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People Leaders and Change Managers: Perspectives from the Middle

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People Leaders and Change Managers: Perspectives from the Middle

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the
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“PEOPLE LEADERS AND CHANGE MANAGERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MIDDLE,” a Doctoral research project prepared by JOHN REGIER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and professional identity formation of four non-academic middle managers from small, private universities in the United States. Given the lack of peer-reviewed research into non-academic middle leaders in the university setting, this study aimed to expand the understanding of the challenges and motivations of the role. Personal interviews were conducted to explore how participants experienced the professional role of middle manager and how they understood their professional identity as they manage and/or lead through significant change in the university context. The research highlighted the participants' commitment to serving students and the alignment crafting the participants used to see their professional identities as student-centric. The conversations uncovered the compassion and empathy these leaders had for their teams. They took great lengths to care for them while still striving for quality work. The middle manager role was shown to be prone to burnout and the participants employed strategies to persist. The findings of this study suggest that middle managers would benefit from pursuing professional identity development, networking, and self-care. The study will also serve as a snapshot in time of the challenges of change management during the COVID-19 era. Further research could involve revisiting participants two years after the pandemic to compare how participants' behaviors and identity changed over time.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Presidents, vice presidents, executives, and provosts make up the strategic apex of universities, and they are paid to cast a strategic vision for their institutions' health (Fugazzotto, 2009). Middle managers are subsequently accountable for supporting the strategic decisions and helping employees understand and follow those directions (Davis et al., 2016; S. G. Marshall, 2012). They build and maintain a vertical link between the upper management and staff (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; S. G. Marshall, 2012; Pugh et al., 1968), which connects top leadership with the ground-level knowledge helpful for strategic decision making. Middle managers deliver key data to the top including evidence of control of the people and processes below them (Sims, 2003). Middle managers often find themselves pulled between the strategic and operational layers of a university (Mintzberg, 1998; Pugh et al., 1968). Yet implementation of the desired changes rests on the shoulders of managers in the middle of the organizational hierarchy (S. G. Marshall, 2012). In order to understand the impact of this model for universities in times of change, it is worthwhile to understand the administrative middle manager role and place in higher education.

The position of the middle manager is most clearly defined from a hierarchical perspective, but it lacks clarity in the everyday, conflicting demands of the top and bottom level (Branson et al., 2016; Do & Nuth, 2020; Sims, 2003; Thornton et al., 2018). These opposing interests collide in the middle where the manager absorbs frustrations from both directions (Belasen & Belasen, 2016). This discrepancy in expectations highlights why middle managers feel sandwiched between the leadership and workforce of the university (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; S. G. Marshall, 2012).

Leadership tasks middle managers to drive employee work efficiency (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011; Davis et al., 2016; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; S. G. Marshall, 2012). To increase efficiency, the middle must manage process disruption (Daniels, 2016), organizational evolution (Franken, et al., 2018), and resistance to change by staff (Hellawell & Hancock, 2001). Beyond managing change and supervising performance, middle managers ideally mediate conflict (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011; Szekeres, 2004) and attend to emotional needs of employees (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; Geer, 2014).

Hotho (2013) writes that “speaking of management thus always means speaking of change management or the management of change” (p. 366). Change management has been a constant theme in management research over the past 40 years (Hotho, 2013). However, the challenge for today’s leaders is to manage increased expectations and responsibility for change management while staff and resources are reduced (Szekeres, 2006). It would behoove me to acknowledge that this study coincides with the global COVID-19 pandemic which has forced education institutions into academic, technological, social, and financial change (Baer & Duin, 2020).

Responding to a changing environment is how universities survive, and the manager is in the middle of that change process. Middle managers are critical for success (Belasen & Belasen, 2016), essential in nature (Clegg & McAuley, 2005), vital to fulfilling the mission of the university (Rosser & Javinar, 2003), and even important to academic achievement (S. G. Marshall, 2012). In turbulent times in higher education, middle leaders fulfill a particularly pivotal role in managing change (S. G. Marshall, 2012).

As important as this position may be, middle managers consistently report a lack of appreciation and recognition (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Johnsrud et

al., 2000; Szekeres, 2006). Unreasonable workload, timelines, and pressure from the top (A. Floyd, 2016; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001; Szekeres, 2006), lead to stress (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Volkwein et al., 1998), cynicism (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013), burnout (Belasen & Belasen, 2016), and high turnover (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Coupled with the threat of layoffs, hiring freezes, and restructuring (Wilson et al., 2016), middle managers can feel vulnerable (Hellowell & Hancock, 2001; Sims, 2003).

Themes emerged in the literature about the discontent of being pulled between the top and bottom layers, the challenges of leading in the middle, and the lack of long-term successful engagement of middle managers. Granted, there were numerous studies of managers from the faculty ranks who may find the managerial role a disempowered detour on their academic career path (Franken et al., 2015). To faculty, middle management can seem like a “poisoned chalice,” yet career administrators can see the role as the “holy grail” of opportunities (Thornton et al., 2018, p. 208). For this reason, upper leadership has steadily moved away from career academics to professional managers to fill these roles (Fugazzotto, 2009; Hotho, 2013). These managers increasingly have graduate degrees and leadership experience (Szekeres, 2011). They understand middle leadership is an important step in their career development (Franken et al., 2015).

