in all things, but especially this endeavor, allowed me to take time away from work to increase my professional competence.

There are many other colleagues who showed support throughout the process by providing and encouraging work and knowing when to ask about progress and when not to. Special thanks to Melissa Shugarman for being my travel partner, travel provider, and research associate. Our travel adventures are cherished memories. Also special thanks to

Mikal Kenfield for always (appropriately) pushing me in the right direction. I would also like to thank the members of my cohort for being excellent colleagues and becoming wonderful friends.

The SSAOs who participated in this study were the most gracious, kind, helpful people I could have hoped to spend time with. Their dedication and commitment to their institutions and students was truly inspiring. The excitement and awe I felt after each interview is a testament to their dedication.

And of course thanks to my family for their sacrifice of time together as a family and financial resources for me to pursue this degree. Although it is cliché, it is true that I would not have been able to do this without your understanding and support.

## ABSTRACT

Student affairs practice at small schools is becoming increasingly complex, and staff at all levels, including the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) are required to manage multiple roles. The purpose of this study was to use a grounded theory methodology to investigate if the need for the SSAO to hold multiple roles requires them to be able to effectively utilize both leadership and management skills. A second research question of this study was to investigate if the culture of a religiously-affiliated college impacts the way the SSAOs conduct their role. To investigate these questions, SSAOs at small, private, liberal arts colleges affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were interviewed to gain an understanding of their roles and the context in which they are performed.

Results from this study indicate that SSAOs do need to use both leadership and management, but that this model does not sufficiently describe their work. SSAOs are required to act as boundary spanners, working in many different domains of the institution, and occasionally even crossing institutional boundaries. They also need to be agile in their work, with little time to spend on any one task. Finally, SSAOs can exert their own influence over the way they spend their time to invest in areas of the job they receive the most satisfaction and find to be the most meaningful.

**CHAPTER I**  
**INTRODUCTION**

**Background of the Problem**

Michelle is just starting her new job as the vice president for student affairs at Liberal College. She has worked her way up through a variety of positions within student affairs, and she feels that she is well-prepared to take this next step in her career.

Although she has never worked at a small college like Liberal College before, she assumed that her graduate preparation and previous experiences have prepared her well to step into the role of senior student affairs officer. Michelle is excited to step into the role of leader – to attend President’s Cabinet meetings, to interact with the Board of Trustees, and be able to decide the direction for the division. However, after a few short months, Michelle realizes that her staff members have started to voice their concern about her performance. Michelle has been spending her time in meetings, trying to establish herself as a leader. To free up her time to do this, she has delegated many of her day-to-day tasks, such as budget management, conduct appeals, staff supervision, and communication with students, to her staff. They are beginning to complain about the additional workload, and Michelle is beginning to worry about how she can regain the support of her staff. How did Michelle find herself in this position so shortly after beginning her role as the vice president for student affairs? Are there things she could

have done differently to better manage all of the expectations placed on her?

Colleges and universities are growing more complex, and student affairs in higher education is no different than the enterprise as a whole. As student affairs practice has gotten more complex, more is being asked of those who are placed in the role of directing these divisions of student affairs – the senior student affairs officer (SSAO).

The growing complexity within student affairs practice is attributed to a variety of factors, including the diversity of institutions, a greater diversity within the student body, and heightened expectations of external constituents including students, parents, and society as a whole (Barr, 1998; Sandeen, 1991). The SSAO position is even more diverse at small colleges where staff members often have multiple roles (Flanagan, 2006; Heida, 2006). To be effective within this increasingly complex environment, SSAOs need a variety of skills, including both strong management and leadership skills (Barr & Associates, 1993; Creamer, Winston, Jr., & Miller, 2001). However, finding an individual who can effectively use both sets of skills can be challenging. Some even question if it is possible for one person to be both an effective manager and leader (Bass, 2006; Zaleznik, 2004).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Small institutions can tend to be “understaffed and underresourced” (Smith, 1991, p. 59). Colleagues at larger institutions face similar challenges, but have typically had larger staffs to help respond to the increasing complexity of the work (Westfall, 2006). Small colleges have had the same obligations as larger colleges and universities, but often have less access to resources, such as staff, professional development, and access to



expert assistance (Westfall, 2006). It is not uncommon for some offices within the division of student affairs at small colleges to be staffed by only one or two people (Heidi, 2006; Palm, 1984). It is also not uncommon at small institutions for associate or assistant deans to have responsibility for their own department, in addition to assisting the SSAO (Heidi, 2006). Consequently, student affairs staff members at small colleges take on multiple roles, and the SSAOs are no exception (Bass, 2006; Flanagan, 2006; Westfall, 2006). Given the demands and the influence of their positions, it has been argued that they need to possess both leadership and management skills (Barr & Associates, 1993; Creamer, Winston, Jr., & Miller, 2001). In any given day, the SSAO at the small college will be required to engage with others in ways that utilize their management skills and then switch gears to take on the leadership role (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneiter, 2004; Bass, 2006). Therefore, they also need to find ways to balance those two sets of skills to maximize their effectiveness for the success of their division. Little research has been done about the experience of SSAOs as they try to balance their roles, therefore leaving a gap in the literature regarding this topic.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study examined the ways in which SSAOs understand their positions, and the ways in which they balance multiple roles and expectations. Based on the literature, SSAOs are often asked to balance both leadership activities and management activities. To help understand the activities and expectations for SSAOs, the research and literature related to leadership and management is used as a starting point for examining the work activities of the SSAOs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of SSAOs at small, private colleges associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as they try to balance the multiple responsibilities and roles of their positions. There were three guiding questions for this research study. The research questions for this study are

1. How do SSAOs at ELCA colleges perceive the complexity of their role?
2. To what extent do SSAOs perceive their roles to require both leadership and management, and how are those two skill sets balanced?
3. How does the context of working at an ELCA school affect the SSAO's understanding of the role?

### **Importance of the Study**

This study addressed several important issues. Westfall (2006) notes that the majority of SSAOs work at small institutions, but often receive their formal education at larger institutions. Learning more about the experience of balancing the multiple roles of the SSAO, including those of management and leadership, could play an important role in the education and training of those who are preparing for an SSAO position.

Leadership is seen as being among the most important skills for new doctoral graduates entering the field of student affairs to possess (Saunders & Cooper, 1999), and many consider the practice of leadership to be contextual (Hickman, 1998). SSAOs being trained at larger colleges and universities may not be prepared to effectively lead within the small college context. This necessitates some way of training staff members who will hold the SSAO position about the culture of the small college environment. In addition

to influencing formal educational programs, building knowledge related to leadership in this particular context could shape how professional organizations structure training or professional development programs directed toward aspiring or new SSAOs.

Learning about the experiences of SSAOs in balancing their management and leadership roles also has practical utility for institutions. This knowledge could be used to evaluate candidates in the hiring process or could be used to mentor incumbents. This knowledge could also be helpful to individuals who aspire to become SSAOs in evaluating their current competency related to balancing multiple roles within the small college context. It may also assist individuals in defining strengths and deficits for increased skill building before stepping into the SSAO role.

Finally, there has been an overall paucity of research on student affairs and the SSAO at the small college. This is equally true of research that has been conducted about religiously-affiliated colleges. Westfall (2006) notes that in 2004, 77% of colleges and universities in the United States were considered small colleges (enrollment under 5,000 students). Assuming that most colleges and universities have a SSAO, this means that three-fourths of all SSAOs work at small colleges. The fact that such a large percentage of SSAOs are working in environments about which we know very little is a compelling reason to add to the body of knowledge in this area.

### **Scope of the Study**

Because of the lack of prior research on this topic, I used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences that SSAOs at small colleges have in balancing their roles as leaders and managers. The goal was to describe the experiences and processes used by

SSAOs in managing their work roles. SSAOs at colleges affiliated with the ELCA who have one year of experience in the role at an ELCA institution were asked to participate in interviews to gain information about their experiences.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

This study was delimited to SSAOs at small colleges affiliated with the ELCA. In addition, the study was limited to SSAOs who have at least one year of experience at the SSAO level at an ELCA college. The purpose of this restriction was to only include SSAOs who have had sufficient time to become acclimated to the requirements of the role and culture of the institution.

One limitation of this study is that it was confined to colleges that are affiliated with the ELCA. Although there are compelling reasons for delimiting the study in this way, such as the fact that little research has been done about religiously-affiliated colleges (Elkins, 2006), this may impact the ability of the results to be applied to other settings (Creswell, 2007). Another potential limitation to this study is researcher bias (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). There is always some risk of bias when engaging in a qualitative study. However, the fact that I am currently employed at a small college affiliated with the ELCA means that I have a certain amount of knowledge and preconceived notions about the context in which this study takes place. It is my work at a small ELCA school that prompted my interest in this topic. I have seen first-hand the difficulty that SSAOs can have in balancing both the leadership and management functions of the position. Although this has piqued my interest in this topic as an area of inquiry, it also means that I bring certain experiences and opinions to the project. While

researcher bias can never be completely eliminated, there were steps that were taken to minimize its impact on the results of this study. This limitation will be addressed more thoroughly in the methods section.

### **Definition of Terms**

There are several terms that are used in this study that should be defined to improve clarity. These are the operational definitions that will be used for this study.

1. Small college: for the purpose of this study, small college is defined as having a baccalaureate enrollment of 5,000 students or fewer (Westfall, 2006).
2. Student affairs: student affairs is a division of a college or university that is focused on the services, programs, and resources that help students learn and develop outside of the classroom. student affairs as a division is comprised of a variety of departments that may include multicultural affairs, student programming, residence life, student organizations, career development, counseling, health services, academic support, and new student orientation, among others (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010).
3. Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO): the SSAO is the individual appointed as the positional leader of the division of student affairs on a college campus, regardless of the position title. This person is the highest ranking administrator in the division of student affairs (Davis, 2002).
4. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA): The ELCA is the largest Lutheran (a denomination of Christianity) church in North America. The ELCA was founded in 1988 when the American Lutheran Church, the Association of

Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America combined (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, n.d.).

5. Leadership: leadership is the process for producing change by establishing direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring people to overcome barriers to change (Kotter, 1990).
6. Management: management is the process by which consistency and order are created in an organization through such tasks as planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem-solving (Kotter, 1990).

### **Assumptions**

There are assumptions that any researcher makes when undertaking a study.

Some of the assumptions I made when conducting this study include:

1. SSAOs at small colleges are expected to engage in multiple roles as part of their work responsibilities.
2. SSAOs will be able to effectively describe their work and their approach to that work.
3. Qualitative research will be an effective approach to learn more about the experiences SSAO have in relation to the study phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).
4. Study participants will be willing to speak honestly with the researcher about his or her experiences.
5. The researcher possesses the skills needed to effectively engage in this research.

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I of the study presents the introduction, statement of the problem, the purpose and importance of the study, the scope of the study, and a definition of key terms.

Chapter II of the study presents a review of selected literature regarding the student affairs and the SSAO position as well as literature regarding leadership and management.

Chapter III describes the research methodology, data collection procedures, data analysis, research validity, and ethical considerations.

Chapter IV presents the findings of the study by describing the open coding process, axial coding process, grounded theory model, and theoretical assertions that emerged from the research. These findings are grounded in the experiences of SSAOs at small colleges affiliated with the ELCA have had in their roles as leader and manager.

Chapter V presents the discussion of the findings of this study. The discussion includes recommendations for practice and further research.

## **Summary**

In the United States, a majority of colleges and universities are considered to be small colleges. However, little research has been done about the staff members who work at those colleges. SSAOs today are working in complex environments in which the expectations of them include both managing the student affairs enterprise as well as engaging in leadership. To better serve institutions and to more thoroughly prepare those

who aspire to become SSAOs, this study examines the experiences that current SSAOs are having with their roles can addresses a gap in the current literature.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH**

Examine the recent books published on student affairs administration, and one will find discussion of the skills and qualities that are necessary for success. The skill domains discussed often include both leadership and management. However, many authors also believe that it is difficult for one individual to be both a good leader and a good manager because the roles are significantly different, require different skills, and have a different focus (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Kotter, 1990). This chapter explores the literature related to the development of student affairs and the position of senior student affairs officer (SSAO), the skills and competencies needed by all contemporary student affairs professionals, the roles and skills needed as an effective SSAO, and the role of the SSAO at small colleges. Finally, a brief review of literature related to leadership and management is included.

#### **Student Affairs in Higher Education**

This section reviews the literature related to the development of student affairs as a profession within higher education. It also describes the evolution of the position of SSAO and the roles and skills needed in the field.

#### **History of Student Affairs in Higher Education**

Student affairs in higher education, as it is known today, is a relatively new profession. It has emerged on the scene of American higher education primarily in the

20<sup>th</sup> century (Nuss, 1996). Student affairs developed out of a need for additional staff to help manage the lives of students outside of the classroom. In the early days of American higher education, faculty members served as instructors, counselors, advisors, and parents (Sandeen, 2000). However, as American higher education became more specialized and students began to have more curricular choices, faculty became more engaged in life in the classroom, with less time to spend and less interest in managing students outside the classroom (Sandeen, 2000). The student body also began to diversify, particularly with more women entering college (Evans, 2001). The more diverse student body was thought to require more supervision to ensure that students were being well cared-for (Evans, 2001). Thus, student affairs emerged as a field separate from that of faculty.

As higher education separated the student life within and outside the classroom, a need emerged to learn more about how students were developing as individuals, apart from their edification as students. Because of this, there was a need to educate institutions about students. In 1926, the American Council on Education was commissioned to sponsor a study on personnel practices within higher education (American Council on Education, 1937). From this early research, one of the seminal works in student affairs practice was developed. *The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)* (American Council on Education, 1937) set forth a philosophical statement that became the foundation of student affairs practice, setting student personnel practice apart from that of other administrative endeavors. The philosophical statement included the proposition that colleges should educate the whole person, including the emotional,

spiritual, physical, and vocational aspects as well as the intellectual component (American Council on Education, 1937).

The *SPPV* set the foundation for student affairs, but the field continued to develop in response to student needs. After World War II, there was a strong need to develop a vocational program for military personnel who were now going to college. A recognition developed that the original philosophical underpinnings of the profession needed to be updated to reflect societal changes and the maturation of the profession. Therefore, a revised version of the *SPPV* (American Council on Education, 1949) was created. This version focused on the responsibilities of students to play an active role in their education, rather than just being a passive recipient (American Council on Education, 1949). Expanding on the original document, the *SPPV* (1949) highlighted the responsibility of higher education to focus on democracy, international knowledge and cooperation, all in preparation for solving social problems (American Council on Education, 1949). In the second iteration, the *SPPV* continued to focus on the whole student, arguing that integration of all aspects of his or her life was important to help develop a mature individual (American Council on Education, 1949). Finally, the second version enumerated 17 different areas of student affairs practice that should be present at colleges (American Council on Education, 1949).

Student affairs continued to develop as a profession throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additional position papers and guiding statements were created that were consistent with social and cultural developments. In 1967 (with notes added in 1991), several professional associations worked together to create *The Joint Statement on Rights and*

*Freedoms of Students* (American Association of University Professors, 1967). This document affirmed many of the foundational expectations of students' rights, including such things as the rights to freedom of speech, expression, and association, and the basic tenets of student records and student conduct regulations (Association of American University Professors, 1967).

In 1987, in response to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *SPPV*, *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987) was developed. The purpose of this document was to more fully highlight the role that student affairs plays in the college experience, and the audience for this piece was other administrators in higher education, including presidents, business officers, and academic affairs personnel. This document presents the importance of students' education outside the classroom, while preserving the preeminence of the academic mission of the college. This document sets the stage for position statements to come, which argue that both academic affairs and student affairs foster student learning.

With the publication of the *Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Administrators, 1994), student affairs staff members began to define themselves as educators. The *SLI* outlines what a learning-centered student affairs division looks like, arguing that student affairs can create conditions and interventions that impact student learning and development (American College Personnel Association, 1994). Expanding on the work of the *SLI*, the *Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs* (American College Personnel Administrators & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998) was published to highlight the kinds of interventions

student affairs personnel could provide that would positively impact student learning. This document was produced in response to growing criticism of higher education. The seven principles defined student affairs staff as educators and articulated the need for increased collaboration between academic and student affairs in educating the whole person (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998). Building on these principles of good practice, *Learning Reconsidered* (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004) was published, again calling for increased partnership between those who educate students within the classroom and those who educate students outside the classroom. *Learning Reconsidered* put forth the idea that student development, which is the purview of student affairs, should be part of an integrative, transformative educational experience for students. *Learning Reconsidered 2* (American College Personnel Association et al., 2006) presented a practical guide to implementing the recommendations set forth in *Learning Reconsidered* (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004). *Learning Reconsidered 2* focused on the importance of developing student learning outcomes and how to assess student affairs programs and services (American College Personnel Association et al., 2006).

The philosophical focus on educating the whole person has endured over time in the student affairs profession. In 2012, a response to the *SPPV* was written to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the foundational *SPPV*. In the essay responses, current student affairs practitioners and faculty members reflected on the tenets of the

original 1937 *SPPV*, remarking on its relevance for the current time. However, some responses note that while the philosophies presented in the *SPPV* are still applicable today, they are tied to a particular point in time, and may not describe fully what is needed to respond to student learning and development in the current context (Boyle, Lowery, & Mueller, 2012). Worley and Wells-Dolan (2012) highlight the continued relevance of the 1937 document in relation to the content of student affairs work, but note that the ways in which this work is completed has become more contemporary. Ultimately, the reflections on the seminal work reaffirm its philosophy while calling for continued examination and re-imagination of the profession for the current times (Boyle, Lowery, & Mueller, 2012).

Through the position and philosophy statements, one can see the development of a profession from student support, serving the role of parent, to a modern interpretation that defines student affairs workers as educators in partnership with their academic affairs colleagues. The foundational principles and philosophies presented are still in use in student affairs practice today.

### **Evolution of the SSAO Position**

The early role of the student affairs professional was as a generalist. Sandeen (1991) writes about Dean LeBaron Briggs, who was appointed the first dean of the college of Harvard in 1891. Briggs served as counselor, advisor, disciplinarian, and parent to the students of Harvard (Sandeen, 1991). Prior to this time, presidents and faculty served in these roles, but as the institution of higher education evolved and became more specialized, faculty became more interested in the intellectual lives of

students and other staff were needed to attend to the social and moral lives of students (Nuss, 1996).

Institutions of higher education continued to become more complex and more diverse in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women were entering higher education at rapidly increasing rates, and higher education responded by appointing deans of women to manage the affairs of their female students (Sandeen, 1991; Schwartz, 1997). The positions of dean of women and dean of men served parallel functions for their designated populations; however, deans of men usually held a superior position (Westfall, 2006). Although deans had responsibility for student services, they often still held rank as faculty during this early development of the student affairs field (Nuss, 1996).

As the need for student affairs professionals grew, so did the need for preparation programs. The first academic program for preparation developed at Columbia University Teachers College in 1914, and programs for the preparation of student affairs professionals continued to develop throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nuss, 1996).

As the American culture and institutions of higher education became more diverse, so did the role of student affairs. Building from the early days, when the dean served as the primary student affairs staff person, specialized areas such as counseling, registration, and health services began to develop (Nuss, 1996; Sandeen, 1991). By the 1930s, there was discussion about the need to have greater organization of these functions, and thus colleges began to create positions to supervise the various student personnel functions (Sandeen, 1991). These positions had a variety of titles, including

dean of students, director of personnel, and vocational counselor, and the positions were as varied as the people holding them and the institutions at which they were held (Nuss, 1996). By the 1950s, most campuses had moved to the model of having one person serving as the coordinator in the dean of students role, but they were not necessarily welcomed positions on campus – from either the academic side, which was concerned about the siphoning of resources away from academic affairs, or by the current deans of women and deans of men who were reluctant to give up their circle of influence when replaced with one dean of students (Sandeen, 1991). Even though the development of the position of dean of students was not without resistance, the social unrest and political activism of students as well as the growth in enrollment of the 1960s and 1970s made the position a necessity (Nuss, 1996; Sandeen, 1991). The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War made student affairs critical to the success of institutions (Sandeen, 1991). During the time, the role of the SSAO position started to become more highly regarded on campuses, and the title of vice president of student affairs became more popular through the 1970s and 1980s (Rickard, 1985). This elevation in title indicated the developing influence that was associated with the SSAO position.

The SSAO position today only continues to grow more involved. Brown (1997) notes that the current role of the SSAO has expanded for a variety of reasons, including the increased diversity of the student body and changing expectations for higher education from students and parents. Sandeen (2000) notes that the modern SSAO must answer to a variety of constituents who may represented competing or conflicting interests.



From the early days of American higher education, when faculty served in loco parentis, the SSAO position has grown in scope and responsibility to become an important and influential position on many campuses. The role has grown increasingly diverse, and to be successful, contemporary SSAOs must possess a variety of skills.

### **Skills and Competencies Needed by Student Affairs Practitioners**

Significant research that has been done about the skills needed for student affairs practitioners, although less research has focused directly on the SSAO. While there has been a significant amount of research on the skills or competencies necessary for successful student affairs practice, there has not been widespread consensus about which skills are most critical (Herdlein III, 2004; Waple, 2006). A definitive set of skills necessary for success as a student affairs administrator may still be contested, but the fact that graduate preparation is necessary for skill development has been widely accepted in the field (Waple, 2006). Because of this, many research studies focused on graduate preparation as the way in which new professionals acquire many necessary skills. Waple (2006) assessed 28 skills that were expected to be developed through master's level graduate study and found that there were 14 skills or competencies that SSAOs assessed to be both attained through graduate study at a high level and used at a high level in entry-level practice: knowledge of student demographics, student development theory, career development, leadership theories, legal issues, effective program planning, organizational theory, ethics, advising, crisis management, communication skills, problem solving, and presentation skills. Although SSAOs felt that graduate study generally prepared new professionals well, there were other essential competencies that

were not being developed through graduate study, such as financial skills and budgeting, assessment, and strategic planning (Herdlein, 2004; Waple, 2006).

In addition to studies focused on the competencies needed for entry-level professionals, there have been studies focused on the skills needed for mid-level professionals. Several studies have investigated the importance of a similar set of skills which were grouped into seven categories: personnel management, leadership, student contact, communication, fiscal management, professional development, and research and evaluation (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Gordon, Strode, & Mann, 1996; Saunders & Cooper, 1999). These studies have shown that SSAOs and mid-level practitioners have a high degree of agreement about which skills they determine to be most important for successful practice. The most important skills sets for mid-level managers include student contact, leadership, and communication, with fiscal and personnel management being slightly less important (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Gordon, Strode, & Mann, 1993). Saunders and Cooper (1999) found that SSAOs placed importance on similar skills when sharing expectations about mid-level professionals with a doctoral degree, with the highest rated skills sets as personnel management, leadership, student contact, and communication.

In an attempt to integrate the research related to competencies, Lovell and Kosten (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature about the skills, knowledge, and traits needed to be successful in student affairs, regardless of the length of tenure in the profession. Successful practitioners need knowledge about student development theory and knowledge of higher education, skills in administration, management, and human

relations, and personal traits that include integrity and ability to work cooperatively (Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

In addition to what can be learned through prior research, there are also organizations that have defined the competencies needed for effective student affairs practice, regardless of tenure in the field. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has developed a set of competencies that should be attained by students who are pursuing master's level preparation in student affairs. The competencies described by CAS (n.d.) include student development theory; student characteristics and the impact of college on students; individual and group interventions; organization and administration of student affairs programs; assessment, evaluation and research; and the historical and cultural foundations of higher education and student affairs. In addition to CAS, there are professional organizations that have defined competencies for student affairs practitioners. The most recent iteration of these competencies comes from a joint endeavor between College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). These organizations published a set of professional competencies for student affairs practice (College Student Educators International & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010). The competencies were developed through the use of research on student affairs competencies as well as other documents that had been used by both professional organizations. Ten competency areas were developed: advising and helping skills; assessment, evaluation, and research; equity, diversity, and inclusion; ethical professional practice; history, philosophy, and values; human and organizational

resources; law, policy and governance; leadership; personal foundations; and student learning and development (College Student Educators International & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010). In addition to the 10 competency areas, there were three threads that were identified as running throughout all of the competency areas, which included technology, sustainability, and globalism (College Student Educators International & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010). These competencies are considered applicable to all functional areas and include three levels of mastery: basic, intermediate, and advanced, which could be associated with the practitioner's level of experience.

While there has not been a consensus about the skills needed to be an effective student affairs professional, there have certainly been consistencies throughout the literature. It is clear that having well-developed human relations skills and knowledge of student development theory is critical (Lovell & Kosten, 2000). Other skills have emerged in more recent times, such as a focus on assessment skills and the role of sustainability, globalism, and technology in student affairs ((College Student Educators International & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010).

### **Skills Needed in the SSAO Position**

While there has been research that has focused on the competencies needed for successful student affairs practice, little empirical research has focused specifically on the SSAO (Smith, Lara, & Hughey, 2009). However, looking more specifically at the skills needed in the SSAO position, research has noted some unique competencies needed for success in this role. Davis (2002) studied what SSAOs perceived to be the most critical

skills, which included personal qualities such as integrity, communication skills, and skills in working with the president. Sandeen (2000) concurs with the importance placed on the skill of working effectively with the president, calling it “perhaps the single most critical element in the success of senior student affairs leaders” (p. 5). In studying what college presidents report to be the most important skills for SSAOs, presidents ranked personal and interpersonal skills as being among the most desired competencies (Randall & Globetti, 1992). More specifically, the top five skills or traits were integrity, commitment to institutional mission, conflict resolution, decisiveness, and ability to motivate others (Randall & Globetti, 1992).

Other skills seen as important are promoting change, coalition building, resolving problems, managing people and budgets, delivering quality programs, assessing student learning, and dealing with crises (Barr & Associates, 1993; Sandeen, 2000). Sandeen (1991) notes that some of the most important skills for the SSAO include good fiscal and personnel management, as well as good planning and executing skills, which includes setting objectives for the division. Sandeen (1991) also discusses the need for good mediation skills (between student groups, between faculty and students, and between the president and students). This list serves as a sample of skills needed, and illustrates the diversity of the SSAO role. While some of the skills described as important for the SSAO are also skills needed for the generalist practitioner in student affairs, some are specific to those in the role of SSAO.

## **Student Affairs at the Small College**

Although small colleges make up the majority of institutions of higher education in the United States, research focusing solely on SSAO or student affairs practice at the small college has been limited (Westfall, 2006). The primary areas of focus have either been studies that compare the demographic qualities of the SSAO at small colleges with their peers at larger institutions, or have been opinion or advice pieces written by professionals working at small colleges.

In terms of the demographic studies that have been completed, the most notable results include studies about the title of SSAOs, the career paths of SSAOs, and the skills and traits necessary to be a successful SSAO. Rickard (1985) studied the diversity in titles among SSAOs. The data showed that the title of vice president was more likely to be used at larger institutions, while the title of dean was more likely to be used at smaller institutions (Rickard, 1985). Rickard (1985) also found that women were more likely to serve as SSAOs at small colleges than at larger colleges or universities. These patterns that were true in the 1980s continue to be true today. In a recent demographic survey of SSAOs, 83% of the SSAOs who held the title of vice president and dean worked at small, private, four year institutions (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2014).

Career patterns for SSAOs at small schools also vary from their large school counterparts. Ostroth, Elfird, and Lerman (1984) found that SSAOs at small schools had fewer years of experience before appointed as a SSAO. SSAOs at small colleges were also younger at their time of appointment than those at larger institutions (Ostroth, Elfird,

& Lerman, 1985). In a meta-analysis of studies related to the traits necessary to be a successful SSAO, Lovell and Kosten (2000) found that no empirical studies focused exclusively on private colleges (which are more likely to be smaller institutions); however, a larger proportion of the studies they reviewed compared public and private institutions. In addition, a focus on the SSAO is a relatively new development, only present in the literature starting in the 1980s (Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

In articles or studies that are more opinion or advice oriented, authors tend to focus on how student affairs practice and the role of SSAO is different at the small college. One of the themes is the diversity of the SSAO position at small colleges. Heida (2006) argues that the multiplicity of the roles within the SSAO position is even greater at small colleges than other types of institutions. Because the organization of the student affairs division at small colleges often tends to have fewer layers than at larger institutions, many student affairs professionals at small colleges, including the SSAO, have multiple roles (Westfall, 2006; Westfall, 2011). Another reason for the breadth and variety of the role is the diversity of the missions among small colleges, including religiously-affiliated colleges, women's colleges, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and others (Westfall, 2006). Heida (2006) also notes that the SSAO position at small colleges plays a variety of roles, including "advisor, counselor, supervisor, program planner and initiator, crisis manager, strategic thinker, and institutional officer..." (p. 16). In addition to the multiple roles played by the SSAO, the position is also characterized by the breadth of responsibility and the need to adapt to change (Westfall, 2006).

Westfall (2011) identified the competencies needed by SSAOs at small colleges. These competencies include good relationship building skills, due to the need to interact with a variety of individuals and groups on campus, continued interest in working with students and their issues, ability to work and develop staff teams, an ability to understand the campus as a whole organization, and an understanding of the fiscal workings of the organization (Westfall, 2011). Ultimately, SSAOs at small colleges need to serve as a student affairs generalist, having broad knowledge not only of the student affairs division, but of the college as a whole (Westfall, 2011).

SSAOs at small colleges also need a level of political acumen. Smith (1991) points to differences that can exist between small and large institutions in the decision making structure. Although many small college student affairs professionals may not like to think of their role as having a political component, Smith (1991) argues that the often decentralized or informal nature of decision making at the small college may call for a level of political engagement.