Overall, organizational effectiveness improved in conjunction with the quality of management in the middle (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Individual managers’ contributions to the whole can be hard to ascertain, but understanding their success has wide implications for the university.

Purpose of the Research and Statement of the Problem

Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) perceived a gap in the literature in the understanding of middle manager’s “experienced middle-levelness,” which they defined as the professional

identity, self-concept, and lived experiences of the middle manager (p. 125). In addition, Marshall (2012) concluded that further research is needed to understand how middle managers lead teams through change. Possibly due to the research focus and interests of academic middle managers, the administrative perspective is largely marginalized in the literature (Szekeres, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). Accomplished administrators on the staff side were more likely to contribute to popular education websites and publications by professional organizations such as the National Association of Student Professional Administrators (NASPA). This study sought to contribute further research into these underdeveloped areas in the middle manager research literature.

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore the experiences and identity of middle managers as they navigated change in higher education. This study documented the lived experiences of a small sample of managers of student-facing teams that intersect with change management in their universities (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; S. G. Marshall, 2012). In this process, I explored their professional identity and what it was like to work in the middle of the university hierarchical structure (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020).

Research Questions

Systematic scholarly investigations require structure and direction. The nature of that structure is largely dependent on the nature of the study and the requirements of the research tradition. In the case of this study, the research falls into the phenomenological tradition which attempts to examine the lived experiences of individuals who typically share common circumstances (van Manen, 1990). The research questions that structure this type of investigation are typically few in nature and generally stated (Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with this tradition, the research questions listed below guided this study.

1. How do participants experience the professional role of manager in the middle of the university hierarchy?
2. How do the participants understand their professional identity as they manage and/or lead through significant change in the university context?

Definition of the Core Concept

Middle managers are most easily defined by their hierarchical position. They find themselves sandwiched between the strategic apex and the operational core of the institution (Mintzberg, 1998). In the literature reviewed, middle was synonymous with mid-level, and manager was at times replaced with leader, administrator, or professional. The researcher's perceived value of the middle manager's contributions seemed to be tied to this terminology. For example, Rosser (2004), who advocated for the value of the middle, referred to this population as the more professional term "mid-level administrators." Marshall (2012), who attempted to define successful middle managers, referred to the participants as "middle leaders." Regardless of the title, Ackerman (2007) wrote that "no other single employee group is more important to the successful achievement of the organizational mission and goals than are middle managers" (p. 61).

Key Terms

Any research activity includes a number of key terms that reoccur in the literature and have a direct relationship to the topic of investigation. Below are important concepts that were important to this research. The definitions represent the way I have conceptualized the terms for this specific research endeavor.

Academic Middle Managers – Academic middle managers are middle managers who lead in academic departments. They may hold positions with titles such as program director,

department chair, or dean (Gallos, 2002). Often these managers have been trained for academic work and have risen up through the faculty ranks for academic excellence more than for leadership skills (Ackerman, 2007). The academic middle manager's primary focus was on the academic mission (R. B. Young, 2007).

Administrative Middle Managers – Administrative or non-academic middle managers may have job titles other than manager such as director, supervisor, administrator, or chief. In the university setting, employee competency may be judged by that job title (Messa et al., 2016). In contrast to academic middle managers, administrators were valued for their experience over their degree (Ackerman, 2007). Non-academic, administrative middle managers were more likely to be career administrators with credentials and education to support the role (Szekeres, 2011, p. 689).

Change Agents – It is likely that all middle managers in higher education have dealt with change in their context. At some level, a middle manager must manage that change. When the change was a strategic directive from the top leadership of the university, a manager may have felt the need to comply. However, middle managers who functioned as change agents, moved beyond following instructions to participate in the change decision process through communication with superiors and staff. Throughout the change cycle, they found solutions in the absence of direction from a supervisor. Change agents actively engaged problem solving, promoted the benefits of change, showed initiative, and even assumed personal risk (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). With an enhanced contribution, these middle managers championed change in their context.

Professional Identity – Professional identity referred to the interplay between an employee's personal and professional self-concept, and behaviors, values, and norms that are

adopted (Wilson et al., 2016). Professional identity remained malleable as it was shaped by interactions with supervisors, staff, the work, and the managers' self-growth (Do & Nuth, 2020). Traditional leadership models focused on behaviors and competencies, however research has increasingly acknowledged the importance of the leader's sense of professional identity (Warhurst, 2012).

Small Universities – Higher education has had a diverse landscape of degree granting institutions. For this study, the term university excluded higher education institutions such as trade schools, community colleges, and colleges which typically are limited in scope and size. The term small will be defined as a university that is between 800 and 12,000 students. This limited range included many private, American institutions but excluded large state institutions and elite private universities.

Limitations and Delimitations

Just as all studies include key terms central to its focus, all investigations also include limitations inherent to its specific design and delimitations imposed by the researcher. As this study was a qualitative investigation, it was limited by a number of important features. With several thousand higher education institutions, there were many middle managers and a plethora of change initiatives in process each day. This study, using a nonprobability sample with a very small number of individuals, was not able to generalize the experiences of so many individuals. However, the goal was to add to what is known about the phenomenon through personal interviews with a few participants.

A second limitation inherent to a qualitative study such as this was the issue of social desirability bias (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Namely, social desirability was the potential for participants to respond and behave in ways that are socially acceptable. This feature of social

interaction has been commonplace but does represent some challenge for qualitative researchers. Moreover, the likelihood for social desirability bias has been even greater in investigations on socially and personally sensitive topics (Latkin et al., 2017). Unfortunately, qualitative researchers have had few measures to counter social desirability bias. Essentially, the researcher must commit to a thorough and honest analysis of the data and spend enough time interviewing participants to allow more accurate narrations to emerge (Tracy, 2019).

Related to the potential biases of social desirability was another limitation of qualitative research, that of researcher bias. Specifically, researcher bias related to the tendency for a researcher to interpret into the data (i.e., the experiences and perspectives of the participants) his or her own personal views. In other words, the researcher sees in the data what they want to see (Smith & Noble, 2014). This is obviously a serious shortcoming that all qualitative researchers must contend with. One measure that has been frequently employed to counter this bias is member checking and including an audit trail (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) such as I included in this study.

In addition to inherent limitations, this study was bounded by important delimitations, essentially research decisions I made presenting parameters of the study. Perhaps the most important delimitation is this study was the bounded limit to the size of the school where the manager works. Namely, this study only included small universities defined as those institutions with an enrollment between 800 and 12,000 students. Moreover, this study was similarly bounded to include only private institutions. This delimitation was important in that it allowed for examination of middle managers who faced similar institutional constraints, culture, and freedoms.

The literature suggested that gender, race, and other personal identity factors may affect the experience of middle managers (Bugg, 2016; Wallace & Marchant, 2011). Due to the limited scope and number of participants in the study, those issues were not addressed in the sampling. In other words, I did not attempt to represent all the rich diversity of the population in a small, non-probability sample.

Finally, there were many elements of the experience of a middle manager to emphasize. Studies have looked at a wide range of experiences such as persistence (Rosser, 2004), conflict (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011), and support (A. Floyd, 2016). There was a concerted effort in this study to focus on the phenomenon as it relates to how the participants experience the middle manager role and understand their identity in leading and managing change.

Another feature of this study which was not clearly a limitation or delimitation but bears discussion was the fact that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic. There was not an opportunity to connect with participants in person. This could have had an unknown effect on the personal interviews. Also, the discussion of change leadership was not easily separated from the massive changes that have been taking place in higher education that directly resulted from the pandemic. This was due in large measure to the timeframe of the interviews that took place.

Bracketing

Beyond the impact of the limitations and delimitations of the study, there were also personal influences that were addressed. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative studies to mitigate the potential of the researcher's experiences and preconceived ideas of unknowingly influencing the research and findings (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing originated in phenomenological research and is essential when there is a "close relationship between the

researcher and the research” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). Bracketing does not mean that the research was free from bias. Peshkin (1988) argues that the researcher will never be unbiased, but by engaging in a process of continued reflexivity the researcher tries to identify personal assumptions, beliefs, values and emotions.

As an attempt to bracket my personal understanding of the phenomenon, I acknowledged that my experience overlaps with the scope of the study. I approached this research from my own professional experience as a non-academic middle manager at a small, American, higher education institution. I have worked as a middle manager for the past seven years. Throughout this time, I have been involved in many change initiatives including those concurrent with the COVID-19 global health crisis. It was important to intentionally understand who I am from a membership role in this study. As a member of the population, I tried to remain cognizant of the pull of siding with the middle managers I interviewed. Moreover, I did not discount perspectives that were shared when they ran contrary to my own.

I do not deny that I had a vested interest in the research. I was curious about how middle managers understand their role and their experiences in their contexts. Mills (2000) wrote that it was important for middle managers to increase their understanding of their roles as a way to deal with issues of power and authority. I am an aspiring leader with a desire to grow in my role, gain experience, make good decisions, be a successful change agent, and understand the limitations of the position. A potential benefit of the research was to learn from other middle managers and share their insights with others.

I must acknowledge that these experiences shaped my research preconceptions. I understood the potential for these experiences to influence the design and interpretation of the study. Therefore, it was important to acknowledge these experiences and motivations and their

potential impact on the study. It was this soul searching that allowed for an enhanced awareness and monitoring of myself throughout the research process (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to examine research on the middle manager role in higher education and understand how that role functions, including leading subordinate teams and managing organizational change. The literature includes numerous terms to denote middle managers. In the literature, middle is synonymous with *mid-level* and manager is at times replaced with *leader*, *administrator*, or *professional*. The researcher's perceived value of the middle manager's contribution is often tied to this terminology. Several studies that advocated for the value of the middle referred to this population by the more professional term of "mid-level administrators" (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Whatever the specific jargon, clearly scholars have not ignored middle managers. However, as will be revealed in the literature, a great deal of this attention has been on business organizations.