Finally, structural differences at small colleges can affect the role of SSAO. The SSAO at a small college may be more likely to hold both the title of vice president for student affairs (VPSA) and dean of students (Bass, 2006; Tederman, 1997). Holding both titles is another indicator of the breadth of responsibility for the small college SSAO. Bass (2006) describes the responsibilities of the two roles as being different in focus and in the types of activities and skills that are required. Bass (2006) describes the role of VPSA as having a global perspective, being involved in long-range planning, having a broad institutional perspective, and often being responsible for a multi-million



dollar budget. In contrast, the dean of students role is described as being an advocate for students, working with the day-to-day operations, being engaged with student governance, and being responsible for staff supervision (Bass, 2006). Due to the differences in expectations for the VPSA and the dean of students, it may be difficult for one person to fulfill all of these roles effectively (Bass, 2006; Tederman, 1997).

Tederman (1997) describes this issue of balancing the dual roles as a problem to be faced by any new small college SSAO. Flanagan (2006) believes that for any small college SSAO to effectively balance the two roles, there will need to be a strong emphasis on training and development.

In addition to the breadth of the SSAO role at small colleges, smaller institutions often have a different mission than larger institutions. As noted earlier, small colleges can have very distinct missions, based on the populations they serve (Westfall, 2006). Westfall (2006) argues that it is important to have focused attention on the role of the SSAO at the small college to better understand how the environment and mission impact those in this role.

The SSAO position developed out of the growing complexity of colleges, as they moved from proscriptive programs of study to more diverse offerings. Faculty, who once carried out the functions of student affairs, gave way to professional deans who assisted students with their lives outside the classroom. Student affairs became more specialized with the development of health offices, counseling centers, and vocational guidance counselors. This diversification called for someone to oversee and unify the various functions, and the position of dean of students was born. Modern SSAOs continue to

deal with the complexity of the higher educational environment, and those at small schools may do so to a greater extent than their counterparts at larger institutions.

### **Student Affairs at Religiously-Affiliated Colleges**

The practice of student affairs at religiously-affiliated colleges is a line of inquiry that has received little attention from researchers. Although many of the earliest colleges in the United States were religiously affiliated, knowledge about the nature of student affairs work at religiously-affiliated colleges is limited.

The strength of the denominational affiliation can vary in religiously-affiliated colleges. Strong affiliation can range in practice from a formal association with a religious organization, financial support from a religious organization, or an impact on the governing structure and of the institution (Hirt, 2006). Religiously affiliated colleges can also have weak ties to a denomination, in which they might be religiously affiliated in name only, or the religious life of the college may be segmented from other activities of the institution (Hirt, 2006).

Similar to small colleges, religiously-affiliated colleges can vary widely in their mission, but mission plays a key role in defining religiously-affiliated colleges (Hirt, 2006). Hirt (2006) describes the role of student affairs professionals at religiously-affiliated colleges as “interpreters” responsible for translating the religious mission of the college for students, while helping the campus understand the role of student affairs within the religious context of the institution (Hirt, 2006).

This translation of student affairs within the context of the religious mission of the college is an area that has been researched primarily in relation to Catholic institutions.

Leaders of Catholic institutions believe that student affairs staff have a key role to play in helping integrate student life with the Catholic identity of the college or university (James & Estanek, 2012). Therefore, through several professional organizations supporting Catholic colleges and universities, the *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities* (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators, & Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities, 2007) were developed. The purpose of this guiding document was to help student affairs professionals think about and shape their work with students in ways that were consistent with the mission of Catholic colleges (James and Estanek, 2007). James and Estanek (2007) found that when surveyed, SSAOs were using the principles to have conversations and planning sessions with student affairs staff and students about working and learning at a Catholic institution. Schaller and Boyle (2006) also found that communicating mission and religious identity were important characteristics of student affairs work at Catholic colleges. Their research highlights the importance of mission at Catholic colleges, while also acknowledging that there is diversity about how institutions within the same religious tradition interpret their mission (Schaller & Boyle, 2006).

Although little research that has been done about student affairs practice at religiously-affiliated colleges, the findings of several studies are that, at least at Catholic colleges, student affairs staff have an expectation to serve a “mission translation” role. While this may be a role expectation at other religiously-affiliated colleges, research has not been conducted to support this claim.

## **Leadership and Management**

The literature in the field of student affairs suggests that skills in leadership and management are important for effective practice. Both leadership and management are phenomena that have been highly explored in the literature. However, there is still disagreement about the differences between the two, and the terms are often used interchangeably (Kotterman, 2006; Rost, 1998). Kotterman (2006) argues that the debate about whether a clear distinction exists between leadership and management generally remains unresolved (p. 13). The debate seems to revolve around the degree to which leadership and management are different or similar, with some arguing that there is a clear distinction between the two, whereas others argue that the roles are more similar or complementary.

Some researchers maintain that leadership and management are distinct from one another. Zaleznik (2004) argues that the two roles are quite different from one another. The managerial role is focused on rationality and control, with managers being directed toward solving problems and generating results (Zaleznik, 2004). The leadership role is focused on generating new ideas and taking risks, and is generally more comfortable with chaos. Leaders shape ideas rather than respond to them (Zaleznik, 2004). Zaleznik also focuses on the individuals who are managers and leaders, and describe them as having different personalities. This would make it difficult for one person to be able to act as both a successful leader and a successful manager. Zaleznik relied on the “great person” theory of leadership, which claims that leaders are born, and tend to maintain a certain personality type – often being very charismatic (Northouse, 2007; Rost, 1998). Similarly,

Bolman and Deal (1991) found that to be an effective leader, one uses different orientations (or frames) than the frames that effective managers use. Effective management is associated with use of the structural frame, while effectiveness in leadership is more strongly associated with the symbolic and political frames (Bolman & Deal, 1991). While in the model by Bolman and Deal (1991), one person could be effective in both, they found a very small sample for whom that was the case. Rost (1998) also describes management and leadership as two distinct phenomena. However, in contrast to Zaleznik (2004), Rost defines leadership and management as relationship processes that cannot be adequately defined solely by what the leader or manager does. Rost (1998) describes management as an authority based relationship in which managers and subordinates work to produce and sell a particular good or service. Management has a coercive element in which the manager directs the work of the subordinate (Rost, 1998). Leadership, in contrast, is a relationship based on influence, where leaders and followers work together to achieve intended change (Rost, 1998). There is no coercive nature to leadership, and leaders and followers are united in a common purpose (Rost, 1998).

One of the dangers noted by several authors in defining leadership and management as two distinct phenomena is that one could be denigrated while the other is glorified. Rost (1998) discusses an early model that he developed that depicted leadership as noble and management as mediocre. After refinement of his model, Rost realized that it was important for both to garner equal respect (Rost, 1998). Along similar lines, Middlehurst and Elton (1992) argue the importance of conceptually separating

leadership and management so that the longer term objectives of leadership don't become overshadowed by the short-term objectives of management. Krantz and Gilmore (1990) also note that splitting the two allows for the possibility of either management or leadership being valued above the other. Each author argues that even though leadership and management are distinct from one another, they are both necessary.

Others argue that there is no discernible difference between leadership and management. Foxley (1980) argues that to try to distinguish the work of "administrators" and "managers" is purely semantic, and has no real value. Foxley (1980) uses the term administration to depict what I have been referring to as management, and management to refer to what I have been calling leadership. Foxley (1980) also argues that good administrators are good managers, and vice versa, also in conflict with how others have described the two roles. Some scholars who argue that there is no or need not be any discernible difference between the two phenomenon often argue that leadership is just good management (Rost, 1998).

Finally, there are some researchers who have found a middle ground. Kotter (2001) argues that while leadership and management are two distinct roles with different aims, they are complementary to one another. Because of this assertion, Kotter argues that one individual can be both an effective leader and an effective manager, what he terms a leader-manager (Kotter, 2001). In further defining the roles of leader and manager, Kotter (2001) points out that they both are focused on the same tasks, but they accomplish them in very different ways. Managers are concerned with budgeting, planning, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving (Kotter, 2001; Luthans,

1988), while leaders are concerned with setting a direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring people to achieve the vision (Kotter, 2001). Therefore, managers are focused on executing in the present and maintaining the status quo, while leaders are concerned with achieving change (Kotter, 1990; Kotter, 2001). Krantz and Gilmore (1990) have a similar perspective on defining how leadership and management. Leadership is the process of developing vision or strategic thinking, while management is the mechanism by which the vision and strategy get implemented (Krantz & Gilmore, 1990). Therefore, Krantz and Gilmore (1990) argue that it is problematic to have one without the other to balance, but that both roles do not need to be held by one individual.

This leads to the need to articulate the phenomena of leadership and management. Although over time there has been some debate about the differences, there is some consensus in the literature about the activities and goals of management and leadership. As noted above, management is generally concerned with control and the status quo (Kotter, 1990; Kotterman, 2006). Activities that are often labeled management include budgeting, planning, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem solving (Barr, 1988; Burke & Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1990; Krantz & Gilmore, 1990). Leadership is concerned with influence and change (Barr & Associates, 1993; Kotter, 1990). Leadership activities include sharing a vision, aligning people, and motivating others (Kotter, 1990).

While there has been disagreement about the distinctiveness of leadership and management, there is some recent consensus around the goals of the two phenomena. Kotter (1990) presented the differences between the two in a way in which activities can be clearly identified as leadership or management. The goal of leadership is to bring

about change, and to be in relationship with people in such a way that supports that goal. Management, in contrast, is about creating efficient processes that help to meet the current goals of an organization, and the relationships with others are focused on creating order and consistency.

### **Leadership in Student Affairs**

Similar to the business world, leadership and management are phenomena that have been highly studied within higher education (Middlehurst & Elton, 1992). Leadership has been identified as one of the key competencies for student affairs professionals (Saunders & Cooper, 1999). The studies have focused on similar topics as in the business world: leadership activities, leadership skills, and leadership effectiveness. In discussing the domains of student affairs work, Creamer, Winston, Jr., and Miller (2001) posit that there are three: educator, leader, and manager. In their role as leader, student affairs professionals should “act for catalysts of change, rather than maintainers of change” (Creamer, Winston, Jr., & Miller, 2001, p. 16). This view of leadership in student affairs is consistent with Kotter’s (1990) definition of leadership. The skills and activities of leadership in student affairs include articulating and implementing a philosophy of student affairs and being able to use influence (rather than coercion) (Tederman, 1997). However, similar to the literature about leadership and management in the business world, there is a lack of clarity as to the activities that would be considered leadership. Although Creamer, Winston, Jr., & Miller (2001) define leadership as a process of change, they label as “leadership” such activities as monitoring, problem solving, planning and organizing, which have often been identified



as management skills (Kotter, 1990). They also list as leadership behavioral characteristics such as motivating and inspiring and networking, which are consistent with the definition of leadership as a change process (Kotter, 1990).

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the methodology used to investigate the experiences of and processes used by SSAOs as they balance the expectations of their roles. I employed a qualitative approach to this study for a variety of reasons. First, little recent research has been done about SSAOs' experience of balancing multiple roles. Therefore, taking an exploratory approach to the study is appropriate (Creswell, 2009; Troachim & Donnelly, 2007). The role of the SSAO has become more complex (Sandeem, 1991; Tederman, 1997), and this complexity also lends itself well to a qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2007). Because the goal of this study was to explore the experiences of and processes used by individuals, the study also calls for a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

In addition to the research questions calling for a qualitative approach, several authors have argued that qualitative research is the method of choice for studying leadership (Conger, 1998). Conger (1998) argues that the dynamic nature of leadership and the social construction of the phenomenon make it ideal for qualitative study. Others argue that the positivistic study of leadership has led to a dissociation of leadership from the experiences and motivations of people (Van der Mescht, 2004). Bryman (2004) discusses the important role that qualitative research has played in examining leadership as a process of change and looking at leadership from a deeper perspective. These

authors are all supportive of using a qualitative approach to study leadership given the complexity of the phenomenon and the fact that it is a social construction. In this chapter I will outline the qualitative approach I used to collect, analyze, and interpret data, as well as addressing issues of validity and the role of the researcher.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is an inductive methodology that is consistent with a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2007). This worldview focuses on construction of meaning based on the reality of those who are participating in the research; the world exists as the participants understand it (Creswell, 2007). Smith (1989) describes qualitative inquiry as internalism, where reality is a social construction built in the meaning people give to interactions with one another and the world. Because leadership has been described as a process of engagement with others, there is a level of social construction that makes qualitative inquiry an appropriate approach for use with this topic (Parry, 1998).

### **Participant Selection**

The participant pool for this study was SSAOs at ELCA affiliated colleges or universities. Although all of the sites selected were colleges affiliated with the ELCA, these colleges are all independent (not belonging to a system), private, four-year liberal arts colleges. The ELCA website identifies three common characteristics of the ELCA colleges and universities. They are all liberal arts colleges, primarily residential, and have a commitment to connecting faith and learning (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, n.d.) A listing of all ELCA colleges was obtained from the ELCA website

(Evangelical Luther Church in America, n.d.). At the time of the study (beginning the summer of 2012), there were 26 colleges and universities affiliated with the ELCA. Once the listing of ELCA colleges was generated, I then researched each institution's website to identify the individuals serving in the SSAO role. Only SSAOs with at least one year of experience in the role at the time I received IRB approval for this study were kept in the participant pool. This limit was established to include only SSAOs who had direct experience in the SSAO role at an ELCA institution, so that they would have adequate experience from which to draw during a potential interview. In addition, limiting the participants to those with one year of experience at the SSAO level helped to ensure that they had sufficient time in the role to gain an understanding of institutional culture and ample opportunity to work with other senior administrators, the president, and other staff members. After excluding individuals without one year of experience as the SSAO at an ELCA affiliated college, the pool included 21 individuals. Next, the titles of SSAOs were reviewed, and two individuals who had responsibility for both student affairs and academic affairs were excluded from the study. The concern with these individuals was that because their time needed to be divided between the two areas, their experience with student affairs and their experiences at their institutions could be significantly different than those whose focus is solely on student affairs. The remaining pool included 19 individuals who met the study criteria.

All of the remaining 19 SSAOs were sent an email message describing the study with an invitation to participate. The email contacts were sent in a series of invitations. An initial group of six individuals were invited to participate. The initial group was

comprised of individuals who were within driving distance of the researcher, to allow for in-person interviews. After the initial group, the remaining individuals were contacted in waves of three to four, which continued until all 19 had been invited to participate. The rationale for contacting the SSAOs in waves was twofold: first, this helped to extend my time in the field; second, it allowed the interviews to be scheduled in a more manageable way, while not having to juggle the schedules of many busy professionals. The email invitation contained a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A) for review. Eleven of the 19 SSAOs who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. Two SSAOs declined to participant, and five SSAOs did not respond to invitations.

The participants in the study included six women and five men with experience ranging from two years to over 20 years in the position. Institutions ranged in size from approximately 1,500 to over 3,000 undergraduate students. SSAOs were interviewed from several areas of the country, including the West, Midwest, South, and East. Eight of the study participants had doctoral degrees, while three held Master's degrees. Seven of the participants had previous student affairs experience, either at the graduate school or professional level, prior to entering the role of SSAO, while the other participants had administrative experience either within or outside of higher education. A fuller description of the study participants is presented at the beginning of Chapter IV.

The participants of this study represent a relatively homogeneous pool of participants who have a shared experience of working as the SSAO at a small, private, liberal arts college affiliated with the ELCA. This homogeneity lends itself to being able to compare the experiences of the participants across the group.

## **Human Subjects**

To ensure protection of the participants of this research, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Dakota (UND). As a condition of approval, the IRB requested that I receive approval from the IRBs of all the institutions at which the SSAOs worked. As part of the participant recruitment process, I contacted the chair of the IRB at each institution at which I would be interviewing a subject to receive approval. Each institution I contacted received a copy of the IRB application and approval from UND, as well as a copy of the informed consent form. Many institutions gave permission based on the approval from UND, but a few required a separate application for their campus. IRB approval was granted from each institution at which I interviewed a participant.

Because of the limited number of research subjects in the study pool, it was important to protect their anonymity as much as possible. Each participant has been labeled only by number. Where necessary, edits were made to direct quotations to modify or remove identifying information. Any edits made to direct quotations were included in brackets within the text. This was done in such a way that did not change the meaning of the quotation, but only helped to mask the identity of the participant. In addition, I edited any personally identifying information to protect the identity of participants. Because gender did not emerge as a significant comparison factor in this study, all participants are identified using the feminine pronoun. This was chosen because there was a slightly higher number of women participants than men. References to the president of the institution were also changes to use a single pronoun. In this case,

for ease of distinction, the male pronoun was used. Participants were given the opportunity to review any excerpts from their interviews that were used in this manuscript. All data, including the list that cross-references participants' names with their participant number, are stored separately from the interview data and are kept in a password protected file on my personal computer. The data from the study will be kept in a locked cabinet for three years after the completion of the study, at which point the transcripts, recordings, and other data will be destroyed.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through audio-recorded interviews with the participants. Participants were either scheduled for in-person interviews or telephone interviews. Participants near the researcher were invited for in-person interviews, while those participants outside of driving distance were asked to participate in telephone interviews. To gain a depth of understanding of the participants' experience, a modified version of Seidman's (1998) three interview protocol was used. Seidman (1998) describes an interview protocol consisting of three interviews: the first interview is focused on learning the personal history of each participant, the second interview is focused more specifically on the details of the experience under study, and the third interview is focused on asking participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 1998). In this study, the protocol was modified to conduct initial interviews focused on both getting to know the history of the participants as well as the detail of their experience related to their roles as SSAOs. Regardless of the method of the interview (either in-person or over the phone), the initial interviews all ranged from between 45

minutes to one and one-half hours, with the average length of the interview being about one hour. The initial interviews were conducted over a period of eight months. Four of the interviews were conducted in the offices of the SSAOs, and the remaining seven were conducted over the telephone. A second interview was completed over the telephone with two participants, asking them to reflect on the initial data analysis and the meaning they give to their experiences. The purpose of the second interview was to conduct member checking as well as to gather additional data regarding the initial findings. Because the two follow-up interviews confirmed the initial findings and did not add significant additional data, the decision was made to end the follow up interviews after two. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing primarily on the daily work and the roles of the SSAOs and the meaning they draw from that work, but allowed space for the interviews to go in directions not specifically designated by the researcher (See Appendix B for the list of interview questions).

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews with SSAOs were recorded using a digital voice recorder. After the interviews, the digital voice files were transferred to computer files and transcribed by the researcher. The interview recordings were initially maintained in three places: the voice recorder, a computer hard drive, and on a secure server. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were deleted from the voice recorder, but the other two voice files were maintained. A password was needed to access the voice files in both locations. The typed transcripts were maintained in the same way, saved on both my computer and on a



secure server. Printed transcripts were kept in a locked file box in my home. All files will be kept for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed.

In addition to the interview transcripts, field notes, observations, and personal memos taken while conducting the interviews were typed and kept in secure computer files.

To begin my data analysis, I imported the interview transcripts into Dedoose, an online data analysis tool for qualitative and mixed-methods research. Dedoose uses high level encryption of data files to ensure security. In addition to importing transcripts, demographic profiles were created for each participant and linked to their interview transcripts. The demographic profiles included gender, length of time in the role, size of institution, area of the country, title, to whom the SSAOs report, and a description of their experience and training prior to taking the position as SSAO at an ELCA-affiliated college.

As interviews were completed, transcribed, and the transcripts uploaded, I began the initial open coding of data. Excerpts of the interviews were selected and assigned initial codes. As more interviews were added, additional codes were created, and excerpts with existing codes were examined each time a code was applied, per the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Once all the transcripts were coded through the initial open coding process, transcripts were reviewed a second time to see if new codes needed to be applied. As data were coded, I created memos when questions or interpretive ideas arose while re-reading or coding the transcripts. Grounded theory, because of the constant comparison of data to new information, often results in a need to

collect additional data (Egan, 2002). The memos I developed led to additional questions, therefore, I contacted two of the more experienced SSAOs to conduct a follow-up interview. The follow up interviews were focused on validating my interpretation of the data to that point as well as to gather additional information. These follow up interviews were also transcribed, uploaded to Dedoose and coded, similar to the initial interview transcripts.

Once the interviews were coded in Dedoose, the initial code list was exported and the excerpts were reviewed. A third round of codes was generated through manual coding as I re-read all of the excerpts and expanded codes that were initially too broad. Throughout the open coding process, words were used directly from the participants whenever possible. The three rounds of coding resulted in 291 initial codes. To begin categorizing the codes that resulted from the open coding process, all the codes from the first two rounds of coding, plus the new codes developed through the third manual coding process, were placed onto “sticky notes” and attached to large pieces of paper that represented categories. This allowed the codes to easily be switched between categories. From this arranging of codes, a spreadsheet was developed by transferring the codes into columns. Groups of codes were clustered underneath categories that described the group of codes around a common thread. The categories were revised after another review of the codes, which resulted in 20 categories. An initial group of themes was developed, along with a draft of a grounded theory map. The codes, categories and themes were reworked several times until the categories were grouped into five themes with 19 supporting categories. To more fully represent the themes, a descriptive statement was

written for each theme. Once the themes were developed, the original coding from Dedoose was reviewed to ensure that the themes represented the participants as a whole, rather than just a subset of the SSAOs. After this review, I felt that the themes fairly represented the experience of the SSAOs as a group. The themes developed were:

1. SSAOs have a complex role and competing expectations can create role tension.
2. Forces within and outside the institution exert pressure on how SSAOs spend their time.
3. Person-environment interaction influences how SSAOs approach their roles.
4. SSAOs exercise both leadership and management in balancing their roles.
5. SSAOs use a variety of strategies to be effective in balancing their work roles.

A full list of codes, categories, and themes can be found in Appendix C.

Through the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007), data analysis moves from the specific, including direct excerpts from the interviews to the more general and abstract, which is represented by the development of themes. This process of moving from the specific to the abstract, through open and axial coding, led to the creation of a grounded theory map, depicted in Figure 1, representing my findings. In developing the grounded theory map, a central phenomenon was first identified from the open coding process. After I identified the central phenomenon, the data and codes were analyzed to identify the causal conditions under which the central phenomenon exists, the strategies that emerge, and the context and intervening conditions that impact the strategies used (Creswell, 2007).

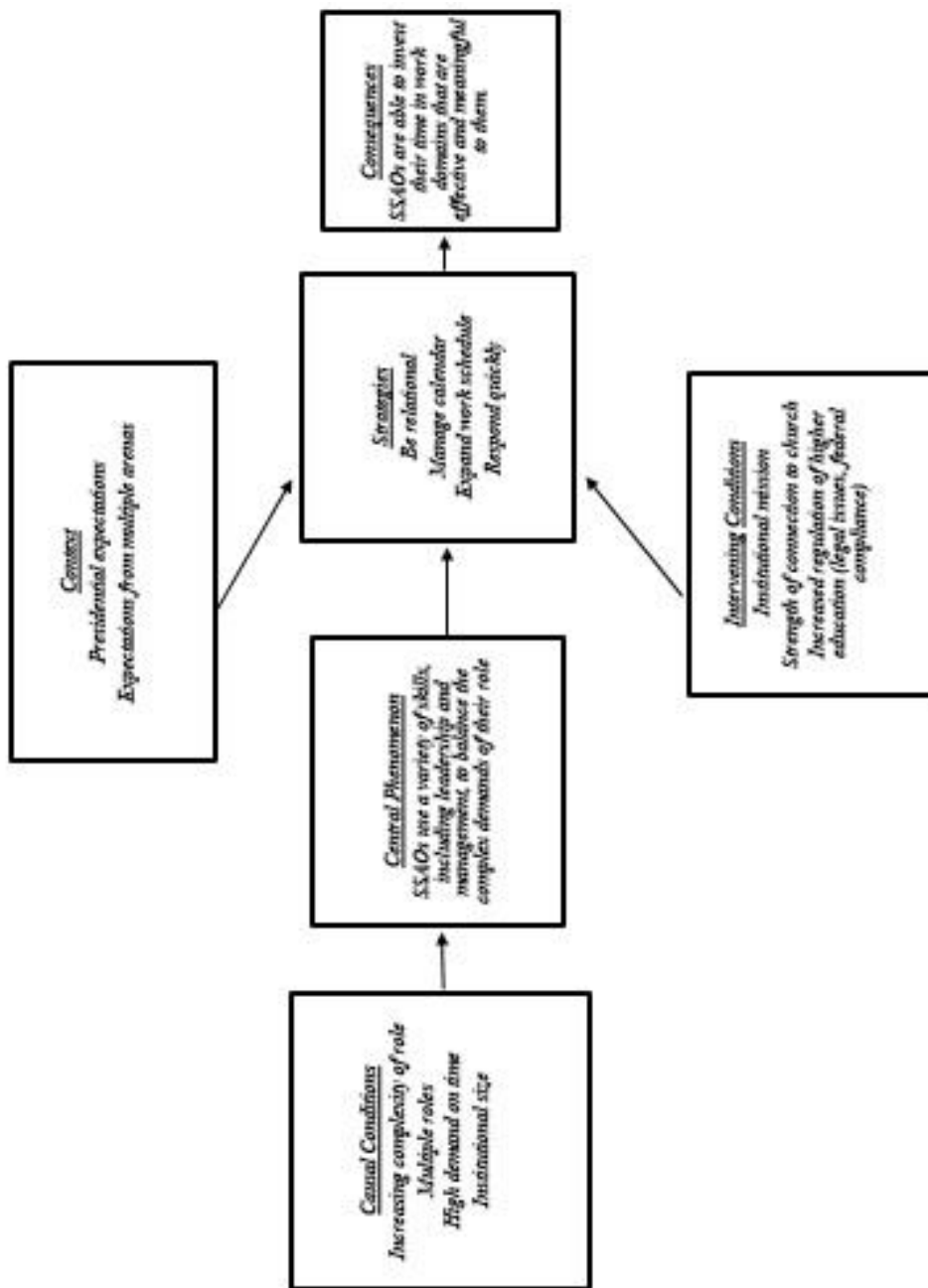


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Map

The central phenomenon that emerged from my data is that SSAOs use a variety of skills, including leadership and management, to balance the complex demands of their role. The SSAOs discussed the many pressures on their time as one of the causal conditions in my theory. They discussed being asked to play multiple roles, and described how technology, educational policy and regulation, and increased interest from stakeholders had increased the complexity of the SSAO role over time, which is also a causal condition affecting the central phenomenon. Finally, the SSAOs discussed institutional size, which is generally small at schools affiliated with the ELCA, as impacting the central phenomenon.

Strategies used by SSAOs included being relational in their work, managing their calendar to carve out time for important tasks, expanding their work schedule beyond the traditional work day, and responding quickly to issues as they arise.

The strategies used by the SSAOs were impacted by both internal factors (context) and external influences (intervening conditions). The contextual factors that influence the strategies used by SSAOs were presidential expectations and expectations from cabinet colleagues and other staff. In terms of intervening conditions, institutional mission, the strength of connection between the institution and the church and the increased regulation of higher education impacted the strategies used.

Developing a theoretical model that depicts the data gathered in this study allowed me to holistically analyze the strategies used by the SSAOs to address the central phenomenon. After reviewing the data, three theoretical propositions or assertions

emerged that respond to the research question of this study of how SSAOs are able to use balance their roles to engage in effective and meaningful work. These assertions are:

1. SSAOs act as boundary spanners.
2. SSAOs must be agile in their work to effectively balance their roles.
3. SSAOs can exert their own influence over their roles to derive meaning from their work.

These actions mitigate the contextual pressures and the external influences on their role to help them choose strategies that will allow them to arrange their work in ways that are effective and meaningful for them.

### **Validity**

The extent to which researchers can have confidence in their research is a major concern for both qualitative and quantitative strategies of inquiry, but the approach to assuring or evaluating validity is very different in the two traditions. Because the approaches are different, qualitative researchers often use different language to describe the ways in which they verify that their research is worthy of confidence (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, some qualitative researchers argue that the terms used by quantitative researchers can be redefined and appropriately used for qualitative research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In this study, I follow that approach, and use the terms internal validity, external validity, and reliability, but will describe how these will be addressed from a qualitative perspective.

#### **Internal Validity**

The goal for internal validity is to try to rule out alternative explanations to those being presented by the researcher, or to discuss the “correctness” of one’s findings (Maxwell, 2005). In qualitative research, several methods are used to try to achieve this goal. Some methods that can be used to promote trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry include: extended fieldwork, using “low-inference” descriptors, triangulation of data, methods, researchers, or theory, gaining participant feedback, using expert or peer review of data and interpretations, negative case sampling, and reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Johnson, 1997, p. 283). For this study, I used participant feedback (or member checking) as a mechanism to ensure trustworthiness, as well as peer and expert review. Research participants were sent copies of excerpts from their interviews that were used in the analysis and presentation of findings and asked to make any corrections or alterations. Two of the participants were interviewed a second time to test the findings. Critiques and new data from these follow up interviews were incorporated into the study and influenced the findings. In addition to the follow up interview, a peer/expert reviewer was used. This individual had held the position as SSAO at an ELCA affiliated college in the past and could provide valuable evaluation of data and interpretations. Both of these methods were helpful in ensuring the trustworthiness of the interpretations of data. Ensuring accuracy and thoroughness was an important first step to have good data from which to draw conclusions.

### **External Validity**

External validity refers to the extent to which the research findings can be generalized from the particular to the general (Johnson, 1997; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982,

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One of the issues of qualitative research is that many would argue that generalizability is rarely a goal of qualitative inquiry (Johnson, 1997; Winter, 2000). Qualitative inquiry is typically aimed at investigating particularistic circumstances, telling individual stories, and situating research within a historical and social context (Creswell, 2009; Smith, 1989). Because qualitative research is concerned with the lived experience within a certain context, generalizability to other groups can be problematic (Van der Mescht, 2004). However, generalizations to similar populations may be possible. To address the generalizability of this study, I included demographic and contextual data about the participants and their institutions, to the extent to which I could and still maintain anonymity, so readers may assess whether the results from this study may apply to other populations. In addition, the findings from this research were connected to the literature about SSAOs in other fields to see where the results may be similar or unique.

### **Reliability**

In qualitative research, because one of the goals of the research may be to tell the story of a particular person or group within a particular social and historical context, there is some debate about whether qualitative studies can truly be replicated (Johnson, 1997). However, some qualitative researchers have deemed this an important concern for research. Efforts to increase the reliability of this study included keeping an inquiry audit to track the methods used in the study and documenting my thinking about the study and its concepts (Golafshani, 2003). Memos and notes about my thinking and how the



theoretical concepts developed were kept as well. In addition, I used verbatim transcripts to increase the reliability for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

### **Researcher Bias**

As the primary researcher, with a background that includes working in the student affairs field, I found it to be important to employ the use of “bracketing”. Bracketing is the setting aside of past knowledge and experiences to try to see the data from a fresh perspective (Ahern, 1999; Creswell, 2007). As a student affairs professional who reports to an SSAO, I needed to examine my prior experience and opinions about leadership and management, and attempt to bracket those experiences and opinions. While it is impossible for one to be completely objective (Ahern, 1999; Maxwell, 2005), by examining my own experiences related to the research study helped to limit the influence of these experiences on the data collection and analysis. Throughout the process, I wrote a series of memos about my interest in this topic, my assumptions related to the research, and my values and knowledge, as recommended by Ahern (1999).

Although I have been working within Lutheran higher education for many years, the opportunity to truly examine, from an academic perspective, the meaning behind working within that context was new to me. To try to limit my bias, I asked questions of SSAOs, especially when at times I thought I knew what their responses would be. By doing this, I increased confidence that I was hearing directly from the participants about their experiences and the meanings they place on their experiences, rather than overlaying my own experiences on the data. As a final step to limit researcher bias, I did not interview the SSAO at my institution.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I reported the methods I used to collect data about the experience SSAOs have in trying to balance the complexity of their roles. I described the qualitative approach I used to gather information about their experiences and processes used in their roles. In selecting participants, I focused on SSAOs at small colleges affiliated with the ELCA who have a minimum of one year of experience as SSAOs in this type of institution. IRB approval was garnered to conduct in-depth interviews from both UND and from the colleges at which I interviewed participants. To address issues of validity and reliability, I used verbatim transcripts, member checking, peer/expert review, as well as attempting to bracket any personal experiences or biases. Finally, I protected the anonymity of the participants by assigning them numbers and editing out any personally identifiable information from their excerpts.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

Small colleges in the United States often have limited resources, which cause them to try to streamline their staffing models (Westfall, 2011). Therefore, the divisions of student affairs at many small colleges are led by a professional bearing both the title of vice president and dean of students. While this model may appear to be an effective way to manage resources, the duties associated with the two titles can be very different. Vice presidents tend to focus more on institutional priorities, providing leadership for the institution and division, while the dean role tends to focus more on the day-to-day management of the division and the work that is done with students (Bass, 2006). Given the different goals for the two activities, there has been argument in the literature about whether one individual can serve both the role of leader and manager, (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Zaleznik, 2004). The purpose of this study was to uncover if SSAOs at small, private, liberal arts colleges affiliated with the ELCA need to exercise both leadership and management in their roles, and if so, how they balanced those roles which could often be in tension with one another. To conduct this research, a grounded theory approach was employed. In this chapter, the findings are explored through a deeper explanation of the grounded theory model that was developed. First a description of the participants is presented. Then, I briefly explain the resulting themes and

categories of data developed through the open coding process. Next, I describe the results of the axial coding process and connect the themes and categories to the grounded theory model, and explore the causal conditions, the central phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions, the strategies, and the outcomes in detail. Finally, I explore the theoretical assertions of this study in response to the research questions.

## **Participants**

### **Demographics**

There were 26 ELCA schools at the time this study was conducted. Of the 26 SSAOs, 19 met the study criteria, and 11 chose to participate in this study. Six of the participants were women and five were men; gender did not emerge as an important factor in the data analysis of this study. This gender distribution is similar to the results of a recent study of SSAOs conducted by the professional organization Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2014). In a national survey of SSAOs, researchers found the gender distribution to be 51% male and 49% female (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2014). The data from the NASPA study are for all institution types. The gender distribution of this study is also representative of the population of SSAOs at ELCA affiliated schools, which is comprised of 12 men and 14 women.

The length of time in the position varied greatly for the SSAOs in this study. Two participants had fewer than five years in the current position, and several SSAOs had over 20 years of experience in their current role. The participants in this study were skewed toward the more experienced, as there were only four participants with fewer than

eight years in their current role. This level of experience differs from that of a recent NASPA study of SSAOs, with 54% of those participants having five or fewer years of experience, (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2014). In this study, 27% of the participants had experience as the SSAO or dean of students prior to assuming their current position as the SSAO at an ELCA affiliated college, compared to 26% having experience as an SSAO prior to entering their current role in the NASPA study (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2014).

A variable that differed in this study from the recent NASPA study is the title held by the participants. In the NASPA study, only 13% of respondents held both the title of vice president and dean of students. As noted earlier, it is common for SSAOs at smaller schools to hold both titles. In this study, seven of the SSAOs held the dual titles, which is 64%, while three held the title of vice president, and one held the title of dean. Holding both titles implies that the SSAO may be asked to do work that is acted out on the institutional stage as the vice president, while also serving the day to day needs of students and the student affairs division while acting as the dean.

### **Pathway to the SSAO role**

The path the SSAOs followed to the position took two different avenues. Six of the SSAOs took a traditional path to the SSAO position: they pursued graduate study after their undergraduate degrees and were then employed in student affairs positions, from which they worked their way up to the SSAO. The other five participants took a less traditional route and worked in a variety of fields, both within and outside of higher education, prior to assuming the position of SSAO.

Of the group of SSAOs who took a traditional route to the position, many talked about early experiences having an impact on their career choice, including experiences they had during their undergraduate years. Because undergraduate students do not go to college intending to pursue a career in student affairs, there is often an influence that shapes their path. One of the influences is what Hunter (1992) describes as a “critical incident” (p. 183), which are experiences that are critical to influencing a choice to pursue student affairs as a career. For some SSAOs, this critical incident during their undergraduate years was very direct, pointing them toward student affairs, but for others, it helped them set a general direction. Participant #7 described her early influences:

I didn't really know what I wanted to do but I thought back about the times that were really significant for me and meaningful for me, and my own experience in college, the previous four years, had been really powerful and really great. So I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do but I knew I wanted to do it at a college or university campus. So I really chose the environment rather than a specific job or path. When I was in college I had also been a peer advisor for transfer students, because I had transferred into the last school I had attended. And that was a real positive experience for me. I also worked in a campus pastor's office doing various things, setting up bible studies, things like that. So I went back and went to get my master's degree in higher education.

Other SSAOs described their early experiences as having a more direct influence that impacted their choice to pursue student affairs. Participant #2 described an influential experience:

How I got here, it really truly was, I was a junior at [my undergraduate institution], I was [a resident assistant] and they were looking for someone to be on a committee to hire the campus activities coordinator. I was an RA and [was asked to serve on this committee]. “Sure,” I said. I remember the moment, I looked at the job description, I remember the moment, I remember the room, I don’t remember what I was wearing, and I said, “They pay people to do this?” I’m like, “Cool, how do I get me one of these?” So that’s actually started my trajectory.

Participant #1 had a similar experience, being exposed to student affairs work as an undergraduate student.

I would say I was a pretty typical student affairs person, in that I had no idea that it was a profession and came to college and thought I was going to be doing something else and partway through my undergraduate realized that I wasn’t going to be doing that other thing that I originally came off to college to do like so many undergraduates change their mind about. I kind of took a hard look around and said to myself well what is it that I want to do when I grow up and what it is that I’m doing now that I’m really enjoying? You know, I was really engaged in the campus activities board, and really engaged in the new student orientation program, and I was [a resident assistant], and all of those things were exciting and phenomenal to me, and I said to the woman who was the acting dean of students who was also the director of student activities and I said, how can I have your job? And she said well, you need to go to [graduate school] and get your

Master's degree and work somewhere else for a while and then you can come back and have my job.

Another way that student affairs professionals become aware of the field is through connections with influential staff already working in the profession (Hunter, 1992). For many of the SSAOs who arrived at the position through a traditional route, not only was early exposure to the field of student affairs important, but many had mentors who encouraged them to consider entering the field or even directly encouraged them to consider the position of SSAO. Participant #6 described mentoring that she received during her undergraduate experience:

For me it was, as an undergraduate having a mentor in student affairs that was always in the background in decisions I made whether it was to go to graduate school, it was the dean of students when I was an undergrad, he influenced my decision to get into the counseling program at [a graduate school] and he was involved in me being hired at [a liberal arts college] as the dean of [students], and he was also a person that had [my current institution] call me when I was [working elsewhere], so I think that speaks to the power and influence of having a mentor.

Mentorship played a similar role for some of the SSAOs who took a nontraditional path the position. Participant #3 did not begin her career in student affairs, but the words of her mentors were influential in her decision to enter the field later in her career. She said:



I had worked, when I was doing my Master's degree, in residential life, I worked for a guy, the vice president for student affairs there at the time. Just an excellent leader, very engaging guy and I always thought, you know when I was working with him and observing him that would be a real interesting position if I ever had the chance to do something like that. So that was always in the back of my mind. When I was in college doing my undergrad I played basketball and my basketball coach always said to me, because he knew I was going into education and he had done the high school stuff and that sort of thing, and he always said to me "If you ever get an opportunity to go into higher ed, take advantage of it" because he said "I think you'll really enjoy it." So I don't know why but those were two markers in my life that once I finished my doctorate, [I decided to pursue the SSAO position].

Participant #5 also had a mentor who encouraged her to consider not only student affairs, but specifically the dean of students position. She was working in higher education at the time, but not in a student affairs position.

Toward the last couple years of that stint, although I loved coaching, I began to look around at the college environment and kind of wonder if there were bigger challenges, more to do. And at that time the dean of students there kind of took me under his wing and kind of was like, you know, a lot of what you do working with the students that you're coaching and the problems, and I worked with him on problem students as you might imagine, would transfer nicely into a dean of

students position If you've ever considered that. And so as he and I talked, I thought, actually that sounds very interesting.

Other SSAOs who took a nontraditional path were approached directly from the president of the institution and asked to assume the role of the SSAO. Participant #10 described her path to the role of SSAO:

And I [worked at the college] for ten years, that president left, new president came on board, and because of the work I had been doing in that role, much of which had to do with student life projects, when the new president came on board, he was interested in making some changes and he appointed me as dean of students, interim dean of students.

The SSAOs who took a nontraditional path to the SSAO role all worked outside of higher education for a period of time during their careers. However, while five of the SSAOs took a more nontraditional path to the position, four of them were employed in higher education positions immediately prior to becoming the SSAO. Only one participant was working outside of higher education immediately before assuming the SSAO role.

### **Preparation**

The SSAOs in this study had a wide range of preparation for the role. From an educational perspective, eight of the SSAOs had earned a doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., or J.D.), while three held Master's degrees. Several of the SSAOs in this study also attended liberal arts colleges for their undergraduate degrees, exposing them to the type

of institution at which they now worked. These educational experiences, both undergraduate and doctoral, shaped the perspectives of the SSAOs.

When discussing what prepared them for the role, there were key differences between those SSAOs who arrived at the SSAO role by coming up through the student affairs field and those who took a nontraditional path to the position. For the more traditional-path SSAOs, two things were mentioned by multiple participants. The first is their academic preparation. For these SSAOs, the influence of their academic preparation was primarily about the prestige that came with attending a well-respected graduate program. Participant #7 said:

One of the things that, at that time... [My graduate school] was thought of as one of the Meccas in our profession. If you were going to [this school], you were a desirable commodity on the job front. And I certainly felt that, that I was. In some ways it is very deserved but in other ways I know it's not deserved. But that really opened up doors. And if you're the graduate assistant to the vice president of student affairs at [this school] in 1978, '79, '80, that time frame, you were just kind of golden. I had the connections from that, from that people knew the stuff we were doing, they got me involved in all kinds of fun stuff, it was really enjoyable. So I really kind of had my choice of positions.

For others, pursuing a doctoral degree was seen as a necessary credential to move into the SSAO position. Participant #11 commented, "When I finished my master's degree I said, well, I'll stay and get my doctorate as well, because the handwriting was kind of on the wall that you had to have a doctorate at that point to get to a VP or dean's level."

Similarly, Participant #2 felt that receiving a doctoral degree was necessary to acquire a position as SSAO. She said, “I went to [graduate] school because then the deal at the time was after a bit in student affairs, you need a Ph.D. or Ph.D. equivalent, if you wanted to move up the food chain” (Participant #2). Only one participant talked about the content of doctoral study as being preparatory to her role as an SSAO. Participant #1 reflected:

One of the opportunities I had was to really be a grad assistant on the ground floor of building [a] study for [a] liberal arts national research project. I already knew I was somebody who was passionate about liberal arts education, so be able to be engaged in that kind of research was so meaningful for me as a doc student.

Another of the most impactful things that prepared SSAOs for their current role was previous work experience. However, that experience came in a variety of forms, and there was no one distinct experience that all SSAOs could point to as being key to their preparation. Even though previous work experience was important in preparing SSAOs, there was no single track to the SSAO role. Participant #9 discussed the lack of a direct path of preparation for the role:

Yeah, I think you know the biggest thing I can say to anyone is I think all too often people look for this clear path of progression and that, well, if you're in this position then you go to that position, then you go to you know, a dean of students position, then you go to a vice president. There's no singular clear path, I think the important thing is having the ability to have either direct experience or a clear

understanding, whether it's direct supervisory experience or experience working with a particular office on a broader base.

For many of the SSAOs, previous student affairs experience was helpful in preparing them for the role. The SSAOs were able to identify previous work in the field that helped orient them to the expectations of the profession and enabled them to build their skill set for working as a SSAO. Participant #11 remarked about the time she spent in the residence life department when she was in graduate school.

Working in residence life for a number of years at a very large university I definitely think prepared me for [the SSAO role]. The residence halls I was in charge of held about 3,000 students and I was supervising the RAs and the RDs while in graduate school, and at [my current institution] we have 750 who are in housing, less than 2,000 in the whole school. I'm like, if I can handle that 3,000 I can handle this.

Participant #1 also referred to her previous experience in student affairs as being good preparation for the role:

The more exposure I had to functional areas, the more confident I was, the more ready I was to hit the ground running, the more I had an understanding... I was so much more prepared for, even though I had never supervised counseling center or health services, prior to [working as a SSAO at a previous institution], I was so much more prepared to do that here after having had the experience of doing that at [the previous institution]. And so I think one of the critical pieces in

preparation was definitely in having responsibility for, being exposed to a myriad of functional areas.

Other participants commented on having a breadth of experience within the student affairs profession as being important to their preparation for the SSAO role.

For me personally I was very intentional about getting experience in other areas, be it orientation, be it services for students with disabilities, multicultural affairs, all those other kinds of things you would find under a typical dean of students office, that's what I tried to get some experience in. And I was fortunate enough to have a supervisor who understood that and was very open to working with me and some of my other colleagues to make sure we had an experience on a broader base. And I think for me that was what made the difference in being able to move on to a dean of students position and even from that to a vice president. Because then as dean, getting involved, particularly when I became assistant VP, alright what are going to be key experiences that I need to present the best breadth of understanding of student affairs and experience within all the different aspects of student affairs that I might work with (Participant #9).

For the SSAOs who did not have a traditional path to the SSAO role, they too felt like previous work experiences, both within and outside of higher education, were beneficial in helping prepare them for the role. Participant #5 discussed experience she had working as a coach at a small college as helping prepare her for student affairs administration:

But I think the coaching job and just being at [another college], being able to be on the campus of a small college as an employee, not a student, you know, oriented me to just the faculty roles, the administration roles, how to work, just how to work, the cease and then flow of a college campus.

Participant #3 was also able to point to her previous work experience as being related and preparatory for the SSAO role. She said, “My background’s in counseling so I was a counselor for a lot of those years as well and you know so I’m very well aware of the mental health issues that we have. So it did provide a good background for this position” (Participant #3).

Some of the SSAOs who took the nontraditional path had previous work experience in administrative positions outside of student affairs at their current institutions. They viewed this experience as helpful in preparing them for the SSAO role. Three of the SSAOs in this study were working in other areas of their institution prior to becoming SSAO. Participant #8 had experience as part of the senior leadership team before assuming the SSAO position. For her, this experience was pivotal in preparing her to move into the student affairs realm.

The thing that prepared me the most for the vice presidency was the three years [on the senior leadership team]. I sat on the council for three years ... with all the other VPs. And was with the board of regents at the upper echelon of leading of the university. So I got to observe that and be a part of it for three years before assuming the responsibilities of it. So that was the best preparation.

Another participant reported a similar experience. Having served as part of the leadership of the college helped her become oriented to the work in student affairs.

I think, you know the ability to see how all the parts of the institution fit together was a real plus, so seeing how student life was related to other parts of the institution, from a here's what the academic piece looks like, here's what admissions is all about, so I had a good knowledge about, maybe more knowledge about those working parts that I did the individual working parts within student life, quite frankly.

Preparation for the SSAO role varied, and as Participant #9 pointed out, there was no clear path that was the best preparation for the role. For the SSAOs who took a more traditional path through student affairs to the top position, their graduate education and experience in a variety of functional areas were experiences they pointed to as being important to helping them attain and succeed in the SSAO role. For those who took a more non-traditional path, their previous work experience outside of student affairs and their institution specific knowledge were what they identified as being helpful in moving into the SSAO role.

### **Institutional Size**

ELCA colleges are small institutions, ranging in size from about 750 students to 4000 students. The SSAOs in this study were employed at colleges that are representative of the pool of ELCA schools. The institutions in this study ranged from approximately 1,500 to 3,500 students. The SSAOs recognized the impact of working at a small college. Participant #5 described the environment of working at a small college



as being different than other types of institutions. She said, “It’s a privilege, I think it’s a real privilege to be in a place where you’re surrounded 24 hours a day by this kind of environment. And again it doesn’t just have to be at ELCA, but all these small privates are just way different than the publics or the community colleges” (Participant #5).

One of the characteristics of student affairs work at small colleges is the need to hold multiple roles. Participant #3 highlighted this need when discussing the small school environment. She remarked, “As you know at a small university you have to do a lot of things. If you hire somebody who’s not willing to work hard and be part of the team that’s probably going to be your weakest link most of the time” (Participant #3). Participant #1 also discussed this need to play multiple roles not only as being necessary to help small schools function, but also as being important in her career development.

I feel like, perfect example, when I was at [a previous college] I was the associate director of res life, so you kind of have this picture of okay, so this person just does residence life. Well no, because I was at a small liberal arts college, like one of the things, and this was way back in the 90s, early 90s, in fact it was 1990 when I started there, and nobody was, hardly anyone was doing anything around sexual assault education, and we had a student who had been sexually assaulted on campus, and just because of my work in res life and the student was in my residence hall, it was a student I was very engaged with, I went to the director of residence of life and the dean of students, because of course it’s a small campus, so even though you’re this very green behind the ears professional, you engage with your dean of students and said to them, “We need to do more.” And I loved

it. The vice president looked at me and said, “Yeah, we do, you should do that. Go figure it out and come back to us what we need to do.”

For the SSAOs, playing multiple roles is demonstrated in their job titles. Most of the SSAOs in this study held both the title of vice president and dean of students. Several of the SSAOs discussed changes that had been made to their titles over the time they had been in the SSAO role. Some attribute these changes to changes that were happening in the profession. Participant #5 described the time when her title changed to include vice president by saying, “Not that it, it wasn’t exactly a promotion but more a change in title which probably reflects the changes across the country too.” Often, the work of the SSAO didn’t change significantly when the title of the position was altered to include vice president (often still maintaining the title of dean of students). Many of the SSAOs described this change in title of primarily reflecting the work they were already doing. Participant #5 remarked that the change in her title to include vice president simply “reflected the work I had already been doing.” Participant #2 also commented that changes in title didn’t necessarily result in changes in the work she was doing. She described several changes that occurred over her tenure in the role:

When I came here the set up was an associate dean of student affairs reporting to a vice president for academic affairs and student affairs. They’d had separate VPs, student affairs and academic affairs and then before I got here merged the two. So in my time here I’ve been an associate dean of student affairs, a dean of students, and then when the president, current president came, became a vice

president of student affairs. I don't know that my job is a whole lot different than when I first started, but the title's different and I go to more dinners.

Although Participant #2's remarks about going to more dinners was said in a joking way, this could reflect the responsibility to serve as an institutional representative that often accompanies the title of vice president. While several SSAOs remarked that their work didn't change significantly when they added the title of vice president, it does not indicate that the titles are meaningless. It reflects that the type of work needed by the SSAOs encompasses both the type of work done by the vice president and that of the dean, regardless of what the formal title of the position may be.

While some of the SSAOs remarked that their work didn't change significantly when adding the vice president title, it may be symbolic to colleagues. Two of the SSAOs specifically discussed conversations they had with colleagues about the title of vice president. Participant #4 described the changes to her title over time.

I was dean of students and then I was vice president/dean of students, and then I dropped the dean of students and now everybody congratulates me for being a vice president. "Wow, you're a VP, what's that like?" I've actually been one for a long time.

Participant #11 had similar conversations with colleagues. Her role currently does not hold the vice president title. In discussing her current title and the possibility of it becoming a vice president role, she said, "I would not be surprised if we had a change in president, and our current president has a contract until 2018, and like I said, I don't care one way or the other frankly. And someone said, 'Don't you wish you were a vice

president?’ and only on occasion, and it would just add one more meeting frankly” (Participant #11).

The participants in this study reflect the prior literature that SSAOs at small colleges need to play multiple roles. The title of the position, while symbolic, does not always accurately reflect the work being done by the SSAOs. The need for playing multiple roles is evident, regardless of the title of the position.

### **Summary**

The SSAOs in this study, while certainly having unique experiences, have a level of homogeneity in their preparation for the role, citing previous experience and educational attainment as being helpful in preparing them for the role. The level of experience for these participants is longer than the average for all SSAOs, and they hold both the title of vice president and dean of students at a higher percentage than the general population of SSAOs. However, the gender distribution of SSAOs in this study is consistent with the pool of SSAOs at all institution types and the ELCA colleges, which may represent a change from previous studies that showed women being over-represented as SSAOs at smaller colleges (Rickard, 1985).

### **Open Coding Analysis**

Open coding is the process of breaking down the data from the participants so it can be conceptualized and reconfigured in a new way to formulate a theory (Goulding, 1999). In Chapter III, the process by which the information was coded was described. In this section, I describe the themes and associated categories, along with sample codes, that emerged during the open coding process. After the initial rounds of open coding,

291 codes were developed. A full list of these codes can be found in Appendix C. The categories and themes that were developed as part of the data analysis are presented in Table 1. This section describes the themes, categories, and codes, showing how the categories and themes were developed by using examples of codes. A more in-depth description and analysis of the data is provided in the axial coding section, which describes the grounded theory in detail. This section is provided to demonstrate process and give the reader a flavor of how the codes led to the categories and themes. Excerpts that serve as examples of codes are presented in the open coding section. This section is not intended to provide examples of each code, but rather to give examples that demonstrate the types of codes and data that were present; examples given should not be inferred to have more meaning than those codes that do not have excerpts presented.

In the open coding process, the codes were combined into 19 categories that were then grouped into five themes. The themes developed in this study, along with the corresponding categories, is presented in Table 1.

The following sections present each theme with examples of the categories and codes that comprise each theme.

### **Theme One: SSAOs Have a Complex Role and Competing Expectations Can Create Role Tension**

The literature on the role of the SSAO supports the claim that the position is a complex one. In this study, the domains in which the SSAOs work, including the institutional domain, the student affairs division, and work with students, contribute to the breadth of the tasks for which SSAOs are responsible. There are both similar and

Table 1. Open Coding Themes and Categories

Theme	Category
SSAOs have a complex role and competing expectations can create role tension	Institutional work Divisional work Work with students Increasing complexity Expectations
Forces within and outside the institution exert pressure on how SSAOs prioritize tasks.	Presidential priorities Student influence External influences
Person-environment interaction influences how SSAOs approach their roles.	Career choice and influences Preparation for role Personal orientation Skills needed Institutional culture
SSAOs exercise both leadership and management in executing their roles.	Leadership Management
SSAOs use a variety of strategies to be effective in balancing their work roles.	Be relational Manage calendar Expand work schedule Respond quickly

conflicting expectations that arise from these three domains. This theme emerged from categories that include institutional work, divisional work, work with students, increasing complexity and expectations. These categories are supported by codes that define the three domains of work and describe how the SSAOs view the complexity of their role.

**Institutional work.** Institutional work involved codes such as presidential expectations to act institutionally, interpreter, setting institutional priorities, big picture, and institutional wide efforts. Examples of institutional work were described by the

participants. Participant #11 described both presidential expectations and what is involved in working institutionally:

I think he counts on me to be, when we're in the president's council meetings, we all have our presidents council hats on so I'm expected to be a, be thinking institutionally and be thinking about advising him about what's best for the institution well beyond student life.

Institutional work involves tasks like attending president's council meetings, thinking institutionally, and advising the president. Participant #3 discussed other work that illustrates the codes in this theme.

Plus I get to sit on the president's council and I get to be a part of, like we just had a retreat last week and we talked about our campus improvement plan that we're going to have for the next five years. We just set a new strategic plan in place that I go to be a part of. So I get to be a part of the big system and a lot of the decisions there ...

In this excerpt there are descriptors of institutional work such as strategic planning and working in the big system.

**Divisional work.** SSAOs also described the work they do within the division of student affairs. The work in the division revolved primarily around supervising and working with the staff in student affairs. Examples of codes were staff support, staff mentoring, supervision, and personnel management. SSAOs communicated their divisional work in these ways.

I will have some kind of staff meeting every week, whether it's all of my directors, whether it's my whole staff, but there'll be some kind of, I have it spaced out, different parts of my staff I meet with them. I would probably have a couple of those one on one meetings I was talking about where I go into their places when I have to go through nine people in four weeks. I'd probably have an office meeting. (Participant #5)

In addition to staff meetings being a large component of the divisional work, SSAOs also engage in staff mentoring. Participant #10 said, "The other part that didn't used to be, I didn't used to focus on very much, but I do now, I really find the professional mentoring of staff to be very fulfilling." Participant #11 described how she approaches staff mentoring. "I really empower them to get better and take advantage of all the opportunities we can afford to have them take advantage of, because it's really important to me to see them succeed and get better at what they do." These examples demonstrate the types of codes that were grouped into the category of divisional work.

**Work with students.** A third domain of work that the SSAOs described was working with students. Codes that exemplify this category include meet with students, access to students, student centered, student crisis, and work with parents. These codes delineate the activities that are a part of the student domain. Participant #2 discussed how she is viewed as having access to students based on her role.

So we're looking at new furniture for the cafeteria. So I get the thing, "Can you go find students to sit on these chairs?" Yes I can I go to my student closet and off



they go. But I'm more likely to have the quick conduit so we found 50 students to go sit on chairs...

Participant #1 discussed the importance of her role in helping the institution maintain a focus on students. She said, "And I'm going to do everything in my capacity to make sure that all parts of this institution remain student centric and student focused..."

In addition to the work done directly with or on behalf of students, SSAOs also described work they do that involves the parents of students. Participant #6 described it as a part of the student domain she doesn't enjoy.

I would say that's... 10, 20 years ago, I think I probably had more comfort, less anxiety, about visiting with parents. But in recent years, I've tended to not enjoy, I've not enjoyed the prospect of looking forward to the phone call I have to return to a parent. As soon as I pick up the phone and talk to the parent or the parent's in my office, that's fine. But I just don't look forward to it.

**Increasing complexity.** Theme One explains the breadth of the SSAO role in terms of work activities, but it also highlights the increasing complexity of the role. The complexity category was devised from codes like increased stakeholders, technology, and dealing with attorneys. Participant #10 discussed the increasing number of stakeholders that are involved in her work and how that makes the work more complex. "Particularly in the sense that you have more stakeholders than I remember having 20 years ago. Not everyone expected to be involved 20 years ago, but they do now. Involved or informed."

Participant #1 described the complexity of the role in terms of the broad knowledge needed to be effective.

And I feel like a SSAO is the penultimate dabbling in a lot of areas. Your fingers are stuck in a lot of places and you have to know enough about them, maybe like the quintessential liberal arts. You have to know [I] think a lot about many things, and you have to know about how to think about how to think.

**Expectations.** In addition to working in the three domains (institutional, divisional, and work with students) SSAOs also have expectations placed on them within those domains. Expectations from the president, other colleagues who serve on the cabinet, and student affairs staff all influence the SSAO role and contribute to its complexity. Participant #9 describes how presidential expectations connect to her work in the institutional domain. “From the president, it’s um, that idea of understanding what the strategic initiatives are of the college and working to support those.” Participant #4’s description of expectations from the president also points to the institutional domain.

Because our president has high demands on us to process information. So we get a lot of reading stuff, a lot of spreadsheets to read. A lot of reports. We read Moody’s bond reports, we read stuff on case studies, stuff like that. He wants to be doing a lot of that kind of stuff.

When describing expectations from staff within the division of student affairs, the tension between the roles begins to be drawn out. Participant #9 highlights the difference in expectations from the president and from the divisional staff. “Um.... You know it’s interesting because you almost get a little bit of a different perspective. I think there is an

expectation that you're going to get in there and fight for what we need." This is contrasted against an expectation to look institutionally to determine needs and where resources should be allocated. Participant #2 described an expectation from staff to represent their work to others outside the division. "I think their other expectation is that I [represent] their work, their world in the various areas" (Participant #2).

Example codes from the expectations category include look beyond my area, think institutionally, connect staff to resources, be a guide, be a team player, and share the student perspective.

The diversity of these codes points to the complexity of the role and the divergence of the expectations from others. Role tension can arise from this diversity. Participant #8 discussed how the tension between roles presents pressure on how time is spent.

Let's see... The most recent long range plan we finished, we adopted it in May of '12 or Jan of '12. The provost and I were co-chairs of that, that took about three years of keeping a process going and engaging the whole campus, so a significant amount of time dedicated to that and extra meetings. So while you're trying to keep that going and moving forward, you have the rest of your job and life and crises or whatever else is going to happen, and you have a deadline of keeping that process moving and in front of things. So I think when you have one of those big things you're trying to help lead university wide and keep that on pace, it just takes more time, and It's not like you get something taken away from you when

you're leading one of those things. You have to carve in additional time to make that happen, which just means you have less time to do other things that come up.