Due to the infusion of the corporate business model into university management (Szekeres, 2004), research literature accessed for this literature review consistently referenced business management journals as well as education journals. As a result, I read across education and business research to understand research-based conceptions of middle managers and their experiences in higher education. The education literature addressed two categories of middle managers: academic and administrative or non-academic. Researchers indicated that the two groups have similar experiences and views about the role in regards to preparedness, pressures, and workload (Davis et al., 2016; A. Floyd, 2016; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001). However, where experiences diverged, such as career path, leading peers, and managerialism acceptance, I chose

to focus this literature review on what is known about the experiences of non-academic, administrative, middle managers.

Middle Managers Navigate Multi-Directional Relationships

This first theme of the literature review reveals the complexities of the middle manager role related to its unique relational position in a hierarchy of relationships (Franken et al., 2018; Pugh et al., 1968). More than any other position, middle managers interact with people at multiple levels of the university (Thornton et al., 2018). With these interactions come the need to navigate the hierarchy of power relationships (Branson et al., 2016; Buller, 2018). Middle managers find themselves pulled between the strategic and operational layers of a university (Mintzberg, 1998; Pugh et al., 1968). How they navigate these levels and the relationships they represent may be the true test of success of a middle manager. For the most part, research conceptualizes middle managers as a distinct position instead of in relation to those around it (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). In many ways, middle managers' realities are defined by relationships (Branson et al., 2016), and sometimes that puts them in the crossfire (Gallos, 2002). The directionality of the middle manager's experience is generally explored across four distinct conceptualizations: (a) accountability upward; (b) supervising downward; (c) in-betweenness; and (d) connecting horizontally.

Middle Managers are Accountable Upward

In the university hierarchy, top strategic leaders own the change-making responsibility and authority (S. G. Marshall, 2012). Middle managers are subsequently accountable for supporting the strategic decisions and helping others understand and follow those directions (Davis et al., 2016; S. G. Marshall, 2012). They build and maintain a vertical link between the upper management and staff (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; S. G. Marshall, 2012; Pugh et al., 1968),

which connects top leadership with the ground-level knowledge helpful for strategic decision making. Middle managers deliver key data to the top and also include evidence of control of the people and processes below them (Sims, 2003). There is accountability for their decisions and department responsibilities (Cawthorne, 2010). The ability to contribute to strategic initiatives and effectively implement those decisions is a sign of a successful middle manager.

Middle Managers Supervise Downward

In addition to an upward connection, this position by definition, also has a downward connection (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). However, interactions with the group below is quite different than that with the leadership above (S. G. Marshall, 2012). At the direction of top leadership, middle managers are hired to manage the work and staff below them. This involves reconciling top strategic directives with operation level issues (S. G. Marshall, 2012).

Optimistically, this puts middle managers in a position to be change agents (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). However, middle managers are also often put in a place where they need to make decisions and prioritize the work that staff perform even when they lack adequate information from above (Cawthorne, 2010). This can lead middle managers to feel the need to protect their teams from what they perceive as needless or detrimental initiatives from above to foster staff productivity and positive engagement (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020).

In fact, recent literature suggests that middle managers are placing an increased emphasis on the well-being and empowerment of those they supervise (Geer, 2014). Staff in turn direct opinions about the proper strategic direction to middle management in hope of advocacy with university leadership (Hellowell & Hancock, 2001). Middle managers' need to manage expectations from below and above (Branson et al., 2016), can put them between a rock and a hard place. A successful middle manager understands the implications of leadership's decisions

and how that affects operational level teams. Translating strategic change initiatives in order to support subordinates while still accomplishing the desired outcome of the directive is a sign of a successful change agent.

Middle Managers Live In-between

Most studies of middle managers focus on the upward or downward vector, but not the position of “in-betweenness” (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020, p. 129). Middle managers find themselves between the operational core of basic services and the vision casting of the strategic pinnacle of the institution (Mintzberg, 1998; Pugh et al., 1968; Wilson et al., 2016). Yet middle managers must maintain the link between top leadership and ground-level staff (S. G. Marshall, 2012) Likert (as cited in Geer, 2014) characterized middle managers as linking pins that hold the top and bottom levels of the organization together. It is likely that without a strong middle manager link, organizational efficiency would decrease and change initiatives would struggle.

Middle managers also create a necessary buffer between the top and bottom (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Middle managers can feel the polarity of representing the interests of above and below, while assuming they need to serve both (Buller, 2018; Do & Nuth, 2020). Middle managers must display allegiance to each group, which is difficult as they have differing priorities. Lapp and Carr (2006) characterize this splitting phenomenon as a “constant temporal and spatial compromise” (2006, p. 655). Middle managers essentially split time between leading the unit and serving the top leadership (Lapp & Carr, 2006). Splitting may not be sustainable because middle managers can feel caught between staff and upper leadership (Buller, 2018). Middle managers reported that they often feel they fail either supervisor, subordinate, self, or all of them (Do & Nuth, 2020). However, managers who embrace an identity of in-betweenness may be able to successfully mediate the expectations of each group.