## **Theme Two: Forces Within and Outside the Institution Exert Pressure on How the SSAOs Spend Their Time**

It is clear from Theme One that the SSAOs have a broad position with a diverse set of expectations for their role. Pressure on their time comes from a variety of sources, including those both internal and external to the institution. Internal pressures include presidential priorities and student influences. There are also external influences on how the SSAO needs to spend his or her time. These categories will be briefly explained and samples codes will be shared.

**Presidential priorities.** Knowing what is important to the president of the institution can influence how SSAOs spend their time. Codes that represent this category include managing your boss, things that come from the president, work directed by the president, and unproductive requests. Participant #7 discussed the importance of knowing what things are important to the president. “And so some of it’s just being politically aware enough of what your president really cares about and trying to create ways they can get their stuff, their priorities met too.” Participant #4 also discussed how being attuned to presidential priorities impacts how time is spent. “I know what things he’s very interested in, so I make a point to make sure he’s well informed on those things. And there are things that he just says, ‘Keep this stuff off my plate, I don’t need to know the details of that.’” In addition to the SSAOs choosing to spend their time in ways that meet presidential priorities, the president can also have a very direct impact on how

SSAO time gets spent. Participant #8 described how the president influenced how she chose to craft her role.

He said I didn't have to do it as the predecessor did. And that was very freeing for me. Because the person I followed was absolutely beloved and really connected to students, he went to all the student events, he lived on the edge of campus, he lived and breathed this job 24/7. And I had little children, I lived 20 minutes away, I didn't want to be here every night.

Presidents can also directly impact how SSAO time gets spent by directing the work of the SSAO. Participant #5 said, "So I think anytime that kind of happens where you're, well, your domain is sort of infringed, well, he certainly has the right to infringe, well he has the right to infringe on anything, but the right to infringe on college commitments that would, you know, how do I want to say this, that would change some of what I'm doing, changing priorities."

**Student influence.** Students exert influence over how SSAOs spend their time. The SSAOs in this study acknowledge that when a student issue or crisis arises, it often takes priority over any other task they might be engaged with. Codes associated with this category include student crisis, mental health, academic issues, and discipline.

Participant #2 highlights how student crises are prioritized. "So anything that I would call crisis. A student with a mental health issue, a student who is in crisis is always a first responsibility, a first priority for me." Participant #11 also talked about the abrupt impact student crisis can have on her time. "They also know part of my job is obviously is to be the one who gets up at 3 o'clock in the morning when a kid's in the hospital, that's what I

do, I gotta go.” Participant #10 quantified the impact that student crises can have on the role of the SSAO by indicating “I’ve certainly had periods of my life as a VP where one case, one student crisis, can take 80% of your time for six weeks. And that was not in the plan. That’s never going to be planned.”

**External influences.** In addition to the internal influences that impact the SSAO, there are also external influences that can control how they spend their time. External influences include codes like compliance, college liability, federal and state regulations, and board of regents. Participant #10 discussed how demands around federal regulation impact her work. “I think that the whole compliance, legal, federal, legislation, regulation piece is a fairly significant and really growing, even in the last 5 years, maybe even 2 years, is a growing piece of the work that we do.” Participant #10 described the need to engage with legal issues through “dealing with attorneys.” These situations of dealing with compliance, legal issues, and institutional risk are often prioritized by SSAOs, indicated by this excerpt from Participant #1. “Situations where I deem the college may have some liability, those are very quickly priorities for me, those are places where I know I need to be really engaged and bringing my expertise and my senior institutional hat and thinking to.”

In addition to legal and compliance issues, the SSAOs also engage in work external to the institution when working with the board of regents. Participant #10 noted that while some aspects of the role maintain some flexibility, work with the board of regents does not.

The divisional work, there's quite a bit of flexibility on the divisional work. So for example if I'm supervising someone or have a regular meeting with someone and other things intervene, I simply reschedule the meeting. So there's, or if I have a divisional meeting let's say, and it turns out that everybody's just overworked and, we all have it, if we can't, if it's not the right thing to do, we're not up for it, then we just cancel it. But you don't do that for Board meetings, even if I don't feel particularly up for a board meeting (laughs).

Participant #1 discussed the work in preparation for a board of regents meeting putting pressure on her time. "And so in the middle of ALL of the other stuff, and there's so much stuff, and then you throw the board on top of that, that's when I get a little 'aaaaahhhhhhhh.'"

### **Theme Three: Person-Environment Interaction Influences How SSAOs Approach Their Roles**

Characteristics of both the SSAOs and the environment impact how the participants of this study approach their work. Categories that contribute to this theme include career choice, personal characteristics, skills needed, preparation for the role, and Lutheran identity.

**Career choice and influences.** There were a myriad of factors that influenced the career decisions of the SSAOs. These influences contribute to how SSAOs approach their role now. Some of the codes in this category included mentors, influential colleagues, previous experience, and undergraduate involvement. Many of the SSAOs in this study began considering a career in student affairs when they were engaged in their undergraduate education. Participant #4 describes experiences she had in her

undergraduate education as influencing her career path. She described how this influence came into play when she was looking for employment after graduation and her original career plan was no longer an option due to economic conditions.

So I had to do something else. Looked around and again looked at people in housing, you know those are kind of cool jobs, I could do that. Went and talked to them and they told me about the Oshkosh Placement Exchange and going to grad school and I could get a grad assistantship in housing and that stuff. And thought that sounds like a pretty good deal.

This experience started her career in student affairs, and experiences in that role influenced her outlook on her work. Another aspect of career influence is choosing the industry or environment. In a similar way to Participant #4, Participant #7 needed to decide a career direction at the point of college graduation. Her collegiate experience had influenced her, and she discussed choosing the environment before settling on a career path. “So I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do but I knew I wanted to do it at a college or university campus. So I really chose the environment rather than a specific job or path.” Similarly, Participant #2 talked about feeling drawn to working in higher education and student affairs because the environment like a good fit for her.

I’m like really, I think this is the easiest most fun thing I’ve ever done. So the kind of two things for me, what’s the industry you find yourself, and you go along with its mission, then what other opportunities within in So those are the kind of two things that linked up for me.



Joining personal experiences, mentorship played a role in influencing career choice. Participant #6 describes the influence of a mentor. “For me it was, as an undergraduate having a mentor in student affairs that was always in the background in decisions I made...” Mentors also played a role in helping SSAOs gain valuable experience as described by Participant #2. “The other piece of it was, I say this to people I work with all the time, people who were my bosses as I made my way into higher ed did me the favor of letting me do the job. Screwing up completely, phenomenal successes, hit and miss kind of stuff.”

**Preparation for the role.** Role preparation for the SSAOs was obtained and demonstrated through codes like exposure to functional areas, professional development, academic study, and exposure to institutional culture. SSAOs described their preparation as being very broad and including both formal and informal types of preparation.

Formal preparation included academic study. As noted earlier, only one SSAO described the content of her academic preparation as being directly helpful to her in her role. However, one SSAO did discuss her graduate preparation in being helpful to her in learning how to analyze the types of situations that SSAOs face. Participant #2 said:

So a lot of the content pieces I had in [graduate] school, not applicable at all, but the process of being aware of the array of potential issues and the need to explore those, weigh cost benefit, pros, cons and make a good decision, I think that’s the big thing I would like to claim I got from that school experience.

Previous work experience was another strong preparatory factor for the SSAOs. Regardless of whether the experiences were in student affairs, many of the SSAOs could

link their previous work experiences to being helpful in their current roles. Participant #5 talked about experience she had in another area in higher education.

But then coaching all those kids, because I was with three teams, I probably had 100 students I was working with over the course of a year. And they had mental health issues, they had eating issues, they had academic issues, they had parent issues and divorces and deaths in the family. All the very same things I oversee here, as dean of students, I was just in a coaching relationship with those students when it was happening to them, and I really was in many ways serving as the dean of students there in terms of comforting, counseling, getting them to the resources they needed to go to, calling parents, talking to them, figuring out, if they're in the hospital how we're going delay a test or do whatever.

Participant #2 referred to her previous work experience in student affairs at institutions that were different than the ELCA school at which she is currently working. This experience helped her to recognize the differences in culture between those previous institutions and the one at which she was currently serving. "And I think just general exposure to the variety of things, I don't know that I'm organizationally culturally astute, but having working a bunch of different kinds of organizations, it just like, hm, I should pause and look at the ways this is different." Another SSAO talked about experience in a previous vice president position as being good preparation for his role now.

So I think I was, not this time, not in my final deanship here, I felt fully prepared for what I was doing and made a lot of really intentional decision about how I would craft my role, and my, what I would do, how I would shape my vice

presidency [here], but I think I was just kind of feeling my way along in my first vice presidency at [another school]. I don't know I was a very good dean there the first few years I was there. But I think I became better and better and more comfortable and confident in the role.

Education and previous experience, either within or outside of student affairs, were key experiences that the SSAOs pointed to in preparing them for the role. These experiences were discussed by SSAOs as impacting how they approach their work now.

**Personal orientation.** The personal orientation of the SSAOs also impact how they do their work. In this category, there is evidence showing the interaction effects between the environment and the characteristics of the SSAOs. Examples of codes that represent this category include prioritizing people, students as priority, servant leadership, and vocation.

In terms of personal characteristics, one participant described his outlook on his work as a vocational calling. He said, "The response is that to be in this role at our type of college, to be able to enjoy it, and to be able to be on the top of your game for a number of years or in other words to have some longevity, you need to be able to view your work not as a job, but as a calling." Another SSAO described her outlook as being one of service. "I really see myself as a servant leader but I see them as that's what they want in order to do their jobs well" (Participant #5). She goes on to describe an orientation toward meeting needs as being helpful in her role.

Figure out how to meet their needs, always be asking them what they need. And that's the staff part, but even the coach and when I meet with students here, very

geared to just, what do you need and how can I meet it? Not that I can always meet student needs or staff needs, because sometimes they want things that aren't healthy for them, but still a question that I'm always kind of like, how can I help you? Bottom line, how can I help you? So I think that orientation has helped me in this job.

Participant #1 described a perspective that influences how she spends her time, and it has to do with prioritizing people over tasks. She said, "I try really hard to prioritize people over committees, so the student who wants to get into see me, I try hard to make that a priority over the more amorphous blob that is a committee or group or a thing."

**Skills needed.** The SSAOs delineated a variety of skills needed to be successful from their perspective. The skills they identify are illustrative of the way they undertake their work. Participant #5 identified two skills she sees as critical to the role. "And I hate to say it but I mean, dean of students, really problem solving and good common sense. I mean those are the two things you need." Participant #11 identifies people skills as being important. "The other thing that I think has prepared me that isn't really an experience but is one of the few skills I have, I am very good with names and faces." She goes on to say that she thinks "being able to talk to people" is another important people skill. Participant #2 also highlighted the importance of communication skills.

I think the good thing for me was I, and I took "Strengths Finder" three years ago and one of mine is includer and communicator. I think that probably some of the environments I was in fostered that or complemented that in that in student affairs

I think those are two strengths or skills that get highly valued and highly practiced.

Participant #4 talked about the skills needed to be able to influence others.

Again, this comes back to you gotta be a grown up and stuff like that. When you're in a grown up organization, you have to think about what influences people: correct facts, clarity of communication about an idea, honesty. Really bedrock principles of how you should run an organization. And that's how you influence people.

**Institutional culture.** Being attuned to institutional culture influences how SSAOs do their work. Participant #11 described the culture of her current institution in a way that made it clear that it has in impact on the way she approaches her work.

I'd say that's, [my current institution] is a place, people like being here, students love being here, it's a, we kind of know what we are and who we are, this is what we do, we do private, four year liberal arts undergraduate education and we don't do anything else. We're not confused. We don't do grad programs, we don't have adult programs, we don't have continuing ed. programs. We don't, it's not a suitcase college. It's like this is the classic quintessential liberal arts college and when they come here they're going to come for four years and we want them to have a fabulous educational experience. And that's kind of how we think about it.

Participant #8 talked about using institutional mission as a way to frame the work of the student affairs division.

Um, let's see. Across the years we have talked about co-curricular education and ourselves as educators rather than service providers and extracurricular. So that we have tied the co-curricular programs and services that we offer very much to the mission of the university and the learning objectives of the university and have that somewhat as a litmus test so to speak as we are moving forward, how is that supporting the university mission so it's not seen as extra but integral to the students educational process and that we are seen as educators as well.

Institutional direction, in addition to mission and strategic plan, influence how the SSAOs in this study approach their role and how time gets spent. Participant #10 discussed this:

And then the other thing that I would say on the institutional side, I think there are these institutional, strategic planning gets at this, but at our institution and I think we're pretty typical, we've lifted up some institutional priorities like diversity and inclusion, or internationalization, or and you know it's, so those themes are kind of part of strategic planning, but they're also just this kind of institutional commitment or values or, that I think we're being asked to respond to and support just a little different from traditional strategic planning.

In addition to the general characteristics of the organization, several SSAOs talked about the influence of the Lutheran identity of the organization on the institutional culture. Participant #1 described how the influence of Lutheran identity created an environment she felt positively about. "I think that the values of this place resonated with me. The social justice bent that is important to us that comes in part from our Lutheran

heritage.” Participant #8 talked about the Lutheran influence as being foundational to the institutional culture.

But when we’re looking for people to come work here in whatever role they need both to understand institutional mission and importance of vocation and meaning and purpose in life. It’s the Lutheran foundation of us.

#### **Theme Four: SSAOs Exercise Both Leadership and Management in Balancing Their Roles**

One of the initial questions of this study was whether or not SSAOs were called on to use both leadership and management skills. There are varying definitions of leadership and management, but this study uses definitions developed by Kotter (1990) as a starting point in examining the use of leadership and management in the SSAO position. After interviewing them, it is clear that both are used and necessary to complete their work.

**Leadership.** Leadership activities are those that are aimed at setting vision, creating change, and aligning work (Kotter, 1990). The codes that support this category indicate that SSAOs do engage in those key tasks. Examples of codes include talk about values, aligning work, set a direction, setting vision, and communicating priorities. Participant #8 described how she was able to set the tone or overarching approach to the work in the division.

It very much went along with [the change we were making]. We talk about transactional services that we provide, but most of our work we want it to be transformational. In terms of the students experience and educational, even in our

transactions with them, and embedding that into our work and supportive things have served us very well and ultimately it's served the students very well.

Knowing and assessing organizational culture was described as an important factor in creating change. Participant #2 remarked:

Because you also have to be thoughtful too that you can orchestrate change in organizational culture, that you discern what is, isn't the only task. Okay, in what ways is that good and what ways is that not working?

In addition to creating change, the SSAOs participating in setting the vision for the college and the division. One participant described the importance of allowing the staff to maintain a level of autonomy within the parameters of the direction the work was going. "I do think staff expect to have some clear direction but at the same time autonomy to be able to make the decisions on their own that you constantly not putting your hands in their business so to speak" (Participant #9). Participant #7 affirmed that allowing autonomy within parameters was an important leadership function.

So you kind of ask people to be active within a certain kind of direction and do good things from their perspective that can move the needle on those sorts of efforts. But to give people a lot of latitude and a lot of support for doing it in the way they would like to do it, that they get passionate about and they care about and then they can find themselves all happy and fulfilled and finding meaning in what they're creating because they really get to own a lot of it. And maybe they don't get to own the general direction but they get to own all the specifics of how that happens. So that's one way that I think is a very effective part of leadership.



SSAOs not only need to create a vision, but they also need to work to align people to work toward that vision. Participant #3 talked about the process she uses to align people to work in the direction of change:

Well that's kind of a big task, how do you decide to do that? In our staff meetings we have a set collaborative process, how do we brainstorm things? How do we get everyone engaged in that conversation? I think if you talked to my staff you'd find one of the things I like to promote is it doesn't matter if you're in my position if you're a hall director, if you're administrative assistant, they all come to staff meetings and they all know that their voice is as important as the next person when we're trying to form something.

Participant #2 also described how she is engaged in the process of aligning people toward change. She shared a specific example of a new initiative they were creating in her division:

So two years ago we were coming up with co-curricular learning outcomes. So who am I talking to that week that's consulting about their program outcomes and how are they fitting into our emerging outline and what our outcomes are going to be? This last year was all about assessment, so it might be who could I meet with this week to talk about how they're already assessing student learning and could we use their data and if they're not, can I invite them to start thinking of a way to do it. I try to kind of bite bits and pieces off on these bigger things.

**Management.** Management skills were also utilized by the SSAOs. Kotter (1990) described management skills as being more directed at maintaining the status quo.

The activities that correspond with this maintenance include planning, staffing, problem solving, and controlling (Kotter, 1990). Again, the SSAOs reported engaging in these types of activities. Codes attached to the management category include such things as budgeting, giving advice, supervising, and problem solving.

One of the tasks that many SSAOs discussed was problem solving. Participant #4 describes one level of problem solving that she engages in with students. “I still deal with a lot of the, what I want to call the organized crises, when students are upset about some big issue and you wind up having to engage in problem solving and stuff like that.” Participant #9 discussed engaging in problem solving with students, but also identifies assisting others in the community.

It can range from, a lot of it tends to deal with various problems and issues, students concerns and issues, problem solving is probably the thing I spend the most time on, helping people work through situations and problems, be it the student, be it the staff member, be it some other administrator, and get that headed in the right direction.

While some work done with staff would include leadership, other work with staff would align more with management functions. Meetings with staff range from planning meetings, supervision, checking in, and dealing with personnel issues. Participant #8 described expectations he feels to manage personnel issues.

You’re also expect that when there is a real problem, you’ll try and help get rid of it. I’ve had really bad staff decisions and supervisory decisions and you work as

fast as you can and as quietly as you can to move the problem along, and move folks.

The management of staff is also directed toward creating consistency. Participant #3 described management activities she performs to build consistency within the division. When she arrived in her role, there was not a habit of having staff meetings.

Again you would've thought that I was asking for, it just wasn't the culture here so to get that established... So the other thing that I did was to establish weekly meetings, individual meetings, with the directors and so just like the meeting I finished with the director of residence life, she knows that at 9:30 every Monday, and these are their meetings so they can tell me how much time they need so I have a half hour with some directors, I have an hour and a half with some directors, it just depends on what they need.

#### **Theme Five: SSAOs Use a Variety of Strategies to be Effective in Balancing Their Work Roles**

The SSAOs in this study exhibited a variety of strategies to manage the various demands on their time. These strategies allow the SSAOs to meet the expectations of their role. The categories that emerged in this theme included being relational, managing their calendar, expanding their work schedule, and responding quickly as new issues arise.

**Being relational.** The SSAOs in this study recognized that creating relationships with others was a key strategy in being effective in their roles. Examples of codes in this theme included using influence, face to face interactions, influence over power, and

building networks. Participant #4 talked about the use of influence with cabinet colleagues.

You know, the comment right at the end, when you're vice president or dean of students you have the ability to direct resources to things like that. I think people overestimate your ability to do that because you still have to work within a system and this is sometimes a struggle I have with my peers. With different priorities, resources can only go so many different ways. Somebody might value student health care than others, um you know and want to put more resources into that. Doesn't really resonate with others. And that can get frustrating. So I can't just say, "Dammit I'm a vice president I should be able to do that." You can't always just do that. So this isn't a position, this is maybe the nut of it, it's not as much a position of power than it is a position of influence. And I learned that from someone else, I didn't invent that idea obviously. But it's certainly one that's worth applying to it.

Participant #9 discussed how she feels that no real work gets done by an individual, that accomplishments are a group endeavor.

You know these kind of questions are always a challenge and I think the same thing when you interview for positions they want to know what you did what you did, and you know, nobody does it on their own. Everybody, it's because of the staff and the people that you work with, but obviously there are areas that you try to influence and set that vision and directions and set people on it together.

**Manage calendar.** Some of the SSAOs in this study utilized their calendar as a way to manage the expectations placed on them. While the SSAOs described spending much of their time in meetings, some tried to be intentional about how their time was scheduled. Some of the codes in this category included not getting tied into meetings, blocking time, unscheduled time, and planning strategically. Participant #9 described how she tried to manage her time to accomplish the goals she has.

Meetings can range from supervisory meetings to um, individual student meetings, and then attending events in the evenings to working on specific projects or tasks. I try to be very strategic in looking at how I'm spending my time and my calendar, particularly things, when I call it a project a project is something that is moving forward on a specific goal or strategic initiative of the college. Personally I actually go in and color code my calendar and outlook to different things that, and it gives me a visual, alright, the bright green are my project things, the things that are moving forward on a specific goal or initiative, and I try to make sure I have a good sampling of those throughout the week so if it's all supervision and I'm not getting any of the, making any progress on an initiative, then I say alright I'm not spending my time where I need to be spending my time. So I try to be specific about it.

In a similar way, Participant #8 talked about leaving some time in the schedule open to attend to unexpected issues that arise.

One [strategy] is to not plan all of the time we have for things that we're trying to accomplish. Because if you need 100% of your time to accomplish what your

agenda is for the year, you're going to fail because there's about 30 or 40 percent of the job you can't plan for, so you need to be flexible and have that time available, so to speak, because you don't know what it will be.

Because the time of the SSAO is often directed by his or her calendar, finding ways to manage the calendar and how time is spent is a key strategy for the SSAOs.

**Expand work schedule.** In addition to managing their calendar, SSAOs find it helpful to expand their work schedule to meet the expectations of their position.

Expanding the work schedule helps to accomplish two goals. The first is to add more time to accomplish tasks each day. The other is to be visible on campus, which helps SSAOs meet one of their goals of being accessible and supportive to students, whose activities tend to occur in the evenings and on weekends. Codes that support this category include nights and weekends, being visible, evening commitments, and working long stretches.

Participant #6 discussed some of the events she comes back to campus to attend in the evenings. "I try to come up for other events, whether those are athletic events, basketball game, volleyball game, something like that." In addition to being present on campus, SSAOs use their evening time to catch up on administrative work. Participant #5 explained how she needs to use evening time to plan and prioritize.

So at night I'm going to prioritize what needs to happen tomorrow or the next day and what can be maybe put off for a week or two and I'll pick a night when I've got some free time and I'll do that thing that can be put off a week or two and that's when I'll do it.

Participant #11 also discussed needing to complete work tasks in the evening to be able to meet her goals around communication. “I take a lot of work home with me and it’s not because I can’t do it here but because of having a family at home, I’d rather, when they go to bed, I stay up until 2 am doing emails.”

**Respond quickly.** A third strategy used by the SSAOs in this study was responding quickly when issues arise. The codes that contribute to this category include juggle, triage, not linger, and hitting tennis balls. This category both describes the active nature of the role as well as what needs to happen to manage the multiple priorities.

Participant #8 described the importance of moving quickly to address issues.

But you have multiple things coming in at you at the same time, differing levels of urgency and priority and you need to be able to quickly move from one to another and sort of disengage from one as you move to another so you can be responsive and move on. You can’t really linger.

Another SSAO described the need to move quickly as being similar to playing tennis, and needing to keep hitting the balls over the net. He discussed this in the context of changes that were made to his role to make it more manageable. “Not because, I was always able to do that, to be able to move quickly from topic to topic. I said it’s kind of like tennis, you just have to keep hitting the balls back over the net.” Participant #1 talked about needing to move quickly to accomplish tasks when she had time not scheduled in meetings.

I feel like I spend a lot of my time going from meeting to meeting to meeting and that consumes a lot of my day. And then in between, when there isn’t any time

scheduled, trying to respond to email, call back the angry parent, squeeze in maybe a student crisis, consult with somebody about something that needs immediate attention.

The previous five themes were developed through open coding. The open coding process was targeted at breaking down the data provided by participants and applying a word or phrase that encompasses the action, attitude, or result. Next these words or phrases were grouped into categories that summarized them. Finally, a theme sentence was written that conveys the holistic sense of the category. Once the thematic analysis was complete, the next stage in the analysis process was axial coding, which is targeted at examining linkages between categories and themes, and building the grounded theory.

### **Axial Coding Analysis**

The goal of axial coding is “to construct a model that details the specific conditions that give rise to a phenomenon's occurrence” (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 52). After the open coding, which deconstructed the information shared by the interviewees, the axial coding process makes connections between categories and themes, creating the grounded theory. While the results of the open coding analysis may seem disjointed, axial coding brings the categories and themes together into a coherent theoretical presentation.

The grounded theory is comprised of several concepts that describe the process under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Moghaddam, 2006). The first concept developed is the core category or central phenomenon (Moghaddam, 2007). The central phenomenon must appear often in the data, and must be the category to which all other concepts



related (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The related concepts help to describe the process and include the causal conditions, the strategies used to address the central phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that impact the strategies, and the consequences, which are the outcomes of the strategies (Moghaddam, 2006).

This section will describe the grounded theory in detail. A map of the grounded theory was presented in Figure 1.

### **Central Phenomenon**

The primary research question for this study was whether SSAOs needed to use leadership and management skills in their role, and if so, how they balanced them. As the data from this study were reviewed, it became clear that the role of the SSAO required a diverse set of responses and skills, including the use of leadership and management. Examining whether one person can complete both tasks was another key component of this research. The central phenomenon that emerged from this study was that SSAOs use a variety of skills, including leadership and management, to balance the complex demands of their role.

When describing their work, the activities in which they engage began to cluster into three domains: institutional work, work within the division of student affairs (divisional work), and direct work with students. Within these three domains, SSAOs used both leadership and management to accomplish the tasks of their role, although some domains called more for leadership or management, depending on the focus of the work. In this section, the three domains of work for the SSAOs are examined, describing examples of both leadership and management actions taken.

**Institutional work.** One of the domains of the work completed by SSAOs is work focused on the institution. These activities tend to be focused on issues that may impact the institution as a whole, such as college budget, institutional policy, or strategic planning. This work is frequently connected to being a member of the college's leadership team, often referred to as the President's cabinet. Time spent working in this domain primarily called for the use of leadership activities. Kotter (1990) describes leadership activities as those that are focused on creating change: setting vision for the organization, aligning staff to work toward the shared vision, and motivating and inspiring others. Participant #8 describes leadership as it pertains to her role in setting vision and aligning staff:

Leadership is having a vision about where we're going and how it fits into the larger university trajectory, and helping to facilitate and use the expertise of my directors and deans and folks who are envisioning how we can get to a certain place to help further those efforts in a collaborative kind of way. Make sure we're not operating in silos but are moving forward in ways that are effective and make sense. And then again being supportive of those efforts.

The SSAOs in this study identified many occasions they had to exercise leadership while working in the institutional domain. Leadership activities for SSAOs revolve around helping to craft the institution's strategic plan (setting a direction) and then aligning the work of the student affairs division with the institutional plan.

Well we have a long history here of under the previous president of long range planning and that being a very collaborative campus wide effort. So the current

long range plan that we have our folks were instrumental in shaping that. So you don't need to spend time with them helping shape university vision because they've already helped shape it and it's very well understood. What we spend our time at this point in terms of strategically planning it forward is trying to take the expertise that they bring forward out of their areas and how we help shape what the university's going to move forward to do.

Aligning people toward a chosen direction is another key leadership task. One of the ways this is done by the SSAOs in this study is through acting as a translator or interpreter. SSAOs share information learned through their work in the institutional domain with other staff and students. This interpreter role is consistent with how Hirt (2006) categorizes work at liberal arts colleges. In discussing expectations from the staff she supervises, Participant #1 described the expectation for her to be an interpreter. She said, "I think they expect me to interpret things that come from senior administrators and from the president's cabinet and the president." Other SSAOs discussed their role to translate information. Participant #9 describes her role in interpreting college values for staff and students:

And with that one of the big things we talked about was, you know, what are our college values? What we try to say is that there are four pillars to [our college's] education, and I reviewed those pillars and said, you know, we talk to students about these in orientation, but what are we doing each and every day to reinforce those values and point those out.

In this case, the SSAO is working to align staff to the key values of the institution, and work toward plans to propagate the values more broadly, particularly to students.

Participant #2 described her role as serving as a liaison between students and the institution, sharing and translating information in both directions. Participant #2 described it this way:

I talk a lot about the ability to be in the doorway between the student and the institution for some student services areas, and the institution to the student. So it's the, "Hey student let me hand you off to this" kind of stuff, and "Hey institution, let me broker introduction to these students that I work with so you know them better."

The SSAOs engage in activities aimed at aligning staff in addition to serving as an interpreter. Setting a direction, but allowing autonomy for staff to create action plans, is the way some of the SSAOs describe aligning the work of staff. Participant #7 discussed the importance of providing direction, but allowing staff the latitude and flexibility to structure their work around that direction in ways that were meaningful to them:

So you kind of ask people to be active within a certain kind of direction and do good things from their perspective that can move the needle on those sorts of efforts. But to give people a lot of latitude and a lot of support for doing it in the way they would like to do it, that they get passionate about and they care about and then they can find themselves all happy and fulfilled and finding meaning in what they're creating because they really get to own a lot of it. And maybe they

don't get to own the general direction but they get to own all the specifics of how that happens. So that's one way that I think is a very effective part of leadership. This orientation toward allowing staff flexibility within their roles to work toward the strategic goals of the organization is an example of the motivating aspect of leadership discussed by Kotter (1990).

The SSAOs find meaning in the leadership work they do, and many of them identify working in the leadership domain as being a personal strength. Participant #5 described engaging in leadership and taking an institutional viewpoint as being a meaningful activity:

Well the rewarding stuff, I like to be involved in some of the college wide decisions or departmental decision, athletic decisions when we're trying to strategize about change, or improving something, or how to spend a pot of money for the best of the whole college and we're looking at everything.

Participant #10 commented on the enjoyment she gets from working at the institutional level and then translating that to the student affairs division by saying, "[t]he part that's easiest is the strategic thinking, seeing how, what we're doing in student affairs fits with the rest of the institution. I'm really good at figuring out, seeing where the institution is trying to go and figuring out how our division can support that."

**Divisional work.** A second domain of work for SSAOs are tasks that are completed within the division of student affairs. While institutional work tends to engage more leadership activities, divisional work tends to be more split between leadership and management.

As part of their leadership role within the division, SSAO are often called upon to create change. Several SSAOs discussed occasions in which they need to orchestrate change within student affairs. Participant #9 described change she created when she started at her current institution:

When I first got here, many of the people had been here many, many years and were used to doing things the same old way they'd always done it. You get used to the idea of, you've probably heard the idea or concept of challenging the process, and I think that's kind of what I've tried to do since I got here which is challenge the process. Part of that has been getting people to look at professional standards and trying to raise the bar with regards to how things operate and function. When I first got here many of the staff had been out of school for so long and they weren't familiar with CAS standards. And you know it was an eye opening experience to them to learn that there were professional standards for each of their areas and that they needed to be, those were in essence minimum standards in most cases and challenge and question whether or not they are doing that. So what we've started is a program review process here in the division where every department, every five years, goes through a program review and we use the CAS standards self-assessment as the fundamental basis for that and bring in outside reviewers to provide feedback and information about their operations. And I'll be honest, that's not earth shattering, that not anything that many other institutions don't do, but that was something totally new to this group and something that created a lot of, almost fear about that. And now we're into the

third year of that and people are lining up to say when am I going to get my turn? Because they're seeing positive results from it and it's making positive change for their operation but for the entire division as well. And so I think initiating that process has been something that I'm particularly proud of.

Participant #3 described cultural change she needed to create in the division when she started as SSAO.

Probably that main thing was accountability. There was no system, and when I say accountability it's not like accountability of me supervising and doing your evaluation, it was wasn't that. It was more like the department didn't have staff meetings on any consistent basis. So when I introduced that I would like to have a weekly staff meeting, you would have thought I just announced something that was crazy.

As well as creating change and setting direction, some supervision activities that lean toward leadership are focused on operationalizing institutional vision for the student affairs staff. Participant #9 discussed aligning staff to the institutional vision, which serves as a bridge between the SSAO's institutional role and divisional role:

And then I have to create a vision for my staff for what that looks like and how we can go about doing that in a loose sense of the term. More of a vision and kind of, these are some strategic directions we want to go but then I need them to put that into practice with the specifics.

Participant #2 discussed aligning staff work toward divisional priorities. "So two years ago we were coming up with co-curricular learning outcomes. So who am I talking to

that week that's consulting about their program outcomes and how are they fitting into our emerging outline and what our outcomes are going to be?" Maintaining a focus on the divisional priorities while working with individual staff members or staff teams to shape their contributions is one of the ways that SSAOs align work.

In addition to spending time executing leadership tasks, SSAOs are also called upon to perform management functions in their work within the division. These tasks include planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, and controlling and problem solving (Kotter, 1990). Some of the SSAOs discussed being surprised by the amount of management required in the role. Participant #2 reflected on how the role was much more management-focused than she anticipated when getting into the role:

I thought it would be more working with, and now I have all these people reporting to me. From FMLA, to someone's not in their office, to somebody's had a complaint about one of the people I supervise, to performance evals, to these kinds of things, just like "dang". So it's human development as well as student development. So there's those developmental aspects to it. So it was just one of those things, it's just like "I'm management." Yeah that was a surprising uptick. Which in some respects, it says right here on the job description but then you get to the day to day of it, and it's just like "woah". It was one of those things that was an unpleasant surprise, and I feel stupid I was surprised by it.

While Participant #2 was disappointed when she realized the amount of management included in the role, some SSAOs take pleasure in the management activities of their jobs. Participant #9 reflected on budgeting as being a rewarding management activity:



I'll say I'm also proud about how we're managed our budget. When I got here the very first year the division had been \$140,000 in the red and they were used to operating in a sense where, well, the college has got this big surplus every year, the college has had over 50 years of balanced budget and part of that is because they budget very conservatively and usually if they are able to, enrollment is higher than they budget, so that generates a surplus. Well people were always used to, oh we don't have to worry about budgets, if we spend more than that, the college has got surplus and they'll cover it, we're fine. But as times have become leaner and we've become more strategic in trying to move the college forward, those resources need to be directed in intentional areas as opposed to people sort of flitting it away because of a lack of control on how they're managing things. So having gone from \$140,000 in the red to having a 2% surplus at the end of the year, we've made tremendous progress from a budgetary standpoint and how we manage and control our budgets and finances. I think that's been a pretty good accomplishment for us.

Participant #10 described many of the management functions she is expected to engage with, either directly or through her staff:

Um, so a lot of [time] is taken up with managing budgets, managing personnel, managing projects.... And there's a lot of, I'd say case management, that I'm not doing directly, but and those are, they might be cases of conduct violations, serious conduct violations, I'm not managing those in the hands-on way, not step

by step, but I'm definitely kept in the loop on those. And any kind of serious student issue, I'll tend to be tracking that a little bit.

The supervision of staff is a task that requires SSAOs to use their management skills. While some supervisory work is in the leadership realm, meetings, particularly the individual meetings with staff, are focused more on management tasks such as monitoring and problem solving. As Participant #2 described it, "I meet every other week for an hour with the direct reports and each week is half of the group. And that's how's it going, what's up, what are you running into?" In this excerpt, she is describing the monitoring tasks that need to be completed as part of her role.

Participant #5 also described the amount of time she spends in meetings with staff:

I will have some kind of staff meeting every week, whether it's all of my directors, whether it's my whole staff, but there'll be some kind of, I have it spaced out, different parts of my staff I meet with them. I would probably have a couple of those one on one meetings I was talking about where I go into their places when I have to go through nine people in four weeks.

SSAOs work with staff in ways that go beyond simple supervision. In their institutional work, SSAOs are often serving as interpreters. In their divisional work, they frequently serve as connectors, connecting student affairs staff to resources, both in the form of financial and human resources. The SSAO is seen as having important connections at the institution, and they feel an expectation to connect their staff to those resources. In the words of Participant #5:

I think they see me as a political entity that has a connection to the president or to the cabinet or to the budget, that's the college budget, that can help them get what they need to do their jobs better. Or I have connections to the faculty, or I have connections to another director who maybe they're not getting along with as well, but I can sway them to help, or you know. I just have the connections. And not that they don't have them too, but I have more.

These contacts are important for connecting staff to what they need to be effective in their roles within student affairs. Participant #5 goes on to say,

They need me to be that link that brings resources to them whatever those resources are. And so when I say that I mean, resources meaning, collaboration too. I try to have staff meetings where I put them all in touch with each other so ideas might come up, they'll be in the same place at the same time so it's easy for them to have a discussion they might not have if they had to pick up a phone or go to somebody's office they might just put it off and not do it.

Serving as a connector is not only important in helping staff obtain resources, but also helping to create a sense of being part of the broader institutional picture.

We're very open, we talk about everything, we try to, I definitely lead by, system approach of connectivity amongst not just in student life connectivity, but how we connect to the rest of the organization as a whole, and trying to develop a learning environment. (Participant #3).

Serving as a connector is an activity that crosses the line between leadership and management. Often, staff look to the SSAO to connect them to resources they need,

which are often financial. Procuring budget resources could be considered a management activity. Connecting staff can also help them complete their work more effectively and efficiently, also aligned with management activities. However, other times, serving as a connector is about helping staff feel a part of the larger institutional picture; this work could be considered leadership, as it is aligning staff to the direction the institution is heading. The connecting actions in which the SSAOs engage highlights the interwoven nature of the leadership and management actions that the SSAOs take. They are not discrete activities, but rather, skills that the SSAOs call upon based on the need at the time.

There are other examples of divisional work that demonstrate the interconnected nature of leadership and management in the SSAO role. The SSAOs in this study placed a high importance on working with staff and ensuring that the staff in the division are high quality. Westfall (2011) emphasized the importance of good staff at small colleges by noting that “competent staff recruitment and supervision can make the difference between success and failure for a small college SSAO” (p. 67). Participant #3 discussed spending much of her time early in her role hiring staff:

And that doesn't always happen where you get to put together your own team of people. And then in the years [I've been here], the director of multicultural and community outreach was hired a month before I came but everybody else I've been able to hire, so really being able to put together a good group of folks.

She goes on to describe how working with staff can be both a leadership activity and a management function. Hiring and supervising staff is a management function, but hiring

the right people and aligning them to the vision of the institution is a leadership activity. “We’ve just kind of built that atmosphere and I’ve hired people that just have that same kind of thought behind them, and tried to hire people who like to work hard” (Participant #8).

Having the right staff members is critical at smaller institutions because personnel issues are both a time consuming and critical task for SSAOs. The importance of this management task is recognized by Participant #7:

So you have to bring in great people and sometimes you get the wrong person and you have to, and they’re good people, but they just weren’t a good fit for whatever the reason was. You have to help them move forward with dignity and grace and get them on in another place. And we’ve done that with two of the positions within the last six months.

Participant #3 discussed the importance of creating a team that was able to work toward the vision set forward by the SSAO. Early in her time as SSAO, she needed to create change around how the division worked.

So um, so through that then those folks early in my time here kind of decided either this wasn’t going to be a good fit for them and went and did something else or go to the point where I had to say to them this isn’t going to work, or if it is going to work, here’s the behavior plan or the performance plan that we’re going to put you on to see if it will work and it didn’t for a couple of them, so they moved on. Those were hard discussions and things like that.

Creating a team can be difficult, but it can also be one of the most enjoyable aspects of the work. One SSAO talked at length about the value he places on the team with which she works in student affairs. In addition to being one of the most meaningful pieces, she also describes it as playing a key role in her success and the success of the division. Participant #4 had this to say when describing a standing meeting she has with many of the staff who report directly to her:

So that's the group that staffs students, and I tell you that's my favorite hour and a half of the week. I sit back there and I'll argue with them and I'll fight, and we're comfortable with each other, we'll insult each other, but when I take step back I can say I have the right people on the bus. There's a sense of comfort in there because you know, it's almost like I can't screw up. I really cannot, it would not be possible for me to make the fatal mistake, which so often undoes people in professional roles is that, the system we set up, number one, is that we have the right people, but then also they have a lot of accountability to each other. Nobody can just do whatever they want. The greatest satisfaction I get is from both leading and being part of that team. Because I see, those are the folks that are making it happen with the kids in crisis, and the families, and, they're the ones who run the freak show.

Participant #5 likened creating the student affairs team to her experience in creating athletic teams. She highlighted the importance of using individual talents to create a strong team.

Even putting together a team, I mean I think about, I've got 25 players and I've got to start this 6. Even here it's like, well, I have a team of 9 directors, okay how do I use them and really approach it like that. I have some directors are brainstorming oriented, and others who are very rules oriented. So for my whole staff, I'll use the brainstormer, my brainstormer's in student activities, so I'll use his skills even to help me in res life, or to help me with public safety to try to come up some new ideas or try to push the boundaries a little bit. But then I'll use some of the more task oriented folks to kind of keep us on track. (Participant #5).

Supervising staff and managing personnel issues are a significant part of the SSAOs' division work, both in time commitment and importance. Again, their work in creating and supervising teams highlights the interconnected nature of leadership and management in their work.

**Work with students.** The third domain of work for SSAOs is work with students. The largest amount of variance in time devoted is in this category of work. Some SSAOs spend a significant amount of time meeting with individual students or student groups, while others do not engage directly with students frequently. Participant #6 reported that "a typical day would probably be filled with three to five student appointments" whereas another participant reported that "direct student contact is very minimal, unless the student has some kind of, well that doesn't even work. I have an associate who sees most of the student issues and crises and things in my office, so I

don't deal with those, so direct student contact is the least of those variables" (Participant #8).

Similar to the other two domains, work with students can entail both leadership and management activities. However, the majority of work completed in this domain is focused on management.

One activity that the SSAOs described that would be considered a management function was problem solving. Finding solutions to issues was a common activity that SSAOs engaged with when working with students. Participant #9 describes problem solving as a significant activity in terms of how her time is spent:

It can range from, a lot of it tends to deal with various problems and issues, students' concerns and issues, problem solving is probably the thing I spend the most time on, helping people work through situations and problems, be it the student, be it the staff member, be it some other administrator, and get that headed in the right direction.

The SSAOs work with students on both personal and academic issues. Participant #2 described a situation where she was able to help a student resolve an academic issue so that she could graduate.

I love when I can work with a student to create a solution. I just really do. So we had a student who has a class with a D, but her major requires everything to be at the C level. So she has to repeat the class. So in her head, she got credit and she's getting credit [again], so she's going to make 32 [credits required for graduation]. Her advisor knew the class had to come in at a 2.0, but you don't



actually get credit toward the 32 for this again. So all of a sudden she's one credit short. Well, we didn't really screw up and she didn't really screw up and it's kind of this tiny thing, so I'm sitting with the academic dean and check in with her advisor, so we wrote up an independent study that we won't charge her for. So she'll be able to do this independent study, she'll graduate at the end of summer, it fits with her major, and blah blah blah, and we didn't really do anything wrong, we didn't do it quite as right. If she had known she could have taken another class as an overload and there would have been some amount of tuition there, so we thought just charge her the overload. And then we thought, you know what? It's summer tuition so it's lower, it's kind of a wash. We found a faculty, let's get her graduated, we can do this independent study, great student, could have caught that, didn't. Talked to the academic dean and it kinds of feels like an advising mistake. And then an environment where the money people are like if that's what needs to happen, that's what we'll do. So it was like, those are the fun ones, a good student, we all want them to be successful and off we go.

Problem solving with students can take another form. Often, SSAOs are called upon to work with students in crisis or during difficult experiences. These can range from challenging personal issues that students might be facing, difficulty with their academic work, students who are involved in the college's disciplinary process, or those who are experiencing significant mental health crises. Even though these situations are often difficult, the SSAOs in this study feel a sense of satisfaction from this work. When

responding to what part of the role came the easiest to her, Participant #6 talked about his work with students.

The one on one student interactions. When that student makes the appointment and comes in and want to visit. They either need advice, they need some guidance, or they need some intervention. I think in those contexts, there's no politics, there's no power struggle, it's just two individuals that are interacting together and trying to figure out solutions. That perhaps is the most gratifying. It really makes you feel, in that moment, that you're making a difference. Often, so much of your time is spent communicating or sitting in meetings and you can sit back at the end of the day or the end of the week and wonder, well, was that time worth it and did I really accomplish something? Sometimes you never know, and you don't know until much later. But one on ones with students, that's the relationship building that I think is so crucial.

The time spent in management tasks that are helping students with problems is another meaningful activity for the SSAOs. Several described it as one of the most rewarding parts of the role. Participant #11 was asked a question about what is most meaningful in her work, and responded like this:

Oh! Talking to students. Working with them when they come in and have an issue and being able to have them leave and they want to give you a hug and say, oh without you, or this has been the greatest thing, or thank you so much, or whatever it is. If I can feel like a student, I've made an impact somehow in a

positive way for a student, and helped them resolve whatever the issue is, that's is where I get the most jollies. Frankly that's the best thing ever.

Participant #9 also discussed the time spent assisting students as one of the activities she enjoys in her work. "Student interaction. If I could sit down and talk one on one with students and work with them on their issues, problems, careers, that's the stuff I just love doing. Those are the fun meetings to have. I really enjoy that time with the students."

Participant #4 also highlighted work with students as being meaningful. "It's still the satisfaction that I still have the opportunity to have really strong relationships with students. It's a smaller group than it used to be, primarily student government leaders or students who are leaders in some other capacity that bubble up through the thing. And so that, still an extraordinary source of satisfaction." Even the SSAOs that don't spend as much time directly with students felt that the work they do on behalf of students is a meaningful endeavor. Participant #8 said, "Generating new opportunities, advancing programs, and meeting student needs over the years for things that students have wanted that have fit with university mission and being able to open doors to make those things happen."

Although helping students during times of need or crisis was rewarding for SSAOs, they also acknowledged how difficult that facet of the work could be.

Participant #8 discussed it in this way:

The challenging ones are.... Probably the student crises, or the most draining of the things. Extremely important, but are very, require a lot of good thinking and they grab you emotionally and so you're, there's just a lot of complexity to

dealing with those. And so those are the challenging, the most challenging of the ones, they're certainly rewarding, but they're challenging.

Not all work that the SSAOs engage with students in is problem solving. The work conducted with students takes a variety of forms. One of the more common forms of student interaction for SSAOs is serving as the advisor for student government. Advising could be seen as a management task, as its aim is often about creating consistency rather than working toward change. Advising student government involves meeting directly with the students serving in executive roles in the organization and attending their meetings, which often occur weekly.

In the afternoon, after those meetings, last year that's when I had my student council, our student government, and I'm the advisor for that. So we had our executive board meeting from 2:30 to 4:00. In fact Tuesday afternoons last year I met with the president and vice president of the council for an hour on Tuesday afternoon (Participant #3).

The choice to advise student government is intentional, and seen as a way to ensure direct contact with students on a regular basis. Not only is it a way to maintain connection to students, it is often seen as a meaningful part of their work. Participant #1 said:

I still think I take the most joy when I'm engaged with students. So one of the things I'm very intentional about, even though some days it's a pain in my behind, I advise Student Senate. So that means I'm here every Monday night sitting in on student senate meetings, the senate co-presidents I meet with weekly in preparation for those senate meetings, I sign all the RFPs with the treasurer so I

meet with the treasurer weekly. And you know that's a piece that would be really easy to hand off to someone else... But I also really understand that if I give that away, and several of my assistant deans have said they would like to have that piece, and I understand why, but if I give that away, I don't have any definitive student interaction that's guaranteed. And I, I love still, it's why I'm a student affairs professional. I still love the sidebar conversations with the students who are sitting on student senate, or the clubs and organizations that are coming to senate for funding. Just being engaged in their day in, day out lives, that stuff is still so meaningful and still so important. And that is without a doubt still the most fulfilling.

Participant #6 also reported that her work in advising student government is one of the most meaningful parts of her role. "One of the things that I enjoy the most in my work is I'm the advisor for our student association. And so we meet on Wednesday evening. I wish they didn't meet at 9 at night, but... 7 sure sounds better."

Being visible on campus is another form of working with students in which the SSAOs engage. The SSAOs described attending events on campus as being one of the primary ways they demonstrate accessibility to students. Participant #3, when discussing her typical schedule, said, "And then fill in your weekend activities, night activities, um, that I either have to attend or I choose to attend just to be connected with the community." Participant #9 echoed the importance of being visible on campus. "With my staff I do think that I've gained a reputation with my president and with my campus of being very visible and accessible."

In addition to advising student government and being visible on campus, SSAOs find other ways to stay connected with students. Participant #9 describes ways she finds to connect to students:

My house is across the street from the president's house and is adjacent to the campus. Literally it's a two minute walk to my house from campus. So I host a number of student dinners at my house, be it for different student organizations. I have been doing a number of freshman dinners where we invite, what we call our, our introductory inquiry course, and those freshman students and the faculty member that teaches that are invited to come to my house for dinner and they get to meet students from another class as well as another faculty member and then have an opportunity to have dinner in a more informal setting. And we talk a little bit about how the semester is going and I try to remind them of some key issues that I think are important for students to be successful and operate on an inter-, a personal level. This week is fall break, and so most of the students are gone, but several of our student athletes are here because they still have athletic competitions, so my spouse and I are having the volleyball team over for dinner tonight. So we'll do those things on a pretty consistent basis. I probably have a dinner at my house at least once a week with a group of students.

While the connection to students can take a variety of forms, engaging and supporting students is a critical part of the work for SSAOs. Regardless of the amount of time the SSAOs spent in direct contact with students, it was clear that having a student-focused operation was of critical importance to them. Their work with students is at the

heart of the mission of their institutions. For many of the SSAOs, choosing to work at small, private, liberal arts colleges affiliated with the ELCA was a conscious choice that allows them to work with a defined population of students within an identifiable context.

Participant #1 described this context:

I feel like one of the things it's really important for me to say is how important it is for us to work with 18 to 22 year olds. It's such a gift to be able to come into someone's life at a point where they're really thinking about who they are and they're doing that in a context that everything that has defined them until that moment isn't standing next to them.

For these SSAOs, their work is divided into three domains: the institutional work, work done within the divisions of student affairs, which is primarily focused on working with staff, and either direct work with students, or work done directly on behalf of students.

Within these three domains, their work can be identified as either leadership or management, which will be highlighted in the next section.

### **Causal Conditions**

The central phenomenon in this study is that SSAOs use a variety of skills, including leadership and management, to balance their complex roles. There are four causal conditions that lead to this central phenomenon: the SSAOs having multiples roles, the position becoming more complex, a high demand on their time, and the size of the institution.

As noted earlier, individuals holding both the title of vice president and dean of students frequently play multiple roles, some of which may pull them in different

directions. Most of the participants in this study did hold both titles, and holding multiple roles was a universal experience. The multiplicity of their roles emerged as the participants talked about the different types of work they do, as well as the expectations that others have for their role. When asked to describe her typical week, Participant #1 highlighted the multiple facets of her position.

I would say one big chunk of my week is in supervision. I have 5 direct reports, which is oddly many less than I had, not oddly, it makes complete sense, but less than I had at [another college]. But it's more complex because my direct reports have director direct reports. So it's just a more complicated chain. So I feel like I spend one big chunk of time meeting with those folks who are meeting with other folks and trying to stay on top of what we're accomplishing, how we're moving forward. A second big chunk of my time are the things I think about that are my VP responsibilities, the things that take me up to the next level, to the institutional level, so President's cabinet, college wide committees, for example this spring consumed with the institutional budget committee, um, things that are really up at that 30,000 foot layer, and I bring obviously a student affairs perspective to those conversations but it's not about my work in student affairs. It's about a commitment to and an understanding of the institution as a whole and not about the student affairs division or the student life division. So I think that that's a big chunk of my every day of my every week. And then just an obscene amount of committees and meetings. Some that are standing, some that are just scheduled randomly, some of them are really specific to the student life division, some of



them having nothing to do with the student life division. I feel like I spend a lot of my time going from meeting to meeting to meeting and that consumes a lot of my day. And then in between, when there isn't any time scheduled, trying to respond to email, call back the angry parent, squeeze in maybe a student crisis, consult with somebody about something that needs immediate attention. I think those are all parts of a really typical week.

This participant clearly highlighted the different groups to which she is responsible to, and that the work engages her in different areas of the campus community, including President's cabinet, the student affairs division, and directly with students. The experience highlighted by this participant was echoed by other participants. Participant #4 described the variety of the work that is involved in the SSAO position, from the mundane to the meaningful.

So all that kind of stuff comes back and you realize, ok, this is what a dean does. This is what it's about. It's not... You have to be good at Title IX, the crime victim bill of rights, and you have to be good at key control, and you have to be good about following facilities stuff, and you have to be good at hiring the right people. You have to have to do all those things. But it comes back to... In the worst moment the college has had in a long, long time, when those three kids got killed, and watching... And I didn't do a lot, traveled around and showed up at funerals, that's what I did. And took care of the needs of families and friends and tried to, played my part in the mending.

Another causal condition of the central phenomenon in this study is the increasing complexity of the work. Several authors noted that the work of the SSAO has become increasingly complex (Barr, 1998; Sandeen, 1991), and this is the experience of the participants in this study. Participants described a variety of factors that have increased the complexity of the role. SSAOs who have been in the role for a longer period of time were able to reflect on ways the role has become more complex over time. Participant #10 acknowledged the increased complexity and discussed one factor that she thinks has contributed to the increase:

I actually think the work is getting more complex. And the projects are getting more complex. Particularly in the sense that you have more stakeholders than I remember having 20 years ago. Not everyone expected to be involved 20 years ago, but they do now. Involved or informed. And even when you're trying to solve a problem, typically now it has many more, it has impact on other departments or people, so there's more need to collaborate with other departments and get their input. It just seems more complex.

Similarly to Participant #10, another participant discussed how the increased expectations around collaboration have made the work more multifarious. In addition, changes in society and student needs have contributed to the increased complexity. Participant #8 discussed how this complexity comes through in facilities planning:

We just did one this last year on gender neutral housing and expanding that in some ways that students wanted that to happen. We were able to advance that on campus. There've been a number of construction projects, those are big

collaborative efforts with president's council, to make those things move forward for students. So from small things to large types of things, renovation of the university center, which would be like your student union, and facilities types of things.

In addition to increased expectations around collaboration, participants talked about changes in the type of work they do now. One recent change in student affairs is the expectation to be involved in fundraising. While this was not a common theme for this group of participants, Participant #4 is becoming more involved in the fundraising efforts of the institution:

The donor relations and all those, I do those. The stuff, my part of the campaign that's coming up, it's not going to be with big donors, it's gonna be with engaging young alumni because those are the people I've known. I'm the known quantity [to a group of young alumni]... Except for those early [in my tenure] most of those people aren't in the position to give a lot of money yet. But the, doing a lot with engagement with them. That's my chunk of it. And I'm really gonna love that, love that part of the donor relations.

External demands have also increased the complex nature of the SSAO role.

Increased federal regulation and legal issues in higher education have impacted the SSAO role. Participant #10, in discussing how the expectations of her role are impacted by the increasing legal issues, said, "And that, obviously there are compliance issues, more and more, legal and federal regulation compliance, so I'm expected to be up on the latest regulations and compliance issues." Participant #2 discussed how she needs to be able to

evaluate and understand key pieces of legislation, such as the Clery Act, higher education reauthorization acts, and the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

While some of the SSAOs enjoy this part of their work, Participant #11 described “dealing with attorneys” as one of the pieces of the role that she finds to be most challenging.

Multiple roles, increased complexity, and the scope of the position all influence the third causal condition, which is a high demand on SSAO time. Some of the participants talked about the role of technology in impacting the demand on their time. Participant #6 reflected on how technology has added to the workload for SSAOs over the last 20 years:

I think when we got into technology with computers back in the late 1980s the thinking was that computers and technology would lighten our work load and allow us to do other things. I think what it has done has added more work. And it's caused us to be a little more independent, not rely on others to act to do some of our work. It's that most important person your office that's sitting at the desk outside your office, your secretary, mine's right out there too. They're not doing our correspondence anymore. I find myself spending more time keyboarding and staring at a monitor each day.

Participant #2 also references the impact that technology has had on the workload for SSAOs.

I joke too, 14 years ago I'd be gone for a week and I'd come back to pile of mail.

Ten years ago I'd be gone for a week and come back to a pile of messages and

voicemail. Now everything's computer and I take it with me. So part of the deal now is you're kind of never gone. So the way the work happens is just really something. The 3 a.m. email from a student who I hear from at 10 a.m. and why haven't I gotten back to them? (laughs) The good thing with email is especially because I love the communicating and including is goes right up my alley. I'm going to copy these people. So it can be a very helpful kind of thing but yeah, the way we work is completely different.

Like Participant #2, Participant #6 also talks about how technology has expanded their availability to work. She said,

So that's really been a change. So to compensate for it, where I'm speaking for myself I think I'm speaking for most of us, we tend to be working longer hours, having less personal time and the normal day in the office has been elongated in the last 20 years... When you go home, you never really go home because you know a phone call or a text message or an email may cause you to come back to campus as quickly as possible. I think that's probably one of the most significant changes in student affairs work particularly on our campuses, of our type.

Technology has been a key to how the SSAO role has changed over time. As the participants noted, it has changed the expectations for availability and has changed the type of work that the SSAOs do. In addition to the changes caused by technology, cultural changes have impacted the SSAO role and the amount of pressures placed on their time. SSAOs have had to develop expertise in a variety of areas that expands the role of the SSAO. Participant #5 talked about the changes as additions to her role:

But when I first got here, disabilities was not an issue really, in the early 90s, I don't think we had students who had documented disabilities and 504 plans. In the mid- to late-90s that started happening. And so as the college does, it looks for somewhere to land that kind of stuff, so suddenly I took on all students with disabilities. I have no training with that at all, but I am working with all those students. So I don't know if you're talking about that kind of thing. But over the 20 years there have been shifts in culture, I don't know what to say, shift in legal stuff, I mean, um that, my job has changed but not, not like suddenly taking on a department like athletics but more taking on, how do I want to say it, taking on or responding to just the changes in culture. I don't know how else to say that. Even with our increasing numbers of multicultural students, numbers of first generation students, when I first got here it was kind of high, then it went way down, now it's coming back up again. The helicopter parenting, that wasn't as great when I first started, my goodness now, I've suddenly become, I officially became the liaison to parents. It's not a department, it's a job. Or part of a job. So that kind of stuff is constantly changing.

Changes in culture have resulted in changing job responsibilities for SSAOs, which add to their workload. In addition to responding to changing culture, many SSAOs talked about actually taking on additional departments or responsibilities during their tenure. This certainly adds to the pressures on their time. Participant #8 talked about how his division has expanded over time:

Student employment came in, international student services came in, athletics, uh..., sort of have a new veteran's services part that grew up, didn't come in from anywhere. And then all that admissions stuff we had for a while, that all left when we separated back out again. But I don't think anything moved away.

Participant #5 detailed a similar experience during her time in the role:

I came in, I was just overseeing res life, student activities, multicultural, counseling. I think and me, dean of students office. And over the years it's really changed. I've picked up athletics, I've picked up public safety, so those would be, and I had career services for a while, but it kind of came in, came out, went back to the academic side. So there's been some change even in the, you know, I guess responsibilities I've had, and then I became dean and VP of student life.

These structural changes contribute to the ways in which the complexity of the role has changed for SSOAs over time.

Finally, the fourth causal condition is institutional size. Westfall (2006) writes that smaller institutions have staff who must play multiple roles, and this is true of the SSAO position as well. It is also common for smaller institutions to have fewer staff members to do the work, contributing to the multiples roles played by each staff.

Participant #11 discussed the need for open communication in working with a smaller staff. She said, "From the people who work for me, I would say their expectation really is of open communication, because we are such a lean staff they want to have honesty, I don't sugar coat things..." In this case, the SSAO perceives institutional size dictates the communication and management practices needed.