In-betweenness can be further conceptualized as a continuum between the top and bottom of the university. Middle managers who more closely identify with upper leadership tend to be performance drivers, those who relate to the staff may take a protector role, while the exact middle may actually foster impotence (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) argue that each position (protector, impotent, performance driver) is related to positive or negative views of the direct superior and subordinates and assumed distance to each level or inclusion in either group.

Regardless of their perception of in-betweenness, middle managers believed they receive less information than they give (Cawthorne, 2010). Decisions are made at the strategic pinnacle, and then middle managers must present initiatives to staff in order to implement, regardless of their personal agreement with the decisions (S. G. Marshall, 2012). A trustworthy leader should communicate honestly (Branson et al., 2016), yet middle managers are tasked with delivering the top leadership's strategic narrative even if they do not believe it themselves (Sims, 2003). Gjerde and Alvesson found that middle managers employed a "good deceit" of affairs in each direction (2020, p. 146). Middle managers create a sensemaking narrative to motivate their subordinates and deliver an account of performance for leadership, which can be conflicting stories (Sims, 2003). Taken together, translation between the top and bottom may be nuanced, but honesty and integrity must be maintained.

Middle Managers Connect Horizontally

If being in the middle of the vertical hierarchy was not challenging enough, recent research has incorporated the horizontal relational dynamic as well (Do & Nuth, 2020; Geer, 2014; S. G. Marshall, 2012; Warhurst, 2012). In these studies, the horizontal relationships were generally positive as it was helpful to collaborate with other middle managers (Do & Nuth,

2020). Likewise, connecting and sharing ideas with peers outside of their vertical continuum helped middle managers make sense of their role and their institution (Do & Nuth, 2020; Geer, 2014). It was helpful for cross-departmental managers to collaborate on issues facing their teams and the university as a whole (Hellawell & Hancock, 2001). Social networks are significant on campus (Bolden et al., 2008), and a collaborative spirit is valued (Tull & Freeman, 2011). It is unfortunate but not surprising that:

Universities (like many organizations) usually attempt to resolve their problems either by focusing on key individuals or by restructuring, less often reflecting on the forces that connect people and enable them to work together in pursuit of a common aim. (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 372)

Especially in times of change, downsizing, and restructuring, university networks are dynamic and need continual relational investment (Bolden et al., 2008). Middle managers can require their subordinates to complete a task, but with peers they must rely on indirect relational influence and social capital (Bolden et al., 2008; Do & Nuth, 2020). The quality of these sideways relationships are often ambiguous (Lapp & Carr, 2006). This emphasizes the middle manager's need for dynamic, multi-directional relationships that extend up, down, and across the university structure (Bolden et al., 2008; Branson et al., 2016). When middle managers build connections across siloed areas of the university, they strengthen the linking network of leadership.

Professional Identity of the Middle Manager

The second major theme of this literature review explores the self-concept and professional identity formation of middle managers. Essentially, central questions confronting these professionals include, are they managers, or are they leaders? Are middle managers members of the team their supervisor leads or a member of the team they supervise? Do middle

managers see themselves as leaders or followers? Critical questions to be sure and failure to construct a well-defined professional identity may limit the middle manager's effectiveness (Ibarra, 1999), while developing a positive professional identity often leads to success (Wilson et al., 2016).

Middle managers' self-concepts affect their leadership and followership perceptions (Geer, 2014). The way a middle manager thinks about their leadership role becomes a mindset that applies to how they view their position (Buller, 2018). Warhurst's (2012) research suggested that identity training is needed to improve self-esteem, self-confidence, personal credibility. This is important to consider since the manager's individual perceptions of their role directly affect their morale, positively or negatively (Johnsrud et al., 2000). The internal narrative of significance a manager believes about themselves is influenced from interactions with superiors and subordinates (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Sims, 2003). The relationships that middle managers have up, down, and across the university feeds their identity sensemaking (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). In turn, the professional identity of individuals shapes the organizational culture (Tull & Freeman, 2011, p. 33). Tull and Freeman (2011) go on to say that:

Administrators able to gain an understanding of organizational practices and cultural politics and their own perceptions and attitudes through understanding locus of control will be better equipped to effect positive change, rather than simply reacting unconsciously to circumstances that arise. (p. 33)

However, ambiguity of professional identity or self-concept can negatively impact the manager's ability to build strong relationships and make good decisions (Lapp & Carr, 2006). Individual perceptions of a middle manager's professional identity has an impact on their job satisfaction

and persistence in the role (Rosser, 2004).

Experiencing the Middle as a Member of a Team

One part of identity formation is making sense of team membership. For many middle managers, they sit on one team led by a member of the strategic leadership of the university. Yet they simultaneously lead a team that will implement the policies of top leadership. The individual may struggle with which team they belong to and where their loyalties lie. Marshall (2012) frames this as the internal or external identity of the team. It may be possible to be both. As insiders in teams they lead, a manager can share responsibilities and sustain change (Edwards-Groves et al., 2019).

Some would argue that to lead a strong team, a manager should choose a membership identity with subordinates and the profession instead of superiors (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Others suggest that prioritizing the team manager's supervisor leads is important to the functionality of the organization (Lencioni, 2002).