When creating the grounded theory map for this study, there were four themes that emerged as serving as causal conditions to the central phenomenon. These four conditions include the increasing complexity of the role, the need for the SSAO to play multiple roles, heightened demand on the SSAO's time, and small institutional size. These factors create the conditions that make it necessary for SSAOs to learn to balance leadership and management to effectively balance their roles.

### **Context**

In the grounded theory map, there are two types of influences on the central phenomenon: contextual influences and intervening conditions. Context includes the internal influences on strategies, while the intervening conditions are broader, typically under less control of the participant.

In this study, there are two contextual variables that influence the strategies used by SSAOs: expectations from the president, and expectations from cabinet colleagues and student affairs staff. These variables exert pressure on how the SSAOs respond to the demands of their position.

**Presidential expectations.** One of the most significant influences on how SSAOs spend their time is expectations from the president of the institution. As an institutional officer, most of the SSAOs in this study report directly to the president of the college. Expectations from the president revolved primarily around the work that SSAOs engage with in the institutional domain. Participant #9 described the expectations of the president in this way:



I think the president also expects, and I think expects it of me and expects it of all the vice presidents, is we need to look beyond our area and, you know too often, some places you'll call it kingdom building, okay, how can I grow my area, how can I do more with my division, my unit, and when you get to the vice president level you need to be able to look beyond your own division and look institutionally and while yeah, it might be nice if this was here, institutionally, it's probably better if we did this. And that may mean less for my division but from an institutional standpoint from a, uh, trying to address our strategic initiatives, it's better for the institution as a whole instead of me continuing to fight for my particular division.

The expectation to have an institutional viewpoint was common. Participant #10 described presidential expectations very similarly to Participant #9:

I think he counts on me to be, when we're in the president's council meetings, we all have our president's council hats on so I'm expected to be a, be thinking institutionally and be thinking about advising him about what's best for the institution well beyond student life.

Presidents also have a high expectation around communication. SSAOs are expected to be a liaison between the institution and the students and the student affairs division. In conjunction, there is an expectation that the SSAOs will keep the president informed. Participant #10 said, "He certainly has the expectation that I know what's going on in student issues and I can flag those issues for him." Participant #7 described the importance of good communication with the president:

What does the president, the president wants, he doesn't want to be surprised. So he wants really good communication, really good transparency of communication with him in particular. The worst thing I could do would be to handle a problem, handle it really well, and never tell him that it happened.

Participant #3 confirmed the desire of the president to remain informed. She said, "I think the president's main expectation is that he's informed, there's no surprises and that he sees that things are continuously growing and improving."

The president's influence over the SSAO's time may vary, depending on the needs of the president. Participant #4 described how her expectations to engage with institutional work had expanded under the current president:

The responsibilities of the senior leadership under him are much heavier than the previous president. He really spends, we spend a lot more time together under this president to help operate the college, from a team perspective, which is interesting to do, but it's very different work than I used to do.

A third expectation, in addition to working institutionally and communicating well, that the SSAOs described is that they handle their division well and work to manage student issues within their division. Participant #5 explains this expectation:

The other expectation is obviously he wants me to be leading the student services portion of [the college] in a way that's going to recruit students, retain students, educate students, help prepare them for life after college, do something that's distinctive to help them want to market [the college] or feel good about [the college], so there's that piece too.

She went on to explain the expectation to handle things within her own division so they don't need to be referred to the president:

Well maybe I'll start with the president. Because, let me say this, I went to a conference three or four years ago, actually at [another college], they aren't far from where I am. But their president spoke to, [this college] had hosted like a student affairs drive in workshop. And their keynote speaker was their president. And he said, and I think this is so true, he said, I hate to tell you all this because you're in student affairs and you're energetic and you're excited and you're contributing to the education and lives of these young people. But do you know what my number one goal for you is? It's to keep the work off my desk. Keep the work off my desk because I need to be out there raising money and doing other things and I don't want to be solving judicial problems and someone got sexually assaulted and whatever. All the different things that are in my area. So I really think there's some truth to that, that his expectation of me really is to run this place so he doesn't have to be involved with the nitty gritty human dimension of this. Yes he can be out hob-knobbing with the students and socializing with them and having fun but he doesn't want to be dealing with problems. He doesn't want the parents of students coming to him with problems I haven't been able to solve. That's a major expectation, I don't want problems.

The expectations from the president are broad, including working at the institutional level, maintaining good communication, and managing the student affairs division well. Expectations from the president exert pressure on how time is spent,

because expectations of the president often take priority for the SSAOs. Participant #7 describes how important presidential priorities and expectations are on the life of the SSAO:

From my perspective nothing happens of substance at any of the smaller colleges or universities that I've worked at that aren't either something that the president wants to create or wants to allow you to create. Or, it's just...the influence of a presidency at our schools is just huge.

Knowing what is important to the president is an important task for the success of SSAOs. Participant #4 explained how knowing the president's interests and priorities influenced the work that she does:

[The president], he's a, with my chunk of the college, he's pretty hands-off. I know what things he's very interested in, so I make a point to make sure he's well informed on those things. Things that he's just said keep this stuff off my plate, I don't need to know the details of that. He likes to read the security reports every day, so I make sure I read them as early as I can to answer any questions that come up. That's just good management, managing your boss kind of thing.

While being aware of presidential expectations is important, SSAOs are also called upon to respond to direct requests for work from the president. These requests often take priority over other work that the SSAO is doing. Participant #1 said, "Clearly when my president says I need something or I want something, I'm smart enough to say, I think, I make sure I get that one done right away." However, she goes on to say that at times, negotiating work with the president is also important.

So in my own mental prioritization of tasks, things that come from the president I'm just gonna pay a little bit more attention to, but there are times that I think yeah that's not important, this [other work] is so much more important. I'm fortunate that I've worked with several presidents in my professional life who I've been blessed to say, "I know you need this, but here's this other thing that I have to get worked out first, and then I'll take care of that." And they've said, that makes sense, please by all means, deal with the suicidal student (Participant #1).

Participant #3 also discussed ways that presidential requests for work can impact how her time is spent. "The other thing that take priority is anything the president calls me and asks me to follow up on, so it might be a parent that's contact them without going through the other steps, so he'll call me and I'll have to deal with that." Being attuned to what aspects of the college work are important to the president and being able to respond to presidential requests places pressure on the time of the SSAOs. As noted by Participant #7, presidential priorities influence the work of the college as a whole, and the work of the SSAOs is no exception.

**Expectations from colleagues and staff.** A second contextual influence on the strategies in this study is expectations from other areas of the college, including colleagues and staff in the division of student affairs. While expectations from the president tend to revolve around institutional work, expectations from colleagues and staff are often in the other two domains of the SSAOs work. Expectations from colleagues, which for SSAOs are other president's cabinet members, generally cluster

around taking an institutional viewpoint, working collaboratively, and being a voice for the students. In discussing expectations from colleagues, Participant #9 says:

I have those kinds of expectations of cabinet and I'm sure those are kind of things they have expectations of me in the sense of again looking at things through an institutional lens. I do think that each cabinet member, we all, and I think the president expects, to carry your area. Try not to let your stuff get into somebody else's unless it absolutely has to. And other places I think for me is about building those collaborative relationships with other units and departments and how we can work together. I think those are some key things from other cabinet members.

Participant #4 describes the expectation from colleagues to be a liaison between the institution and the students:

I think they sort of expect me to be a voice for student/parental viewpoints, perspectives, and needs, when we're discussing topics that might impact that. So I think they expect me to be in touch enough with students and what they would want that we wouldn't make a decision at the cabinet level that would anger students.

The expectations from cabinet colleagues aligns closely with presidential expectations. Being attuned to the student body and issues that could affect the institution, working collaboratively, and managing the division well are the key expectations from colleagues. The similarities between colleague and presidential expectations even extend to the preference to resolve student issues within the division.

Participant #10 believes her colleagues “would very much like for me to make every student issue kind of go away. Not all of them, but I think most of them.”

However, expectations begin to shift when examining what the student affairs staff want and expect from the SSAO. While the president and colleagues have expected an institutional viewpoint, staff expectations feed into two main areas: to be an advocate for the division in terms of procuring resources and to serve as a connector to and interpreter of the larger institutional community. Participant #5 recognized the difference between what staff expect and what other colleagues and the president expect, in terms of where she focuses her attention.

For my own staff, I mean their expectations, they do want me to get them the resources they need to do their jobs well, and if I can't do that they do want me to at least talk with them, sympathize with them, listen to them then, brainstorm with them about how to go forward without whatever they thought they needed.

Participant #1 also identifies the differences in what staff expectations are. She responded, “No I think it's actually different. The kinds of things that are expected of my colleagues and my supervisor, the president, are really different than what's expected of me from the people that are in my student life division.”

One primary expectation from staff is to advocate for the division. Participant #3 described the expectations from staff as, “from my staff standpoint their expectations is just that I can help them in any way I can to be creative, to think of new ways of doing things to provide them the resources, budget wise to accomplish what they want to accomplish...” When describing how she tries to meet staff needs, Participant #4 said:

I get a lot of satisfaction from that, making sure people have the resources to do their job, and primarily because that's what they need me to be doing. They don't need me at the hospital at three o'clock in the morning. They really don't. They're good at it. We've got other people to do that. They need me to give them the tools, they need to be able to go out there and be able to have a laptop that works.

Another primary expectation from staff is to connect them to the larger institution. Aspects of this expectation are to be a good communicator with the staff and serve as an interpreter of what is happening on the larger institutional stage. Participant #9 described this expectation as a need to be informed:

I think they want to be kept informed about what's going on at the college and where things are going. I tend to be a fairly open person about explaining why we're headed somewhere. To me sometimes it's more important that people understand the why than the specifics of the what.

Participant #11 attributed the staff's desire for good communication to be a function of the size of the student affairs division:

From the people who work for me, I would say their expectation really is of open communication, because we are such a lean staff they want to have honesty, I don't sugar coat things, we had an issue where we had to lay off some staff members, and I told them as soon as I saw the handwriting on the wall, look this is probably going to happen.

Participant #2 agreed that having open communication was important to both her and her staff. She said, "What I hear from people that are part of student affairs, the directors that



they find very helpful is information on the broader college scene. And this last year's been nothing but the budget. I've been happy for folks that they've felt very, very informed." Participant #1 described the expectation for communication as going beyond simple communication, and rather serving to translate information from the broader institutional context. "I think they expect me to interpret things that come from senior administrators and from the president's cabinet and the president" (Participant #1).

The expectations from staff are very different than those of the president or cabinet colleagues. These differing expectations can often be in conflict. Participant #10 begins to highlight the conflict:

But you know they expect me to be a good advocate for the division, they expect me to compete for resources, I'm sure, they, there's a lot more focus on transparency now than there used to be, much higher expectations around transparency. Like we should know, we should know how you make budget decisions. Well.... 20 years ago I didn't expect the president to explain to me how the budget decisions were made, I might have liked to know, but I didn't expect it. And I think this generation gets miffed if they, if they're not brought into, at least informed.

Participant #1 was able to highlight the conflict in connection with budget decisions. When asked if she experiences conflict between the expectations for her role from different constituents, she replied:

Oh yeah, absolutely (laughs). I feel it most acutely around institutional budget decisions. When I'm wearing my VP hat, when I'm sitting at the president's

cabinet, and we're talking about how do you make the institutional budget, how do you take anticipated revenues and anticipated expenses, and make those equal to zero, you're we always want more than we have money for. So someday I'm going to work at an institution that has more money than it has wants. But I end up finding myself in a position where I have to say "we should cut x" and sometimes x is one of my babies, one of my programs, one of my responsibilities. And that's a tough place to be. And some of my colleagues at the cabinet are very, very good at saying to their colleagues "you should cut x. I'm not actually going to cut anything on my end, or not propose cutting anything on my end of the continuum." And I always feel this intense pressure between should I selfishly safeguard only the things that report to me, or do I get up here at 30,000 feet and try to think about what's in the best interest of the whole of the institution.

The conflict around budget was also an example used by Participant #9 in describing the conflicting expectations:

I think there's an expectation that you're going to get in there and fight for what we need. And explaining sometimes that while yeah, I agree with you, but this over here in this area is a higher priority. But clearly you have to have a few of your own little wins in that so staff do feel like you are fighting for them and supporting them and those kinds of things.

Participant #1 discussed the conflict around obtaining resources, but she also discussed the conflict that can arise around expectations for communication.

So another example there are things that I'm privy to, information that I'm privy to, and then I think okay, I know this and I could, you could say some things or you could work some things that would be advantageous to student life but you're really not in a position to be able to do that or say that, it would be wholly unethical and inappropriate and it puts you in this weird position because you're having a conversation with the people that you probably care the most about at the institution, the student life division, and you think I could save everybody a lot of heartache, but I can't really say what it is that I know or explain something because it's not information that I'm not at liberty to share, and you know, that gets to feeling really.... Challenging, bumpy, uneven.

Participant #10 also described how difficult it can be to meet the expectations of all three groups. She finds it to be most challenging to meet the expectations of her staff:

I guess I would say of the three areas, [staff] is the most, that group is the most challenging. Communicating with the presidents, meeting her expectations is like falling off a log, it's so easy. With my colleagues, I would say 90 percent of the time things are good. Every now and then an issue flares up and you have to deal with it. But dealing with my own division is the biggest challenge. Keeping them engaged, motivated, informed, happy. I don't even really go for happy. Happy is too high a standard. But basically feeling positive about things. I do try, but it's a lot.

These expectations, and the conflict that can arise due to the divergent expectations, exert pressure on the strategies SSAOs use to balance their time and what kind of activities they need to be engaged with, whether it is leadership or management.

The contextual issues that impact the strategies used by SSAOs in this study include expectations from the president, which can be significant and often take priority and expectations from cabinet colleagues and staff within the division, which can be in conflict with one another. These are factors that must be accommodated by the SSAO to accomplish work related to the role.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Intervening conditions are broad influences over which the participants have limited control. In this study, the intervening conditions are three:

1. institutional mission and culture
2. religious affiliation of the institution
3. the increasing regulation of higher education

These are all factors over which the SSAO has little influence or control, but impact their strategies in terms of determining how they spend their time and what activities take priority.

**Institutional mission and culture.** The mission and culture of the institution has an impact on the work the SSAO does. Participant #8 described how the student affairs division has worked over time to become closely aligned with the mission of the institution, and this has been used to define the work of the division:

Across the years we have talked about co-curricular education and ourselves as educators rather than service providers and extracurricular. So that we have tied the co-curricular programs and services that we offer very much to the mission of the university and the learning objectives of the university and have that somewhat as a litmus test so to speak as we are moving forward, how is that supporting the university mission so it's not seen as extra but integral to the students educational process and that we are seen as educators as well. So I've had a sense of moving forward that, I've had others who have shared that vision and I've been able to make it come alive in their staff and for folks to capture that vision as well. Over the years of being vice president that's one of the things we've worked very hard on and have made good traction with and are supporting the faculty and the curricular emphases of the university and building collaborative relationships that are supporting and seeing the academic mission as primary.

Again, the theme of the relational nature of the work comes through, and this SSAO discussed how her work has been directed at aligning divisional work with the mission of the college. Participant #3 also discussed how institutional culture and mission require a relational focus.

Probably the biggest thing is that I didn't realize how much power the faculty had. And to just embrace the fact that your leverage with faculty is not positional at all. It doesn't matter who you are, even the president at times doesn't have much leverage with the faculty. It was important for me to understand that early and it's

also for me to make sure my staff understood that early because it's a constant frustration for some people to know that you just can't tell the faculty what to do in pretty much everything. So it has to be a relational leverage. It all has to be about us developing relationships that are valuable enough to the faculty for them to come along, and either say yes to doing something or joining something that you're presenting or promoting that they're like yeah, we'll do that because we trust you or we think it's great or you've done your homework or we know you're working hard at it.

In the preceding excerpt, the SSAO is able to identify the value of relationship building in being able to accomplish the work of the division; therefore, relationship building becomes a foundational activity to being able to accomplish other goals that the SSAO might have.

Some of the SSAOs disagreed about the level of influence that institutional culture plays on their role. Participant #11 indicated feeling that institutional culture plays a key role in dictation the work of the SSAO:

I don't necessarily think that being a dean at one place would prepare you to be a dean someplace else, because every school has its own personality. And depending on the administrative structure, that's going to be big too. We're very, we're lean and mean over here. A lot of offices of one. But if you go to a bigger university they may have a full staff. They may have a series of a vice president, and then a dean, and then a series of assistant deans and then all the other people,

coordinators, that sort of thing. Here you have me, I've got two assistant deans, and I've got four or five directors, and that's it.

In contrast, another participant, who had experience at larger, public institutions, didn't feel that the institutional culture was as unique:

You know, the big school/small school, in my opinion, is a bit overstated, on both sides. Umm, when you work at a big school and to have somebody who's interviewing for a position and they're coming from a small school, the tendency is to look at it with some bias that says, oh wow, this person's going to be overwhelmed, they're not going to be able to handle this, they're just a small school, this is going to be too much for them. And on the flip side when you go from a large school to a small school, it's oh, they don't understand us, they're used to all this staff and all these resources this just isn't, you know, and to me they're biases that just don't hold a lot of water. And in my experience the differences have been far fewer than what most people would imagine

(Participant #9)

However, Participant #1 believes there are key differences between institution types. She argued that there is just a lack of knowledge about the small college experience:

One of the things that's so interesting about that is that you see large institution bias. I feel like somebody who understands and lives, and has had the lived experience of the small college, like in my task of understanding American higher education, I have this whole connection to small college, so I get what that's about, I've lived that, I've done that... And I think that I have this maybe more, a

greater willingness to understand all those different kinds of educational experiences. I think the bias is that when you grow up in the state university system and that's the only system you've ever experienced you think that's what higher education is about. I don't think there's as much of a push to understand the small college and the small college experience. I think you could very blissfully go through a master's program, a PhD in higher education, and not really grasp the diversity that is out there.

Other SSAOs agreed that the culture of the small, private, liberal arts college is unique and impacting their work. Participant #5 discussed her feelings that private, liberal arts colleges are significantly different than other types of institutions, and once again highlights the relational nature of the work:

I certainly think these small, private residential colleges are head and shoulders above any other type of education, community college, public institution, whatever. For training people, well not training. For opening up a person, um, to be able to consider different perspectives, embrace life as fully as they're capable of it, problem solve probably most effective, more effectively. I think just because you're open to more so you have more resources and you're able to just handle more. Be able to handle more, think more outside the box, just think more. I think these kinds of educations because of 24 hours a day, you're here 24 hours a day, the potential to be impacted by mentors is much more likely to happen here, and the mentors you're likely to be impacted by are genuinely good people devoted to people. I think the kind of people that teach at these institutions



are generally people who want relationships with kids, with students, they want this kind of lifestyle. I think often at the publics, they're doing research. I think, so you actually have people who much more likely genuinely care about you [as a student], and try to figure out who you are and how to move you forward than at any other kind of institution in the country. I really believe that. So the chance for an individual to grow here is significantly more. And to reach their potential, whatever that potential is, just significantly more.

Participant #2 described what it was like to try to discern the institutional culture when she first arrived, having worked at other types of institutions:

Where you might have found in kind of a bad way maybe for some people is some of that work is done for you at [a public institution] or the larger environments, or even at the two year school, because you don't really have that expectation of service. You don't have that expectation of care, you're part of this large group wandering around. You get pleasantly surprised at the service. So that was a little bit, kind of trying to adjust to what's the, and trying to decipher what's the norm here?

Participant #4 highlighted the difference between the work done by SSAOs at larger, public institutions and the work she does at a small, private liberal arts college.

[The SSAO at a large public university just retired]. And he's a close friend of mine. And I loved recommending the [large university], I would be proud if my daughter went there. Because [he] led a group of people who really broke the university down into, you know, bite sized chunks, manageable chunks.

Humanized the place. I think a student [at this large university] is very well cared for. I think we do a little bit better because we can on the base of scale... He retired and I went to his retirement party and they had like 6 speakers up there... These people, these high, these people that you see on the news, the athletic director was there, so these kind of famous people that you recognize at this thing. The president got up, the provost got up, the academic senate guy got up, they told these stories, he did a great job leading the commission on undergraduate education to study the advising system and make recommendation to the faculty \ senate to... And that was just such key work for the university to do. And I'm thinking man, at my retirement party if someone cites that, that would suck. (laughs). If they want to talk about a committee I got on. So we're standing in the back, if you're gonna talk about a committee at my retirement party, I'm not leaving. But that's the nature of the work, [for the SSAO at a large public university]. To make the most impact, you lead a commission to change the way that undergraduate advising is done. Okay. And he was perfect for that. And it's accepting that's what you do at a place like that. At [my institution], I found myself in a position, I'm in charge of academic review, who gets kicked in and who gets kicked out. There's a guy who, there's two stories, I'm only going to tell one, but there's two of them really bizarre stories that just happened this last year at graduation. One of them was a guy that had a five year break between his first three years and his last year and half. And it was because he needed to get sober... And this is the intimate relationship you have, I'm the dean, the chief

student affairs person so dealing with this kid because he's drug addicted, he's alcohol addicted, he's in trouble with the law, his parents are, he's a third generation kid, parents have been donors. Well parents weren't really donors yet, but potential. And this, he'd been an athlete. There's all kinds of drama around the kid and finally we booted him, and he left. I remember the last meeting I had with him and he told me he was stoned during it, later on he told me he was stoned. But I sat there and I looked him right in the eye and I told him, his mother was sitting here with him. I told him you can come back here and graduate, there's a path back. And when you graduate, I pointed out this cabinet behind you and there's only one picture of a student in there, it took him 7 years to graduate, and because he'd had a stopover in [a chemical addiction treatment facility], in the middle. It's the only picture I have of a student, it's on his graduation day with myself and another one of my colleagues who had a bigger role in him being successful coming. It's the most proud I've ever been of any student to graduate. You're going to be the second one when you get back here. I remember telling him that. He told me later, I remember you telling me that, but I was stoned. And I said, I'm not surprised but on your graduation day we're going to take a picture. So he came back, I mean he was gone, he got sober, he went to this kind of sober ranch in Colorado and then stayed there on the staff for three years. I ran into his mom at a Lutheran event of all things. And I said you know is he going to, does he want to come back? And she said I was hoping that you were going to be here because I want to talk to you about this... So I'd sent him

an email asking if he was ready to come back. He goes, I'm not ready, I really like working here at the ranch, at some point we can have a conversation. And finally he did, he came back and he graduated and stuff like that. I read the names at commencement and he walked across... and he walked across and gave me a fist bump as he walked across the stage. This guy graduates and walks across the stage and goes out into the audience. We had an indoor commencement because the weather was bad. And so when the commencement is over, we don't recess, everyone just sits there and it's just a big mass mob, and it's kind of awful. So I'm walking down the steps, and I see, I shouldn't have done this, but there were lots and lots, hundreds of people standing around, and I see him and I say "you owe me a picture." And people turned, because they heard me yelling from the steps, this was after commencement, and he turns to me and he says "you're fucking A right I do!" (laughs) So I've got this picture and I'm building a frame for it, and I'm going to send one to him and one's going to go into my cabinet. So that's the difference. Between somebody at my retirement party talking about a commission I led to improve undergraduate advising, and people who know that story. That's the difference.

**Religious affiliation of the institution.** Another intervening condition that is a facet of institutional culture is the religious nature of the institution. Within the ELCA schools, the strength of the religious affiliation of the institution varies, and the connection the SSAOs feel to the religious nature of the college varies as well. However, the religious affiliation of the institution does impact the work of the SSAOs. Several of

the SSAOs discussed how the ELCA affiliation impacts the environment at the institution. Participant #1 described the impact in this way:

I think that the values of this place resonated with me. The social justice bent that is important to us, that comes in part from our Lutheran heritage. The, and I say that carefully, because I'm not, I'm probably one of the lesser Lutheran advocates... I think it's fine but I don't always couch it in that language, but I appreciate the fact that when you look at our core values you see that strong connection to our roots and our heritage, part of which is being Lutheran. Those pieces resonate with me.

Another component of institutional mission and culture that impacts the work of SSAOs is what one participant referred to as an expectation of care that exists at private, liberal arts institutions affiliated with the ELCA. Similar to Participant #1, she discusses how the environment at an ELCA school resonates with her personally.

Certainly my work is influenced by the type of place [this] is. You know, I'm born, raised, and always been in a Lutheran church so that's always been part of who I am, so I have a strong orientation to being at a college of the church. I think, I didn't got to a place like this, but the academic, I've really had to reorient myself, because this isn't academically, this isn't my tribe. I'm really in awe of the level of the academic stuff that goes on here. So I think that being a high achieving academic institutions is a big deal, but I think the one that influences it the most on a day to day basis in how I think through it is an orientation to

attentiveness to students and families and the influence, and people that we care about.

In terms of key values that come from the affiliation with the ELCA, several of the SSAOs talked about being open to other faith traditions and ideas as being core to the institution. Learning about faith and spirituality, Christian and non-Christian, are key components of the curriculum, and that also impacts an openness to students from a variety of backgrounds. Participant #5 discussed the openness. She said, “Now I think what the ELCA ones do, from my experience, is that because of the Lutheran commitment to kind of an openness to everybody and all religions, I think they do it in a way that is very not off-putting.” Participant #11 talked about this openness and its impact on the environment at her institution:

So as a dean I try to model that but also you know coming from a school of the ELCA, we have a lot, our biggest population here are not Lutheran, they’re all Baptists. Not all, but many, many Baptists are the largest group of Christian students here. And there are times that there’s a conflict. Well, I thought I was getting this but I’m like, you know, this is the world, so... for people to understand that just because we are a school of the church doesn’t mean that we throw anybody away. A lot of times it’s because people don’t understand what Lutheran education is about. They just see Christian school or church school, they see that we have a chapel with a big cross on the top, so down in the south, many people equate that to being very conservative. And we’re probably one of the most liberal bunch of people I’ve ever met, as a faculty and staff. And we

have very conservative students, and very conservative faculty and staff too, but for the most part everyone is live and let live, let's empower these students to go out and do great things in the world, and accomplish and be what they are going to be. And people don't always understand that doing that does entail being very open to new ideas and things that we may or may not even agree with sometimes.

Working at an ELCA affiliated college also directly impacts the work of the SSAOs is in their ability to talk to students and staff about spiritual issues. Participant #2 described the influence of the ELCA affiliation on the culture as having a significant impact on the educational goals of the college:

Yeah, the thing I like about it, and it isn't like the heathen godless at [a community college], we didn't care about it. But it requires that you pay attention to people's growth around ethical, around spiritual, that you have that as part of the conversation. It doesn't have to be Lutheran. But you get to, you're actually kind of compelled to do it.

Other participants contrasted the work at ELCA colleges with other types of institutions. Participant #9 discussed the contrast between ELCA schools and public universities:

I think one of the nice things is unlike the public institutions the whole idea of spirituality and Christian values is not something that you have to hide or some will describe it, I don't necessarily agree with this term but some will describe it as being PC and not talk about that. Being part of a Christian college allows us to embrace the whole idea that spirituality is a part of the whole person. It doesn't

matter if you're Lutheran or Catholic or Muslim or Jewish, you know, that's an important aspect of students' lives and we are very intentional about addressing that aspect of students' lives. That was not something you would generally see at a public institution. You know it was education void of that. Yeah there were little samplings of it, but it's much more intentional here and I think that's healthy and that's really part of human nature, and to ignore that aspect of it, it's been nice to work in that kind of environment.

Participant #5 talked about using the faith connection of the institution to serve as a resource to students:

Well I think it certainly gives me resources to refer students who are in trouble or in need that I would not necessarily have. I can refer them to our campus pastor, I can refer them to our Catholic nun, even if they aren't Lutheran I can get some assistance to get them hooked up with even, again, if I have a Muslim student, our campus pastor I mean again because it's probably Lutheran feels like he has to be in touch with all the different denominations in the community so he can immediately connect a student with that kind of need with somebody at the mosque or whatever.

Using the connection to faith and spirituality in talking with students was a common theme. Participant #2 talked about how speaking with students about their spirituality or religious beliefs can help them reflect on their behavior in ways that is meaningful for the student:



So that's one of the differences about it, this isn't drag the cross out every time you have a conversation with people, but it's to say, in the ways that it's appropriate or the ways it makes sense, you know, like in the discipline kinds of, what are your values? If you think of yourself as someone who is Christian, if you think of yourself as a strong faith adherent, what might your faith inform you not about the legal requirement, but adhering to being a positive member of the community.

Being able to talk with students about issues of religion and spirituality is a part of the SSAO's work. Working at an ELCA affiliated institution also gives SSAOs an opportunity to interact with students around faith issues in another unique way:

And there was a while that I was an advisor to one of our religious groups. I suppose that could happen as a state institution too but I don't know if I would have done it as the dean of students. But that opportunity is there too and I'm not sure if it would have been looked at as well at a state institution. (Participant #5)

As well as impacting their work with students, some of the SSAOs discussed how the religious affiliation of the institution impacts the work they do in the institutional domain. Participant #5 described several ways that the work of the president's cabinet is influenced by the faith tradition of the institution. She describes the work of the campus leadership team as having a values component that she thinks may be absent at public institutions:

It is the case that at cabinet meetings throughout, back [with our former president] and now [with our current president]. And I don't know if this would be the same

at a state institution or not. I mean there are times that we really grapple with, I mean, what is right and what is wrong. Do we take a stand on abortion or not? Do we take a stand on gay marriage or not? As a college or as individuals, I don't know if you know, but [our college] has a chapel, so in March, we allowed two lesbians to be married there. That was a big step. Paper covered it in the community, all that. And that was a huge decision. And um, I guess I'm just, I don't know if state institutions, I don't think there would be a debate, the state would have to be what the state does. I guess I'm just saying the religious nature of the college has caused lots of conversations and decisions to be made that have had to go back and be rooted in some religious doctrine of some kind.

She described another institutional decision that was impacted by the faith connection of the college, pointing out how these kinds of decisions impact the organizational community as a whole:

So there is a fair amount of, I remember even going back to when we decided to have benefits for same sex partners. That was huge. I mean the board of trustees had to discuss that. And I'm sure we discussed that differently than a state institution, I'm just sure we did. Because you bring in your religious roots. So it does color a lot, well not a lot, but significant decisions that are being discussed in the culture we're also discussing that and bit by bit taking stands or making decision and empowering people or not empowering people based on some religious commitment. And that impacts me and that impacts everybody who works here.

There was recognition among many of the SSAOs that the level of connection to the church is not the same for all of the ELCA schools. What it means to be ELCA affiliated can vary greatly from institution to institution. Participant #8 attributed some of the difference to geographic location. She said, “So, the institution’s mission and priorities, which has a Lutheran, institutions have some similar veins around the country but we’re in different geographic areas so they get played out differently.” She went on to expand on the differences among the ELCA schools:

For what it means for us here, and we just had a publication, our faculty just had a publication on the core elements of Lutheran higher education and what are those values and things that we really aspire to hold up as part of the educational experience. When the author was asked, it was a committee that put it together but when he was asked by other ELCA folks who were out here this summer and they were using it when they said “can we use this on our campus” and his response was “I don’t know. Because I don’t know if these are your principles. These are the ones here for us in [our location] and our history and all that makes sense for us.” I think there’s great diversity among the 26 ELCA schools that we’re really different in many ways and what that Lutheran part means for each school is a different question that somebody is going to have to answer.

Another SSAO reported that the connection to the ELCA was very low at her institution. Similarly, she attributes this lack of connection to geographic location.

So I think the fact that we're an East coast school and the fact that most ELCA schools are Midwestern schools is part of it, I think that our history, we're just not all that Lutheran. And it's really, truthfully in name only.

This lack of identification with the ELCA changes the culture related to religious and spiritual development. This SSAO did not talk about those aspects being a part of her role.

The affiliation with the ELCA does act as an intervening condition, impacting the strategies used by the SSAOs in response to the central phenomenon. The influence is seen in direct work with students and the way that institutional decisions are made.

**Increasing regulation of higher education.** SSAOs need to be well versed in the changes in regulation and how it impacts their work. This influence tends to be one that most SSAOs do not enjoy spending time on. Participant #10 discussed how compliance and legal issues are taking more time. She said, "And that, obviously there are compliance issues, more and more, legal and federal regulation compliance, so I'm expected to be up on the latest regulations and compliance issues" (Participant #10). In follow up, she goes on to say:

I think that the whole compliance, legal, federal legislation-regulation piece is a fairly significant and really growing, even in the last five years, maybe even two years, is a growing piece of the work that we do... But that piece is really growing. So I'm thinking it's like Title IX, Violence Against Women Act, Clery, SaVE, those are the main ones right now that are really on people's minds, but the

level of federal, and state, but particularly federal intervention in our work is totally unprecedented. It's happening at a level I've never seen before.

Other SSAOs talked about how the compliance and regulatory issues are woven into other work they do, and the complexity and difficulty that can bring to the role.

On occasion we've had parents that don't understand that their students should have to be accountable for some things and don't understand that their students are actually adults. So we've had students who continue to drink or continue to do really bad things and the parents are like well, it's somehow our fault. And then they kind of hang it over your head and we're going to sue you or we're going to call [the Office of Civil Rights] or whoever. So having to make changes to nice simple, clean cut policies because a parent has made a complaint, a baseless complaint, to the [United States] Department of Education or the Office of Civil Rights and we have to come up with a nice legalized policy that's 14 pages long when the old policy was a half a page long. Now students won't ever go to the new policy because it's too long to read. So that drives me nuts.

(Participant #11).

Participant #3 described her involvement in the institutional accreditation process as influencing how her time is spent. Accreditation is another form of external intervention into the higher education arena. "And then there's other things, just like we're going through the HLC accreditation process right now and I was assigned as the [chair one of the criterion], so I'm having to write the criterion stuff and do all the gathering of those kind of things" (Participant #3). Participant #10 also talked about

accreditation and assessment compliance issues that influence how time is spent. “And then there’s the whole kind of compliance assessment piece.”

Context and intervening conditions play a role in affecting the strategies used by SSAOs in this study. Contextual factors such as presidential expectations and expectations from colleagues and other staff members are important factors internal to the environment. Institutional mission and culture, the strength of the connection to the ELCA, and increasing federal regulation are intervening conditions.

### **Strategies**

There are strategies the SSAOs use in being able to manage the various expectations of their role while accounting for the context and intervening conditions. While the strategies selected by each SSAO may vary based on the nuances of their particular environment, there were some themes that emerged related to what helps SSAOs be effective in their role. The strategies used by the SSAOs include being relational in their work, managing their calendar, expanding their work schedule, and responding quickly. The strategies were described as part of Theme Five, but this section will add depth to the description above. These strategies help the SSAOs to manage the conflict that can arise in their role and the multiple expectations they face.

**Being relational in their work.** Student affairs work is highly relational, engaging with others to make plans and decisions. This relational nature was evident in the amount of time that the SSAOs spent in meetings. Time in meetings was significant for the SSAOs. Participant #9 put it very clearly when she said, “Well, probably the thing that dominate my schedule the most is meetings.” Participant #6 described the

meetings she participates in on a regular basis. “I’ve got 13 direct reports, I would have meeting with about three of my direct reports and other, I sit on three or four faculty meetings, so I would typically have a co-curricular meeting, an assessment meeting, that I would have with faculty members.” Participant #10 also talked about the role that meetings play in her work. She said, “A typical week is filled with meetings. Um, I mean absolutely filled. So I’m looking at my calendar now, there’s about 3 hours of white space in my calendar.” She went on to describe how meetings and her calendar dominate her daily agenda:

Um, how do you balance...? Well, the calendar you know it’s just so driven by the calendar. It’s just so driven by meetings. And so if you have a meeting on, with presidents council, that’s where you’re going to be. So I don’t know if everyone’s calendar is like that, but mine is 95% just calendar driven. Just showing up at the right place, where you’re supposed to be, with some idea of what you want to try to accomplish in that time together.

In this preceding excerpt, Participant #10 is able to highlight the relational nature by expressing the goal of what can be accomplished together. Participant #1 also describes meetings as consuming a large amount of her time:

And then just an obscene amount of committees and meetings. Some that are standing, some that are just scheduled randomly, some of them are really specific to student life division, some of them having nothing to do with student life division, I feel like I spend a lot of my time going from meeting to meeting to meeting and that consumes a lot of my day.

Participant #6 discussed informal meetings that she attends, and identifies them as a way to build connections with others on campus. In this case, she describes how she interacts with faculty around student concerns, and how those interactions serve a relational function:

We have a program, an early alert program that would allow our faculty, to, they're concerned about students, whether that's more active... In the afternoon as opposed to calling on the phone or emailing I'll walk over to faculty offices, I find it some of my most productive hours during the day are spent just to walking down faculty office, the faculty office hallway and catching faculty. And from a relationship building it helps the relationship but to also be able to talk about student concerns in ways that you really don't share that information via email, the particular details.

In addition to spending time in meetings, the work is relational in terms of being visible to the campus community. Many of the SSAOs described being visible on campus as being important to their work in helping to build or foster relationships with students or staff. Participant #2 described being visible as a key component to supervision and connecting with students.

I try to map a lot in the fall and get to student government twice, get to the Pan-African student, Asian, American Indian, weekend college, football game, basketball game, kind of front load in the fall, so that if there's things happening in the spring and I'm not, people have felt tended to. Because I believe that you



sort of supervise by showing up. So in a typical week there might be one or two things that I'm going to make sure I'm getting to them.

Participant #9 discussed the importance of and expectation to be visible on campus. Being visible to students often means attending events in the evenings or on the weekends. She said:

Well, one is you have to be visible, you have to go out and be there so I attend a lot of evening events, I think one of the nice things about a small liberal arts college is we have one cafeteria. I can go in and sit down at a table with any group of students and just have a conversation with them and those are great ways.

Participant #6 described the time she invests to attend events as a way to show support to students, but also to other staff and colleagues:

In some of the same ways with colleagues, I will go to some events that they've invested a lot of time and energy and programming and events or even a faculty member that's doing something, I just simply want to go to be supportive of them. And then with those that I supervise, I would even put our hall director staff into that category, I can't expect them to be at events if I'm not willing to make the investment myself to be at those events.

Attending events and being visible on campus is an example of how the work of the SSAO is relational. This relational nature requires a significant amount of time spent in contact with others, either in meetings or by attending events on campus. However, being relational in their work is one of the strategies SSAOs use to be effective.

**Managing calendar.** Having a busy schedule and multiple priorities requires the SSAO to be thoughtful about managing his or her calendar. This strategy helps SSAOs prioritize how their time gets spent, because it would be easy for the day to day trivialities to take over any unscheduled time. Participant #9 describes how she works with her calendar to try to maintain time to work on important initiatives.

In reality, what I find is that oftentimes my schedule is kind of, I'm subjected to my schedule and trying to wrestle control back over that schedule to make sure that I've got those blocks of time to put in those chunks of projects is really what I try to do, so usually the Friday before the next week we kind of lay out what's already on my calendar and I try to find time to put in those big chunks and try to get my secretary to work around that.

Leaving some unscheduled time is one way the participants manage their calendar as a strategy to balance their work. Participant #2 said:

We try to keep two to six hours each week at least that are unscheduled, for the walk up. For the, "my dad just died", "I think I might have to drop out of school", "I just had this run in with this prof, I can't be in the class anymore because they were insulting to me" to I've got this other walk in crisis to whatever the kind of the deal is with it.

Participant #3 also discussed how she tries to leave time open in her schedule for things that might arise unexpectedly or to catch up on work.

Tuesday afternoons are a more free afternoon. I don't typically schedule any meetings on Tuesday afternoon so if something fills in, if there's discipline things,

if there's just stuff that usually comes up after having meetings for a day and a half, that's when I'll sit and get things caught up.

SSAOs understand that their time is in demand, and when they have been inaccessible for a period of time, it's necessary to have some unscheduled time to respond to needs and expectations that may have come up. Although the recognition of this reality is there, Participant #1 highlights how difficult it can be to manage her calendar in a way that allows her to meet all needs.

Sometimes, I know that I'm so much less accessible than I used to be, in terms of individual student appointments. There are a lot more student that come into the office that come in with the idea that "Oh I want to meet with [the dean]" and then they kind of get shuffled, oh, you can't see her for days, you should meet with one of the assistant deans. So I know I have a lot less of that on my calendar, but when there is a student who completely and legitimately needs to see me or who you know, some way or another gets by the front desk (laughing) those are really important priorities for me.

Managing the calendar is tricky, but the SSAOs are often able to utilize this strategy to be able to manage their multiple priorities.

**Expanding work day.** Many of the SSAOs discussed extending their work day to outside the traditional business day to accomplish the tasks needed. By completing tasks in early morning, evening, or weekend, this allowed the SSAOs some flexibility to respond to things that arose during the day. Participant #5 described how she uses an extended work day to manage the multiple priorities:

So at night I'm going to prioritize what needs to happen tomorrow or the next day and what can be maybe put off for a week or two and I'll pick a night when I've got some free time and I'll do that thing that can be put off a week or two and that's when I'll do it. But during the school year I don't get much accomplished other than the daily stuff during the day. (Participant #5)

Participant #11 also described the need to expand the work day, both to allow for flexibility during the day but also to achieve some balance between work and personal life:

A typical week, um, usually depending on what's going on, I usually will be working from anywhere from 50 to 65 hours a week, sometimes a little bit more. I take a lot of work home with me and it's not because I can't do it here but because of having a family at home, I'd rather, when they go to bed, I stay up until 2 a.m. doing emails. I'm a real stickler with things like that so unfortunately I sit a good bit trying to get emails back out to people, trying to answer questions and trying to be there. My door is always open so I'll have, you know, if schools in session I'll, a day won't go by where I won't have 10 or 12 students who will come in either to chat or ask questions or have concerns or whatever, so they'll come in, the door stays open all the time, so I get interrupted a lot.

The SSAO position is not a nine to five job. To accomplish the tasks in ways that are acceptable to those in the role and those with whom they work, they need to expand their day beyond a normal business day.

**Responding quickly.** As noted in the open coding description, SSAOs are called upon to respond quickly and be able to switch their focus many times throughout the day. Responding to student crises, attending cabinet meetings, speaking with parents, and working on divisional tasks such as supervision and budgeting can all be included in a single day. This strategy is consistent with the literature on SSAOs at small colleges (Westfall, 2011). Due to the diversity and complexity of tasks, to be successful, SSAOs need to be able to respond quickly and move on to the next task.

### **Consequences**

The SSAO job is multifaceted and calls upon the SSAOs to use a variety of skills. They work within a variety of domains: working on the institutional level, working with the staff within student affairs, and working with students. They are also called upon to engage outside of the institution to work with the Board of Regents or serve as an institutional representative in the community. By utilizing leadership and management, and employing the various strategies to manage their time, SSAOs are able to be effective and enjoy the work they do. Participant #3 sums up the SSAO experience in a way that resonates with the tone of other interviewees:

I would think if you're a person that did not embrace the multifaceted approach, I don't know if approach, the multi-dimensions of this job, it would drive you nuts. Especially [here]. I don't know if you've looked and seen the different directors that I have here, I think I have 5 direct director reports but then there are other staff that I oversee. We contract out food service, security, and health services, but I'm the liaison for all three of them with our CFO. He does all our contracts

and stuff, I do the student part of it. All the different things like registration, orientations, the discipline, the residence life, leadership development or student activities, there's all sorts of different things that I get to oversee and there's not a part of it that I don't like. That to me is the fun part of it, that every day that I come to work I get to have a chance to be a part of those different things. And that energizes me where some people might look at it and go, I only like two or three of those things and hope the rest of it takes care of itself. But I've really, I've found a job that because there's so many different things to pay attention to, plus I get to sit on the president's council and I get to be a part of, like we just had a retreat last week and we talked about our campus improvement plan that's we're going to have for the next five years. We just set a new strategic plan in place that I got to be a part of. So I get to be a part of the big system and a lot of the decisions there but then I get to come and you know kind of run my own part of the organization as well. For some people that might be a lot to do, but it's something that really fits what I think are my gifts and skills to be able to do that.

### **Assertions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the SSAO at small, private, liberal arts colleges affiliated with the ELCA. Determining the constellation of tasks that their role entails and how they balance those tasks was one of my primary interests in studying this phenomenon. After reviewing the data and constructing a grounded theory, there are three theoretical assertions that emerged in response to the research questions.

The three research questions in this study were:

1. To what extent do SSAOs perceive their roles to require both leadership and management, and how are those two skill sets balanced?
2. How do SSAOs at ELCA colleges perceive the complexity of their role?
3. How does the context of working at an ELCA school affect the SSAO's understanding of the role?

There are three corresponding assertions that respond to these research questions.

1. SSAOs act as boundary spanners.
2. SSAOs must be agile in their work to effectively balance their roles.
3. SSAOs can exert their own influence over their roles to derive meaning from their work.

The following section will develop the above assertions in more depth.

### **Boundary Spanning**

One of primary questions of this study was whether SSAOs could balance the activities of both leadership and management. While it became clear that the SSAOs do commit actions that fit in both realms, it also became clear that trying to define their roles simply as leadership or management is problematic. In a study of pro-vice chancellors (analogous to the position of academic dean), Philbeam and Jamieson (2010) argue that using a boundary spanning framework to describe their work may be more accurate. Higher education institutions, like other organizations, have specialized areas for the purpose of attending to the work required by that area. Divisions of student affairs generally deal with the lives of students outside the classroom, including the programs, facilities, activities, and structures that support them. Dividing institutions into

specialized areas, such as student affairs, academic affairs, and business affairs, for example, leads to boundaries being formed around these units. Defining specialized units can help with the efficiency and effectiveness of communication within the unit, but can provide challenges to communicating with those outside the unit (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981b). Boundary spanning activity is defined by information sharing across boundaries, and boundary spanning individuals are those who are consulted on within-unit work matters and who have substantial communication outside the unit (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981a). It requires individuals to be able to not only bring new information into the unit, but also to share information from the unit to external audiences (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981b).

In a study of SSAOs, Pruitt and Schwartz (1999) found that all of the SSAOs studied engaged to a high degree in boundary spanning activities. The SSAOs reported that communication and interaction intra-organizationally (within student affairs), inter-organizationally (with other units within the college) and with students were essential to their role. Extra-organizational (with entities outside the college) communication and interaction were slightly less important, but still present (Pruitt & Schwartz, 1999). The data from this study are consistent with the findings of Pruitt and Schwartz on the role the SSAOs play in boundary spanning activities. The SSAOs in this study are required to operate at the institutional level, in which they cross inter-organizational boundaries. They feel a responsibility to act institutionally, attending to the expectations of the President and their colleagues. In the divisional work domain, SSAOs are required to work intra-organizationally. They must communicate, lead, and manage the division of



student affairs, also attending to their expectations. The third arena for boundary spanning activities identified by Pruitt and Schwartz (1999) included communication with students. It is clear from this study that the SSAOs feel an obligation to work with and for students, supporting their needs. In fact, for many of the SSAOs in this study, working with students was the most enjoyable and meaningful aspect of their work. Finally, the SSAOs in this study discussed the expectation that they work extra-organizationally. Working with the Board of Regents, although strongly connected to the institution, should be seen as work external to the organization. In addition, the SSAOs discussed expectations that they serve as institutional representatives, working in the community, however community is defined. Participant #10 described it this way:

There's another piece in there that comes, and I don't know how it plays in, but there are, um, maybe it falls into the institutional work, there's an expectations that as an officer of the college, there's an expectations that you're doing external work in the community.... But the expectation that you represent the institution, it might mean that you're on the local board or committee, or have to go to city council meetings, or that kind of thing. It's a little to do with institutional work, but really has more to do about external relations.

In addition to the domains in which SSAOs act, there are certain activities they engage in as boundary spanners. One of the key roles of boundary spanners is information processing (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981a). SSAOs are expected to translate information from outside the student affairs division. To have access to the information in other areas, SSAOs must build relationships across boundaries. Participant #9

identified this as an important activity when she said, “And other places I think for me is about building those collaborative relationships with other units and departments and how we can work together.” Participant #10 had a similar perspective:

You know, you’re supposed to be a good team player here... So we try not to elevate everything to the vice president level, our directors have to solve issues together, but if things get to the vice president level, we’re definitely expected to play nicely together in the sandbox together, solve problems together. We don’t have a lot of tolerance for high territoriality and just being, you know, it’s a high standard of professionalism and collaboration.

Forming collaborative relationships helps SSAOs to bring information back to the division. Communicating information gained through these collaborative relationships back to the division is an important part of being a boundary spanner. Often, this information or knowledge needs some translation to be meaningful to those to whom it’s being communicated. Participant #9 talked about this as helping staff understand the rationale behind actions and decisions. She said, “I think it’s getting them to understand the why. You can’t always share every little thing but I tend to err on the side of that expectation is important to them understanding the big picture and where this fits.”

SSAOs who serve as boundary spanners also need to convey information from within the unit to others outside. Philbeam and Jamieson (2010) identify one of the key criteria of boundary spanning is having a resource that is attractive to others. In this case, the information that SSAOs have about students is the commodity that is valuable to others. Being in touch with students and being the liaison between students and the

institution was noted earlier as an important expectation that the SSAOs need to meet. SSAOs need to be able to effectively communicate with those outside the division about student needs and activity being conducted within the division.

One direction that information needs to flow is to the president. Participant #7 described his strategy of communicating with the president:

I inundate him with information all the time, even more than he may want to hear, but I think he appreciates it. So I over communicate, because I know he, even though, I may hit him with 10 things that he doesn't care about, but if I hit him with the one thing he does really care about among those 10, then it's really, and I can't judge exactly sometimes when it's gonna get priority to him so it, I over communicate with my boss.

Participant #10 also discussed the importance of maintaining good communication with the president. She said, "I think the president has the expectation that, first of all that he will never be surprised. So I think he has the expectation that he will be kept informed of the things he needs to know about related to student life."

Philbeam and Jamieson (2010) present a model of the activities required from those in boundary spanning role. The expectations of the SSAO align with these activities, and are represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Philbeam and Jamieson’s Boundary Spanning Model with SSAO Activities

Boundary Spanning Activities	Corresponding SSAO Activities
Communicate convincingly and effectively with a wide array of stakeholders	SSAOs must communicate with the president, cabinet colleagues, faculty, staff in the division, students, parents, Board of Regents members, and members of the community
Network – initiate, develop, and maintain relationships with others for mutual benefit	SSAOs must create fruitful relationships with the president and cabinet colleagues who frequently have influence over budget resources. Must also be able to create relationships with students and staff within the division, for the purpose of sharing key information back to stakeholders.
Have a resource that is attractive to others	SSAOs have access to information about students. They are often seen as the primary liaison between the institution and students’ lives outside the classroom.
Capacity to feel comfortable with the tension implicit in a boundary spanning role	SSAOs face tension among their varying responsibilities and expectations. Often, the expectation from the president and colleagues is in conflict with the expectations from staff.

**Being Agile**

In response to the increasing complexity of their role, it became clear that the SSAOs in this study needed to be agile in response. The SSAOs were asked how they balanced all the demands on their time and the expectations from multiple constituencies. Many SSAOs described this as being a challenge. Participant #6 was able to articulate the difficulties in being able to effectively prioritize the work:

Well my first response is that I would tell you that I don't prioritize very well. I really don't. I tend to allow some of the more lengthy projects or those topics that require a little more reflective engagement to fall down the list and there's so many times in the morning, I said I don't take appointments until 9, I tend to avoid doing those things even though that's probably the best time of the day to do it. I knock off as many short tasks as I can, whether or not those are important or not.

Participant #4 also described the challenges with prioritizing work effectively when in the position of both vice president for student affairs, needing to attend to institutional issues, and dean of students, needing to attend to the needs of students.

How did I prioritize it? Not exceptionally well. Again because I had this action orientation. I might be working on something for the president and a kid walks in, I drop the president's thing. But you can't do that. So you have to pick it up again later.

In this example, Participant #4 hints at a strategy that many of the SSAOs reported using: expanding their work day.

Being agile is one way that SSAOs help to manage their role. Being able to respond to things quickly and move onto the next issue was an important skill for balancing the demands of the role. Participant #8 described the need to move quickly from one issue to the next:

What does it look like? It looks like an air traffic control tower. Having never been in one. But you have multiple things coming in at you at the same time,

differing levels of urgency and priority and you need to be able to quickly move from one to another and sort of disengage from one as you move to another so you can be responsive and move on. You can't really linger. If you linger on things in the midst of while you're trying to deal with another one you're not going to be very effective.

Another SSAO described how the demands of her position as both vice president and dean of students became overwhelming, and the institution decided to make a change and split the roles of vice president and dean. She also highlights the need for agility.

But that's a pretty dramatic change for me, because I had all that stuff, and in all honesty, it was getting to be too much. Not because, I was always able to do that, to be able to move quickly from topic to topic. I said it's kind of like tennis, you just have to keep hitting the balls back over the net. Which all worked fine, and again primarily because I had really good people, but what was different was the president, we had just done a strategic plan, there was stuff the president wanted on retention, about some health issues about some alcohol education. He wanted me involved in some broader things about employment at the college, staff development more broadly on campus. The responsibilities of the senior leadership under him are much heavier than the previous president. He really spends, we spend a lot more time together under this president to help operate the college, from a team perspective, which is interesting to do, but it's very different work than I used to do. And also I'm not here in the office to keep hitting balls

back over the net. So stuff, we weren't operating optimally. I don't know that we missed anything but we weren't operating optimally and I was getting worn out.

When discussing how their work gets prioritized, SSAOs discussed other ways in which they need to be agile. There are times when the SSAOs may need to respond immediately to a situation, regardless of what they may have scheduled. This occurs most often when students are in crisis. When discussing how she prioritizes the various tasks she has, Participant #1 said, "So anything that I would call crisis. A student with a mental health issue, a student who is in crisis is always a first responsibility, a first priority for me." Participant #6 highlighted a general priority he places on her work with students:

But you know, the final analysis, those things that I attend to first, those that are the priorities are those that require I take action on behalf of a student or a student request I'll always do those first.

Participant #11 was able to discuss the need for agility in a particularly stark way:

The hard part is sometimes for others to understand how I have to balance it. I'll be scheduled to go to a meeting with the president, and then I won't show up. And they're like why aren't you showing up for meetings? Well, I had a student in my office telling me they were going to kill themselves later today. So, you know, so trying to, and so one minute I'm working on a convocation for somebody and the next minute somebody comes in and tells me a student has been run over by a train, and I wish I could say that was a joke, but that's not a joke, and of course they got run over at four o'clock in the morning. But there are

things that all of sudden take me from doing something very mundane, signing check requests, to “oh my gosh, we’ve got to go deal with this, a student might have a gun”, and then 20 minutes later I’ve got to get ready for a banquet for the community service awards.

Participant #9 discussed how, although she tries to plan his schedule to be able to accommodate the multiple priorities, there are emergent issues that can impact how her time is spent.

We meet on a daily basis and she kind of lines things up and we may have to move and juggle some things around to accommodate whatever the current crisis is, and you know that could be a student in crisis, that could be some other problem that needs immediate attention, but also making sure I’m allocating that time to different projects.

Another aspect of work with students that requires flexibility and agility is work with students who violate the college’s student conduct code. For one SSAO, this is work that can be cause for agility. She said, “Yeah, obviously discipline. Discipline, as you know, is never scheduled. As you know it just happens and when it happens you have to deal with it” (Participant #3).

The SSAOs in this study had to balance a variety of pressures on their work and how their time is spent. Being agile and responsive to things as they arise was one of the strategies that allowed them to find some balance in their role. Moving quickly from one thing to the next and responding to crises as they arise are the primary mechanisms used by the SSAOs.



## **Exerting Own Influence**

While it is clear that the SSAOs in this study are faced with balancing a multitude of expectations, sometimes conflicting, in doing their work, they also feel a sense of influence over their positions. Many SSAOs talked about feeling like their days were driven by their calendar and the number of meetings they need to attend. Even within those pressures, Participant #1 talked about the feeling of influence she has over her role.

So I feel my boss, the president, driving [how I spend my time] a little bit, and I definitely know that I have staff who will be demanding, who will say “I just need you for two minutes” or whatever. And I suppose those shape who else has control, but at the end of the day and maybe part of it is just how I choose to look at my world I feel like those are by and large my decisions.

This sense of personal control over their work was echoed by other participants. Participant #5 discussed her feelings of having control, yet recognizing that some expectations lack flexibility.

Um, well I feel like I have quite a bit of flexibility personally. Although obviously if the president, if you have a major project gong on like a new facility or new planning process, you just have to put the time into it. You’re not going to, you’re not going to not do that. Anything that the president or board of trustees directs you to do, you’re going to do. You really don’t have tremendous flexibility. The work with students, the crisis work with students, or even the conduct issues and so forth, those I have probably more, and I could choose not to

be involved, or let's say I could choose to limit my involvement, that's probably a better way to say it.

Exerting personal control is viewed as autonomy by one participant. Participant #4 said, "However, I'm in relative control of how my professional life goes... In my work, I do have that level of autonomy."

The SSAOs in this study are able, to an extent, to choose the way they spend their time. They can choose the activities they find most meaningful. For some, that is spending time working with students or student affairs staff members. For others, that is engaging in work at the institutional level, engaging in strategic planning and institution-wide decision making. Participant #10 discussed the level of control she has in spending her time in activities that are meaningful for her. "I think that, I think there is pretty good alignment between what I like to spend my time on, and what I do spend my time on. I don't always think there's good alignment between what others expect me to be spending my time on and what I spend my time on." However, even though she recognizes that there may be times when she may not be meeting others' expectations for how her time is spent, she also speaks to the level of control she has in making changes to her time allocation.

The biggest guilt I have about my work that I think about quite a bit is the, the dichotomy on the one hand that I'm representing students, I'm advocating for students, I'm the chief student affairs officer. Versus the fact that I have extremely limited contact with students. That dichotomy is really significant for me personally. So I think that people probably deal with that in a variety of ways.

I've never quite, I feel like I, and I think part of this is getting older, and part of it is getting, I don't know, I just feel like I'm drifting further and further away from students. Part of that is the, things, the division has gotten bigger, it's gotten more complex, the institutional piece of the work, that's more interesting to me, that's more challenging, I enjoy that part more, therefore I put more into it sometimes, therefore I get more opportunities there. I have a very strategic vision, that's probably my greatest personal strength. So this thing about, the part of the work that's focused on, crisis, yes, boom. Of course, I'll be there. Bring people together, lots to think about, but just the day in, day out of meeting with students groups [can be challenging]. So I think that's the biggest dichotomy for me. Not so much what I like doing, but what I feel I need to do to have any credibility whatsoever (Participant #10).

Although meeting with students may not be the most meaningful part of the work for this SSAO she recognizes that it's important to be connected to students, and she is able to adjust her time in ways that allow her to feel more connected. She goes on to describe the strategies she has used to reconnect with students, including advising student government, advising a student trip, or teaching a class. She was able to identify a variety of options that she could choose.

### **Summary**

Although the concepts of leadership and management are helpful in understanding the SSAO role, the boundary spanning framework provides a more complete picture of the role of the SSAO. They are called upon to build relationships within their division,

across divisional boundaries, and across institutional boundaries. Having good communication skills is critical to being effective in building networks across institutional boundaries. They also need to be comfortable with the conflict that can arise among their multiple roles and responsibilities, and find ways to manage those tensions.

In addition to working as boundary spanners, SSAOs need to be agile in their work. Their schedule doesn't allow them to linger too long on any one task, or they run the risk of not meeting the multitude of expectations placed on them. Exerting their own influence, they are able to choose to spend time in the areas of the job they find most meaningful. This allows them to stay fresh in their roles and for some of them, maintain longevity in the position.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Conclusions**

Higher education is becoming more complex, and this is certainly true for the work of the SSAOs in this study. They are expected to work effectively in three domains, responding to the needs of the institution, the staff within the division of student affairs, and the students who they serve. They must meet these needs in a context that is becoming increasingly impacted by federal and state regulations, and advances in technology mean that the SSAOs are always available.