Along with team membership comes the idea of being the leader of one team and a member of another, which means being a follower of that team's leader. This leader-follower dichotomy can lead to conflicting expectations (Geer, 2014). The idea of being both the superior and the subordinate is not well defined in the literature (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Geer (2014) looked to mythology for a metaphor to describe this dual functionality:

The two faces of Janus, the Roman mythological god of gates, can be used to symbolize the manager in the middle of a vertically differentiated organizational structure. Much as Janus evidenced the benevolent image of a protector facing inside the gate and fierce protector facing outward. (p. 156)

It has been observed that middle managers prefer to think of themselves as leaders not followers,

but organizations are not designed to let them lead (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). The conflicting expectations of the two can cause stress and confusion (Geer, 2014).

Experiencing the Middle as a Manager

Some researchers have compared the two seemingly the incongruous functions of *manager* and *leader* in the middle of the university. The challenge of the middle position is that manager and leader are often described as mutually exclusive roles that require different abilities, behaviors, and focus (S. G. Marshall, 2012). In education, middle managers have been seen as administrative bloat and auxiliary to the core work of academics (Fugazzotto, 2009). Forty years ago, Scott (1980) identified that mid-level positions were moving toward being filled by trained professionals with a high degree of specialization. Today, middle managers must manage staff and processes, yet the position also demands strong leadership (Davis et al., 2016; Do & Nuth, 2020). It is important to explore the dual functionality of *manager* and *leader*.

Corporate terminology has increasingly seeped into the halls of academia such as *division, restructuring, customer, strategic goals, and manager* (Szekeres, 2004, 2006). Middle managers have positional power plus the ability to allocate budget, adjust workload, and influence the working environment (Bolden et al., 2008; Branson et al., 2016). These are the same functions a middle manager has in a corporation. Managerialism ideology grants managers authority to supervise and direct the work of others (Davis et al., 2016); in the hierarchy of the university this is more about efficiency than strategy. In line with that model, middle managers play an essential role in the “productivity, efficiency, sustainability, and competitiveness” of the university (Davis et al., 2016, p. 1481). Middle managers are often deployed as performance

drivers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). The desire of university leadership for corporate-like productivity necessitates middle managers existence in the university setting.

Research about the experience of working in the corporate university setting sheds light on the challenges middle managers face (Szekeres, 2006). A majority of participants in Szekeres' (2006) study experienced increased responsibility and workload while enduring a reduction in staff and resources. Middle managers need greater efficiency from their divisions to meet the increasing demands of the customers: (a) students, (b) university departments, and (c) employers who hire university graduates (Szekeres, 2006).

Pressure to reach strategic goals can cause middle managers to push resistant staff to change (Hellawell & Hancock, 2001). Yet to be successful, the middle manager is wise to avoid top-down, head-on management (Do & Nuth, 2020). Rather managers should use tolerable interventions and commitment building (Hotho, 2013). In addition to managing team performance, increasingly middle managers are evaluated on how well they conduct themselves and supervise their staff (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011; Franken et al., 2018). This encourages managers to tend to employee relationships (Fugate & Soenen, 2018) and deal with conflict (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011). This is important to top leadership because employee engagement is an indicator of institutional health (Daniels, 2016).

Experiencing the Middle as a Leader

Leaders are more than skilled managers (Warhurst, 2012). Managers oversee short-term issues, but leaders focus on long-term results (S. G. Marshall, 2012). However, Do and Nuth (2020) observed that middle managers will often step up when the opportunity to lead arises. Those who evolved from manager to leader reported being empowered by top leadership to make decisions that matter (S. G. Marshall, 2012). Instead of only monitoring and directing, a leader

develops and enables engaged staff (Daniels, 2016; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001). Managers who function as leaders are also shown to be more adept at engaging their teams in strategic change initiatives (Belasen & Belasen, 2016).

To move beyond managing employees, a middle leader must thrive amidst disruption, show enthusiasm, model desired outcomes, and have an attitude of gratitude (Daniels, 2016). A relational leadership style increases team productivity and collaboration while building trust in and respect for the leader (Branson et al., 2016; Daniels, 2016). Perceived differences between how leaders should act and how they actually act directly affects employee engagement (Geer, 2014). Engaged employees respond differently to relational leadership than to the positional authority of a manager.

Middle manager as leader is largely a self-designated identity which is developed through social interactions and interpersonally (Bolden et al., 2008; Warhurst, 2012). Leadership behavior is influenced by this sense of identity and understanding of an expanded role (Do & Nuth, 2020). In Marshall's sample of successful middle managers, participants identified as middle leaders of change (2012). These empowered middle leaders identified more closely with upper strategic leadership and had developed a sense of shared institutional identity (S. G. Marshall, 2012). Leadership begins when those in the middle understand themselves as leaders and not just managers (Warhurst, 2012). Yet the seemingly mutually exclusive roles of middle leader and middle manager can lead to a collectively exhausting role.

Experiencing the Middle as a Change Agent

Another identity a middle manager may embrace is that of a change agent. This is a mindset that middle managers who identify as leaders more strongly resonate with (S. G. Marshall, 2008). A change agent could be defined as those who lead or champion change as

compared to those that merely comply with directives to implement change (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). In championing change, middle managers represent core institutional values (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011). As a change agent, a manager strives to find solutions in the absence of direction from a supervisor (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). In addition, change agents are more likely to learn as they go, adapt, and achieve objectives (Fugate & Soenen, 2018).

Marshall's (2008) focus group of middle managers described change agents as creative, adaptable, strategic, future-focused, and risk-takers (p. 71). Understanding the value of change and need for change often comes from a repository of institutional knowledge and operational wisdom that established managers tend to hold (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011). On the other hand, a middle manager who merely complies with change initiatives tends to be a self-interested agent of control who feeds the corporate bureaucracy (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011).

Experiencing the Middle as a Non-Academic

Across the research I reviewed, academic managers were shown to have faced many of the same challenges as administrative managers, however there was a difference in the attitudes and self-concepts of the middle manager role. Managerialism was seen in a more negative light by academic managers as it can limit academic freedom and collegiality (Branson et al., 2016; Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Academic and non-academic middle managers experienced increased pressure and control from senior management when entering the role, however this was more of a shift for non-academic managers (Sims, 2003). Sims (2003) also observed that it was more common for the academic middle manager to expect attempts to undermine them by subordinates, where teamwork was expected in non-academic roles. The middle manager role was also seen as a detour (Franken et al., 2015), if not detrimental to their career trajectory

(Thornton et al., 2018, p. 208). For many academic middle managers, their professional identity was teacher or researcher, so the manager persona was less likely to be embraced (Sims, 2003).

Summary

This literature review investigated studies of the lived experience of middle managers which focused on multidirectional relationships and professional identity formation. Middle manager success appears to depend on the quality of relationships that span up, down, and across the university. Likewise, middle managers who develop positive self-concepts about their positions, such as reframing their roles as middle leaders or change agents, may more effectively lead change initiatives in their context. The divergent elements between academic and non-academic middle managers factors into the delimitation of the study. Therefore, it appears there is value in researching the experience of non-academic middle managers who function as individual contributors to the wider university effectiveness and responsiveness to the changing higher education environment.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study explored the experiences of non-academic middle managers in higher education. Specifically, the investigation attempted to understand how participants experience the role of manager in the middle of the university hierarchy and to understand their professional identity as they managed change in the university context. With a phenomenological approach, I used a set of personal interviews to uncover the essence of the participants' experiences. The interview was analyzed for patterns and themes to bring structure and insight to the complex experience of middle managers.

Phenomenology

A phenomenological methodology was determined to be the best method to explore the lived experiences of higher education middle managers. This type of qualitative study was well-suited to prioritize the essence of the participants' experiences with change initiatives as they experience their middle position in universities. The reality for each middle manager varied as it was constructed through their lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). To explore the very nature of middle managers, it was important to hear, reflect, and interpret each participant's experiences (van Manen, 1990). Through multiple interviews, I hoped to get to the "essence of the phenomena" of being a middle manager (Moustakas, 1994).

I reviewed multiple studies which used a phenomenological approach to better understand the experience of middle managers. One study used multiple interviews and a focus group to explore the lived experience of middle managers leading successful change in higher education (S. G. Marshall, 2012). Another phenomenological study built metaphors from the themes that emerged from the set of interviews (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). A third study used a phenomenological approach to understand the middle-manager's experience with mentoring

(Finstad, 2008). While each of these studies made unique methodical choices in their approach and analysis, the focus of these studies was a better understanding of the experience of middle managers. The common thread was a commitment to listening to participants and carefully analyzing the conversations to draw out themes.

Participants and Setting

Participants for this research study were identified through purposive and snowball sampling based on the following criteria: (a) non-academic middle managers; (b) at small (800 to 12,000 students) private, American, higher education institutions; (c) who supervise staff in student-facing teams; (d) have experienced substantive change in higher education; and (e) were willing to participate in this study. I reached out to higher education leaders in my own professional network for possible participants who met these characteristics. These leaders essentially served as gatekeepers who assisted in the recruitment process.

These distinguishing characteristics of the participants were chosen with intentionality. Middle managers have a unique perspective of the university, because they report to the strategic leaders at the apex of the university while supervising the workforce at the ground level (Fugazzotto, 2009). I chose non-academic administrators in favor of deans and directors of academic departments because much of the literature I reviewed was already focused on this academic group to the exclusion of administration participants (Szekeres, 2004, 2011). I also decided to limit my scope of research sites to small (800-12,000 students), private, American, higher education institutions which were more likely to have similar levels in the organizational hierarchy. I chose middle managers that supervised student-facing teams, to draw on the unique environment of higher education. Combined, these criteria allowed me to draw from a narrowed population from which I could more easily compare the similar experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, I did not recruit participants from my own institution to avoid unwanted complications, risks, and negative outcomes for myself and the participants (Yin, 2016, p. 61).