Working within the three domains can present role tension for the SSAOs. Expectations from the president and cabinet colleagues require an SSAO to take an institutional view of the role, helping to lead and manage in ways that are best for the institution as a whole. However expectations from the staff within their division require that they act in ways that are supportive of their work. Advocacy and resources for the work within the division of student affairs are high on the list of expectations from staff. In addition to balancing these often-conflicting expectations, SSAOs must find ways to stay connected with students so that they can work to meet the needs of students and create programs the services that help

them develop outside the classroom and help the institution maintain a focus on serving students.

To examine the experience of SSAOs who work at ELCA-affiliated colleges, a grounded theory approach was employed. Through open coding of interview data, the codes applied to the data were reduced to 19 categories supporting five themes.

1. SSAOs have a complex role and competing expectations can create role tension.
2. Forces within and outside the institution exert pressure on how SSAOs prioritize tasks.
3. Person-environment interaction influences how SSAOs approach their roles.
4. SSAOs exercise both leadership and management in executing their roles.
5. SSAOs use a variety of strategies to be effective in balancing their work roles.

Moving next to axial coding, categories were examined to determine connections among the categories. From this analysis, a central phenomenon emerged in response to causal conditions. The central phenomenon that emerged in this study is that SSAOs use a variety of skills, including leadership and management, to balance the complex demands of their role. The causal conditions for this phenomenon include increasing complexity of the role, the need to play multiple roles, high demands on their time, and institutional size.

The strategies used by SSAOs to balance these complex roles include being relational in their work, managing their calendar in ways that allows them to attend to the three domains of their work, responding quickly to issues without lingering on any one task, and expanding their work schedule. Using these strategies, which are impacted by both contextual influences and intervening conditions, helps the SSAOs do their work in ways that are effective and meaningful to them.

Being able to effectively respond to these demands requires a myriad of skills from the SSAO. One of the purposes of this study was to determine if SSAOs can effectively balance requirements to act as both a leader, encouraging and supporting change, and a manager, ensuring smooth operations while maintaining the status quo. Kotter (1990) argues that most organizations today, due to their complexity and need for change, have a need for both a high level of leadership and a high level of management. However, there has also been debate in the literature around leadership that argue that one person cannot effectively serve as both a leader and a manager, given their different goals. Kotter (1990) provides useful definitions of leadership and management that delineate the two practices as separate activities. He describes leadership as being focused on creating change, and this is done through setting direction, aligning people toward the new direction, and motivating and inspiring others. In contrast, management is described as maintaining the status quo through such activities as planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, and controlling and problem solving (Kotter, 1990). The SSAOs engaged in all of these activities within their different domains of work as presented in the previous chapter. When examining their work domains and Kotter's

description of leadership and management, there is a measure of alignment between the two models. Work completed by the SSAOs in the institutional realm tends to align with leadership; work done with students leans toward management. Work done on behalf of the division of student affairs requires both leadership and management in nearly equal proportion. The distribution of leadership and management activities based on the domain of work is represented in Figure 2.

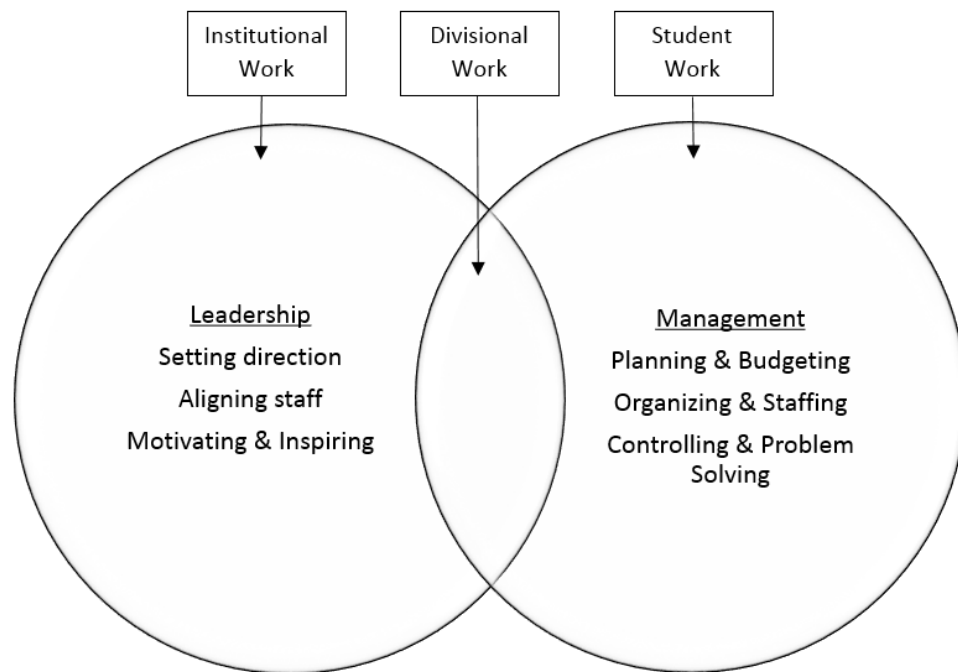


Figure 2. Kotter’s Leadership and Management and the Domains of Work

While one of the initial goals of this study was to examine the ways in which SSAOs use leadership and management, and the alignment of their work with Kotter’s model is interesting, the data were not sufficiently represented through this model. What I found was that although SSAOs do need to use both leadership and management skills



in their work, classifying their activities simply as leadership and management is incomplete in accounting for how they work effectively within a complex environment. After evaluating the grounded theory, three theoretical assertions emerged that more fully explain how the SSAOs in this study need to work to be effective:

1. SSAOs act as boundary spanners.
2. SSAOs must be agile in their work to be effective in balancing their roles
3. SSAOs can exert their own influence to balance the role to be meaningful for them

Acting as a boundary spanner means that SSAOs must work across departmental, divisional, and institutional boundaries in their work. Because of this, it is critical that they develop or possess effective networking skills to be able to foster relationships among many different individuals. Boundary spanning also requires the SSAOs to have good communication skills (Philbeam & Jamieson, 2010), being able to share information about students and the division outwardly, while bringing in information from different areas of the campus, and even information from outside the institution. This communicator role often requires SSAOs to interpret and translate information and make connections between groups. SSAOs need to perform these functions, because they have a unique resource that is attractive to others: access to and information about students. SSAOs are often viewed as the conduit between other areas of the institution and students, so as part of their boundary spanning role, they need to connect with students so they can help students fully engage and access the institutional environment and resources.

Being agile requires the SSAOs to move quickly between tasks. Often, their calendar controls their time during the work day, but crises can intervene to impact how they need to spend their time. Because SSAOs are asked to play multiple roles, and expected to be actors on many different fronts of the institution, they need to be able to refocus quickly from one task to the next. SSAOs are expected to be able to transition from working in the institutional domain to working with students or dealing with a staff issue. Being agile allows SSAOs to meet the expectations that come from a variety of sources.

Although SSAOs have multiple roles, expectations from a variety of sources, and immense demands placed on their time, they do report a sense of control over their work life. Being able to exert their own influence – exercising their own priorities and interests – helps the SSAOs feel a sense of meaning and satisfaction in their work. To an extent, SSAOs can choose what they become involved with, how they choose to engage with students, and the direction of the student affairs division. This sense of control, real or perceived, allows the SSAOs to spend time in the work activities from which they take the most meaning. These activities vary from individual to individual, and yet, they are able to find meaning and enjoyment in aspects of their work.

While much of the data gathered through this study confirmed what was already known about SSAOs at small schools, this study was able to further elucidate the role of SSAO at small colleges affiliated with the ELCA. The findings related to work domains, strategies, and the theoretical assertions add to the body of knowledge related to this topic.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

Conducting this study was important for a variety of reasons. Westfall (2006) notes that while most SSAOs work at small colleges, most receive their academic preparation from large public institutions. It was clear from this study that institutional context influences how SSAOs execute their work. The data in this study support Hirt's (2006) research that asserts that different institutional types have different cultures that may call for different skills, aptitudes, and attitudes. These findings can be used by a variety of entities when considering how to best prepare SSAOs for success in their roles.

**Implications for SSAOs.** The findings of this study could be useful to those who are considering assuming a role as SSAO at a small, religiously-affiliated college. Understanding the nature of the culture and its unique characteristics is important in helping the SSAO transition quickly and effectively into the role. The key components for SSAOs to consider are institutional mission and the influence of the religious affiliation on the campus culture. While this study explored the impact of ELCA affiliation, it is reasonable to expect that other denominational affiliations would have an impact on culture. What seems to be important is the strength of the connection to the religious tradition. The SSAOs in this study felt a responsibility to educate the whole person, including a focus on the spiritual development of students. The religious affiliation also impacted the way institutional decisions were made; often, reflecting on the faith tradition of the institution or recognizing a moral component to the decision at

hand became part of the decision-making process. Understanding this dynamic is important for individuals new to the role.

In addition to being aware of cultural issues that may make the experience at a small, religiously-affiliated college unique, SSAOs should also consider a self-assessment of the skills needed. An important skill that emerged from this research was the ability to be agile, thinking quickly and moving rapidly from one activity to the next. Having long periods of uninterrupted time to work was not common for the SSAOs in this study, unless they utilized time outside of the regular business day. The SSAOs in this study needed to use time before and after the regular work day, as well as weekend time, to accomplish administrative tasks necessary for their role. Many SSAOs saw their position as a lifestyle choice, not just a job. Participant #6 summed it up well:

The response is that to be in this role at our type of college, to be able to enjoy it, and to be able to be on the top of your game for a number of years or in other words to have some longevity, you need to be able to view your work not as a job, but as a calling. It isn't about compensation, if you get caught up in beginning to account hours that you've working during the day or working during the week already, you're doing the wrong thing. It's, you know, I think to really be effective in this role you have to view it again not as a job but as a way I live, the way I spend my time. You get refreshment simply by walking into the office or coming to work. And really having pride in doing what you do at the institution.

In addition to being able to be agile and feeling comfortable working beyond the regular work day, aspiring or new SSAOs need to have a level of comfort with working as a

boundary spanner. Being willing to work with others at the institution (the president, cabinet colleagues, faculty and staff) in addition to student affairs staff and students, is a requisite activity. Effectiveness in boundary spanning includes a need for good communication skills, a certain level of comfort with the tension that comes from working within different domains, the ability to network, and understanding of one's role as a representative of students (Philbeam & Jamieson, 2010). SSAOs can assess their capacities in these areas, and seek further development, if needed.

**Implications for graduate programs.** About half of the SSAOs in this study took a traditional pathway to the SSAO role, which included pursuing graduate study in student affairs. While the content of these programs wasn't something that the SSAOs pointed to in terms of being an important part of their preparation, the graduate school experience oriented them to a way of thinking about their work in ways that have been helpful to them.

Recognizing that many graduate students will become employed at small institutions, graduate programs can do a better job of exposing students to the differences in institutional types. Hirt (2006) highlights the differences between institutions in her research, but there are others (Tederman, 1997; Westfall, 2006; Westfall, 2011) who explore the experiences of small college deans, study of which could be helpful preparation for those considering careers as SSAOs. Graduate students considering a deanship or considering work at a small college could be advised to read these works, as well as the results from this study, as an introduction to the role and the environment.

Graduate preparation has played an important role in the development of the student affairs profession (Nuss, 1996). However, the SSAOs in this study pointed to their graduate preparation as being a necessary hurdle that would allow them to be competitive in seeking an SSAO position. There was little discussion of the program content being meaningful in helping them be effective in their roles. How do student affairs graduate preparation programs need to change to become relevant to those moving into positions as SSAO? For the SSAOs in this study who came to the position through a non-traditional route, they cited gaining an understanding of institutional and student affairs issues through other experiences as helping them feel prepared for the SSAO role. Graduate programs could consider courses that highlight institutional differences, an introduction to the work of and departments in student affairs, and courses in higher education more broadly to help students in these programs be prepared for upper level positions within student affairs.

The Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1996) argues that student affairs professional need to be experts on the needs of students. While this is still a critical competency, graduate preparation programs should also strive for flexibility in the curriculum that would allow them to address current issues in higher education. For example, courses in managing and using technology, legal issues in higher education, and the political landscape of higher education are current issues that are impacting the work of SSAOs that could be addressed through graduate preparation.

**Implications for professional organizations.** “Student affairs as a profession has, and will likely to continue to, attracted those whose backgrounds do not include

completion of formal study in the field” (American College Personnel Association, 2007, p. 4). Because there is no one clear pathway for those aspiring to the SSAO position, it is important to not rely on graduate programs as the only way of preparing individuals for these positions. Many of the SSAOs in this study got to their positions through what might be considered non-traditional paths. Without exposure to student affairs work or graduate preparation in student affairs, SSAOs can benefit from professional development opportunities targeted at helping them prepare for or acclimate to the role. NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) currently offers a symposium for women aspiring to become SSAOs and an institute for men and women already in the position. ACPA (College Student Educators International) presents an institute for aspiring SSAOs. Components of these experiences include reflection on personal strengths, learning about the role, and considering where one might be best suited to serve (American College Personnel Association, n.d.; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, n.d.). Professional organizations can play a critical role in helping to prepare SSAOs for success in the role.

A unique role that professional organizations can play is helping to educate professionals around issues of institutional fit. Continuing to incorporate new data from research such as this can help to better represent components that may be difficult to incorporate into graduate study, such as acclimation to institutional type and culture. Many professional organizations have embraced their role in helping to develop professionals around issues of institutional fit, particularly related to the small school experience. However, what has been less represented is a focus on work at religiously-

affiliated colleges and universities. From personal experience, I have observed there are often misconceptions about what it means to work at a religiously-affiliated college. In this study, it was clear that the SSAOs did not feel that it was the institution's role to indoctrinate students or staff, but rather to foster the spiritual development of students while respecting a variety of faith traditions. Helping aspiring SSAOs consider the mission of religiously-affiliated colleges could better prepare them for the unique aspects this orientation lends to the college environment. Because many individuals considering the SSAO position are unlikely to have had experience at a religiously-affiliated college, using professional development opportunities to expose them to the unique characteristics is important.

In addition to helping SSAOs (aspiring, new, or incumbent) think about differences in mission and culture based on institution type, professional development opportunities can help SSAOs learn about the nature of the work. In this case, helping SSAOs understand the domains of the SSAO role, as well as the skills needed to be successful, can be important preparation for success. Incorporating a reflective session or self-assessment activity within these professional development opportunities, targeted at assessing comfort with and development of skills and abilities to work in these areas, would be critical to SSAOs considering work at these kinds of institutions and being successful once they are there.

**Implications for colleges and universities.** Finally, the results of this research holds implications for colleges and universities. As noted earlier, hiring the right people is critical at small colleges (Westfall, 2011). Because SSAOs serve as part of



institutional leadership teams, their potential to impact on the institution is significant. Selecting an SSAO who fits with the institutional culture and mission is critical. Small, religiously-affiliated colleges recognize that institutional fit is important, and often strive to assess this in candidates for all positions. What is less likely is that institutions are assessing candidates on their ability to work in the different domains and their ability to execute the critical skills of boundary spanning, agility, and exercising their own influence to manage their positions. Those who have responsibility for hiring the SSAO, namely the president and members of a search committee, typically do not have experience as an SSAO. They may have worked with or for an SSAO in the past, but may view candidates through their own lens. For example, the president may seek to find someone who supports the president in his role, who will “keep things off his plate”, and who will focus on the institutional and presidential priorities. While it was clear from this research that those are important tasks for the SSAO, they are different from what the student affairs staff expects, which is support for the work of the student affairs division. And as likely as it is that the hiring authorities at institutions may not understand the full scope of the SSAO role, the candidates themselves, if they do not have previous SSAO experience, may not fully understand the breadth of the role. This pinpoints the critical importance of educating hiring authorities about the expectations of the role so that they may assess candidates accurately.

Additionally, it was clear from this study that there is no archetypical preparation for the SSAO role. Although a candidate may not have direct experience in student affairs, with the right perspective and collection of experiences, they can still be effective

in the role. Looking beyond simply direct education and experience, hiring authorities can look for transferable experiences, such as serving on leadership teams, previous experience in a boundary spanning role, and sympathy for the work involved in student affairs.

In conjunction with educating the staff at colleges about the role of the SSAO for hiring purposes, these results can help orient presidents (or other supervisors) to the role. Again, it was clear that the expectations that presidents had for the SSAO were occasionally in conflict with what others expected or what the SSAOs felt was important for them to be spending time on. While presidents do not need to alter their expectations, they can frame them within the context of what is now known about the SSAO role. The president can set forward expectations for building networks across campus that can help the SSAO build a foundation for their boundary spanning role.

The results of this study can be useful in a variety of practical ways, including how SSAOs are prepared for the role, what institutions should look for when hiring an SSAO, and how presidents can effectively orient and interact with SSAOs.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This study was intended to be exploratory in nature. Study of the experiences of SSAOs at small, religiously-affiliated colleges is sparse, as is research on the processes of how SSAOs balance the multiple roles that comprise their positions. The results of this exploratory study provide a strong foundation for an agenda of further research expanding on the findings presented in this paper.

It is clear that the framework of leadership and management is insufficient to describe the work of SSAOs. The boundary spanning framework provides a much richer description of the work of the SSAO, encompassing the fact that they must cross a variety of boundaries, internal and external to the institution, in carrying out their roles. In addition, there was evidence in the data that taking a traditional path to the SSAO position was unnecessary. Several SSAOs were hired for their positions without any direct experience or education in student affairs. Yet, these SSAOs seemed as skilled at boundary spanning as those who had experience or education in student affairs. Research should be conducted on how SSAOs learn boundary spanning skills. Williams (2002) argues that there has been a dearth of research on the individual actors who serve in boundary spanning roles because the research has focused on the organizations in which boundary spanning occurs. Some of the skills identified as being critical for boundary spanners are relationship building, communicating and listening, empathizing with others and resolving conflict, and developing trust (Williams, 2002). Further research could explore the level to which SSAOs possess these skills and the processes by which they were developed. Knowing this information could help in the development of training programs or could be shared with presidents and those who supervise SSAOs as they help to orient new SSAOs to their complex role.

While boundary spanning is a helpful and interesting construct to understand the role of the SSAO, it bears many similarities to the framework of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is a concept that is has been difficult to define, but a key element of intercultural competence is the ability to view the world from others'

perspectives (Deardorff, 2011). There is a link between this skill, which is necessary in developing intercultural competence, and the skills needed as a boundary spanner.

Williams (2002) describes boundary spanners as being “characterized by their ability to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies. This is motivated by a need to acquire an understanding of people and organizations outside their own circles – to acknowledge and value difference in terms of culture, mind-set, profession, role and ‘gaze’” (p. 110). In higher education, different sectors have been described as having different cultures and different lexicons, so being able to interact and communicate effectively across institutional boundaries resembles the actions of culturally-competent individuals. Are there correlations between high levels of intercultural competence and the ability to be an effective boundary spanner? Future research should explore the similarities and differences between intercultural competence and boundary spanning activities.

A third area of further inquiry is related to effectiveness. While the SSAOs in this study seemed to be effective in their roles, no data were gathered to assess their level of effectiveness as assessed by others. Exploring how use of boundary spanning skills, agility, and exerting one’s own influence interact with perceived effectiveness of the SSAOs could be another productive line of investigation. Is one aspect more important than another? Do different colleagues, possibly including the president, subordinates, peers, or students, view one set of skills as being more influential on their view of SSAO effectiveness? These are questions that could be studied with further research.

A fourth line of inquiry could explore the findings of this study at other institution types or with other senior leadership positions. There is some evidence to suggest that vice president for academic affairs (VPAA) positions may require boundary spanning activities (Philbeam & Jamieson, 2010). Further inquiry could explore if this is true for VPAAAs at ELCA affiliated colleges and universities, as well as examining if they experience the same kind of role conflict experienced by the SSAOs in this study. Research could also explore whether the results found in this study are consistent with those at colleges affiliated with other religious denominations, or at other small colleges that are not religiously affiliated.

Finally, this study highlights that there is a still a paucity of research on the effectiveness of graduate preparation in student affairs at the doctoral level. Many of the studies that examine the efficacy of graduate programs have focused on Master's level preparation and entry-level or mid-level professionals. Further research needs to be conducted on how well doctoral programs in student affairs prepare senior level administrators. Study of this topic could help graduate programs and the field of student affairs respond to the argument about whether student affairs is a true profession, with specialized knowledge and skills that require specific graduate training.

### **Final Thoughts**

SSAOs at small, private colleges affiliated with the ELCA are required to be “standing in the doorway” between many constituent groups. They are called upon to serve the institution, their division, and the students, as well as serving and responding to external constituents. This boundary spanning role requires them to be effective

networkers, good communicators, and have a level of comfort with the tension that comes with responding to diverse constituents with competing needs. SSAOs must serve this boundary spanning role in an increasingly complex environment.

Private higher education is in a precarious position. The rising costs of college, the public's growing concern with the effectiveness and value of a college degree, and the growth in online and for-profit educational institutions all pose risks to private four-year institutions. Small colleges need to spend their money wisely, and they need staff in leadership roles who can meet the expectations of complex roles. Hiring and training staff, especially those who hold a senior leadership position, is costly to institutions, so making good investments is exceedingly important. Having more thorough knowledge of the SSAO role and the skills necessary for success, can help institution make wise investments in staff who can serve their institutions well during these turbulent times.

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A  
Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT**

**TITLE:** *Role Complexity in the Position of Senior Student Affairs Officer*

**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** *Jasi O'Connor, doctoral student at the University of North Dakota*

**PHONE #** *701.238.8330*

**DEPARTMENT:** *Department of Educational Leadership*

**STATEMENT OF RESEARCH**

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

You are invited to be in a research study about the complexity of the role of the senior student affairs officer because you are a currently serving in this position. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of how senior student affairs officers balance the complexity of their roles.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

You will be asked to participate in two individual interviews with me that will last between 60 and 90 minutes each. You will be free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.



## **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

The risks associated with participating in this study are expected to be minimal. It is possible that some participants may experience some discomfort during the interview if sensitive topics are discussed. You may stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any questions without any penalty to you. If you feel any distress after the interview, I encourage you to seek the support of a professional counselor. Neither the researcher nor the University of North Dakota will be financially responsible for any professional counseling sought by you.

## **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, I hope that you experience some benefit through an opportunity to discuss your experiences as senior student affairs officer. In addition, it's possible that you or others may benefit in the future from the results of this study.

## **WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

Every effort will be made to schedule the interview(s) in such a way that no additional travel is required of you. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

## **WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?**

The University of North Dakota and I are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board, and my faculty adviser for this project.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by using a pseudonym in all interview transcripts. Any personally identifying information will be changed to protect your identity. Any interview recordings will be kept solely by me and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. You maintain the right to review and edit interview transcripts and audio recordings at any time.

If I write a report or article about this study, I will describe the study results in such a manner so that you cannot be identified.

**CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?**

If you have any questions, you may ask them now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Jasi O'Connor at (218) 299-3872 during the day and at (701) 238-8330 after hours or you may contact my faculty adviser, Margaret Healy, at (701) 777-4391.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

## Appendix B Interview Questions

### *Interview One*

- Please tell me about yourself, your background, and how you came to be a SSAO at this college?
  - What are the key experiences that you feel prepared you to become a SSAO?
- Describe a typical day or a typical week.
  - What things do you tend to prioritize or respond to more quickly?
- What expectations do others have for you? How have you learned about these expectations?
  - Supervisor
  - Colleagues
  - Those who report to you
- When have you felt most successful?
- Describe a time when you felt pulled in multiple directions.
- What is a time that you have struggled in your role?

### *Interview Two*

Interview two will focus on asking the participants to make meaning of their experiences, as well as getting their response to the initial data analysis.

Appendix C  
Open Coding Results: Code, Category, and Theme Chart

**Theme One: SSAOs have a complex role and competing expectations can create role tension**

<b>Expectations – from President</b>	
look beyond my area	alert to student issues/concerns
follow up/follow through	stay current on legal issues
keep him/her informed	manage division well
communicate	think institutionally
<b>Expectations – from staff</b>	
stay out of their way	be a guide
be available day or night for support	interpret information
integrity	give direction but allow autonomy
connect staff to resources	open and honest communication
help them accomplish goals	keeping staff engaged
leadership	transparency
advocating for division	
<b>Expectations – from colleagues</b>	
looking through an institutional lens	avoid acting in conflict with other areas
find solutions that benefit the whole institution	play nicely in the sandbox
share the student perspective	make student issues go away
give due diligence	be a team player
be open and honest	

<b>Increasing Complexity</b>	
dabbling in a lot of areas	compliance issues
technology	dealing with attorneys
increased stakeholders	fundraising
technology means you're never really gone	construction projects

<b>Institutional Work</b>	
what's best for the institution	benefit of the whole college
accreditation	strategize about change
work on diversity	strengthening connection to Lutheran church
interpreter	big picture
liaison between students and institution	influencing institutional success
power	creating the future
leadership team/cabinet	being part of the collective voice
connection with other VPs	institution wide efforts
presidential expectations to work institutionally	shaping big decisions
work with Regents	creating new programs/facilities
work in community	Working on university stage
setting institutional priorities	strategic planning
impact change	emergency management
institutional budget	representing institution
30,000 foot level	

<b>Divisional Work</b>	
promoting work of staff	honesty
procuring resources	communicating to staff
adding resources	advocate for division
staff support	introduce professional standards
staff mentoring	staff accountability
connection staff to institution	setting expectations
operationalizing institutional vision	meeting with staff
delegating	complaints about staff
promoting staff work	performance evaluations
creating a team	being kept in the loop
personnel management	staying on top of what's happening
management	helping students through your people
supervision	help staff understand why
helping staff see big picture	program review
helping people see where they fit	getting the right people on the bus
communicating vision	

<b>Work with Students</b>	
talk with parents	be visible
help a student on an individual basis	emotional connection
advising student religious organization	create an environment open to students
being on call	talk students down
problem solving	gather student input
attend student events	open door
create solutions	meet with student senators
problematic student behavior	student discipline issues
mental health crisis	advice or guidance
suspending a student	advise student government
seeing 4 or 5 students a day	host dinner
sit with students	

**Theme Two: Forces within and outside the institution exert pressure on how SSOAs prioritize tasks**

<b>Presidential Priorities</b>	
frustrating or unproductive requests	things that come from the president
be the face of things/visibility	presidential priority
understand and support strategic initiatives	president's influence on the environment
high demand to process information	knowing what s/he cares about
retention	managing your boss
when president says "I need something"	

<b>External Pressures</b>	
college liability	report for Regents
federal and state regulations	accreditation

<b>Students</b>	
student requests	mental health crisis
discipline	student crisis

**Theme Three: Person-environment interaction influence how SSAOs approach their role**

<b>Career Influence</b>	
mentors	undergraduate involvement
fit with educational mission	choose the environment (higher ed)
influential colleagues	early experience

<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	
work as vocation	remaining calm
people over tasks/meetings	seeing self as servant leader
students as a priority	passionate about liberal arts education

<b>Skills Needed</b>	
staying current with students	common sense
desire to serve	problem solving
connecting	strategic thinking
talking to people	communication

<b>Preparation for Role</b>	
exposure to functional areas	work at a variety of institutions
professional development opportunities	time working in education
work at small colleges	mentors
exposure to institutional culture	previous experience in similar role
experience at the institution outside student affairs	focus on being a practitioner
work at larger colleges	undergraduate experience at liberal arts college
educational preparation	experience working at liberal arts college
broad base in student affairs	other student affairs work
having success	graduate preparation
making mistakes	non-student affairs experience
experience outside of student conduct	no single path



<b>Institutional Culture</b>	
values	intentionally inclusive
social justice	importance of vocation
liberal	embrace spirituality
exposure to faith	moral education
openness to everybody	focus on mission
shared values	pay attention to growth around spiritual development
ministering	influence on institutional decisions
grapple with right and wrong	student support resource

**Theme Four: SSAOs exercise both leadership and management in executing their roles**

<b>Leadership</b>	
setting vision	influencing change
mission	communicating priorities
talk about values	have the connections/network
make things better	system approach of connectivity
sustaining momentum	build networks for staff
solving cultural problems	getting people to see the big picture
aligning people	vision gives common point of reference
guiding people	help people see where they fit
set a direction	strategic goals provide focus
ask people to be active in a certain direction	ensuring a fit with vision/values
having vision	clear about vision when hiring
interpreting the horizon	strategic priorities
interpreter	strategic planning
share information from broader scene	clearly sharing vision
evaluate culture	make stuff happen because of title
influencing change	knowing institutional culture

<b>Management</b>	
helping parents understand goals	case management
parent liaison	managing projects
connect staff to resources	hire, train, supervise
be available to staff	supervision
support staff work	performance evals
advise student government	personnel issues
keep problems off the president's desk	accountability
help people do better	setting expectations
giving advice/guidance	establish meetings
problem solving	paperwork
help students with issues or problems	bring resources
how we will fulfill vision	manage budget
see how we are moving forward	situational leadership
meetings with staff	using staff expertise
deal with problems	personnel decisions
dealing with staff turnover	operationalizing vision

**Theme Five: SSAOs use a variety of strategies to be effective in balancing their work**

<b>Being Relational in Their Work</b>	
influence versus power	network
knowing what influences people	meet face to face
create relationships	

<b>Manage Calendar</b>	
not getting locked into meetings	blocking time
saying no	making lists
fitting in time	using time not in meetings
goal setting	having enough people
delegating	

<b>Expand Work Schedule</b>	
nights and weekends	early morning
work as lifestyle	work schedule
evening commitments	work long stretches
create work/life balance	

<b>Respond Quickly</b>	
triage	time sensitivity
goal setting	hitting tennis balls
triage	not linger
juggling	plan strategically
air traffic control	

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