Data Collection

Data collection relied on interviewing mid-level managers about their experiences in their roles at their universities. This aligned well with the goal of a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experience, or essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Instead of a strict interview template, the study used a semi-structured interview protocol that incorporated clarifying questions (see Appendix A). Without knowing the individuals' experiences in advance, it was impossible to know what would have been shared in the interviews. Therefore, these interviews remained flexible enough to capture the essence of the experience, as was appropriate for qualitative research (van Manen, 1990).

Rather than attempt to explain the phenomenon with one person's experience, I compared four separate individuals. Interview questions were beta tested with a former higher education middle manager who gave feedback on how to get to the essence of the research questions. No part of that pilot interview data was included in this study. Based on this interview and following feedback, I realized the need to split the interview into two parts. The first was meant to uncover the essence of the participant's role in the middle of the university (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). There was special attention given to establishing context and building rapport to provide a familiarity and comfort for the second, more in-depth interview. In the second interview, I worked to uncover more about their role, their profession, their leadership experience. I also explored participants' understanding of their professional identity as they navigated change initiatives in the university. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom. Upon

completion, interviews were transcribed with Otter and reviewed to validate the transcription and correct errors.

An additional source of data collection came through my own analytic memos. After each interview, I composed analytic memos to capture my initial thoughts and feelings that came out of the interview with each participant.

Data Analysis

After conducting individual interviews, I took special care with the recording and analytic memos for analysis. I maintained a logical nomenclature of the Zoom interviews, Otter transcripts, and analytic memos that protected the participants' identities and provided data integrity. In addition, throughout the data collection and data analysis steps, I kept an audit trail.

Coding

The overarching goal of the study was to gain understanding of the phenomenon of middle managers as they navigate their role. This was an iterative process of interviewing, memoing, and analysis. I followed the broad steps laid out by Huberman and Miles (2020) by coding and writing memos, noting code frequency, and interpreting those codes by creating categories and developing themes. The goal of these steps was to capture the essence of the participant's experiences while suspending judgment about the reality of those experiences "until they were founded on a more certain basis" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.75).

I used in vivo for first-cycle coding to honor the participants' own words in identifying important elements of their experience. This elemental method was a good fit for phenomenological research because I was able to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 73). In this process, special attention was given to "impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases, similes, and metaphors"

(Saldaña, 2009, p. 74). In addition, I looked for repeated statements or words within each interview. I also included narrative examples shared by participants in the findings.

Second-cycle coding utilized patterns to identify a list of commonalities across participants' experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that the phenomenologist's job is to "focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 82). Saldaña (2009) encourages a use of pattern coding as a second-cycle step to pull together similar in vivo codes as a step to analyze their commonality (p. 129). There was also value in partitioning some concepts into subcategories rather than assume a "monolithic simplicity" (Huberman & Miles, 2020, p. 281). This was a place where I interpreted the data and tried to remain cognizant of the lenses and biases I have. Memoing was important to this step of code category generation (Saldaña, 2009, p. 131).

Thematic Analysis

Saldaña (2009) recommended thematic analysis as a way to further analyze pattern codes (p. 130). Using an inductive thematic analysis, I developed a structural description of the experience (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) argued it is "simplistic to think of themes as ... categorical statements" (p.79). Rather, "theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand. Theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 87). It is a sense-making exercise. To develop themes, I asked questions of interview transcripts and subsequent codes and categories such as: "What is going on here? What is this an example of? What is the essence of this? What is the meaning of this?" (van Manen, 1990). These questions helped to uncover how the phenomenon was experienced. This study adds further insight into the complexity and experience of middle managers.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with minimal risk to the participants. The researcher applied for and was given IRB approval for adequately addressing the safety and dignity of the participants before collecting any data. The primary concern was to protect the identity of the interviewed middle managers as they did disclose things that at times reflected negatively on their supervisor, those they supervised, their university, and their own performance. I believe I put interviewees at ease so they were able to share freely by masking the identities of participants and their institutions by using pseudonyms and obscuring other identifying details. However, due to the qualitative nature of the study and the interview protocol, the participants are known to the researcher and thus I am unable to guarantee complete anonymity. I also recognized that there could have been discomfort in talking about their experience and so I proceed sensitively in the interviews. Each participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B) that outlined these precautions and risks. Finally, interview files and recording were stored securely on a password protected device and will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study.

Membership Roles

I approached this research from my own experience as a non-academic middle manager at a small, American, higher education institution. In addition, I have experienced several large and small changes in my own context. As a member of the population, I remained cognizant of the pull of siding with the middle managers I interviewed, and so I looked to include any relevant contrary perspectives that are shared.

Subjectivity of the Researcher

My purpose as a researcher was not to prove a position, but rather to listen to middle managers experiences. Creswell and Poth wrote that research flows “from philosophical assumptions, to interpretive lens, and on to the procedures” involved in the study (2018, p. 50). As for my own lens, the first step was not to suppress any feelings, judgements, or experiences but to acknowledge them. Yin wrote that the researcher cannot avoid seeing the study through their lens (2016). Instead I tried to remain aware of my lens and anticipate the possible effects and interference which I recorded in memos.

Creswell and Poth (2018) note that the reader is actually interested in why we research, why we care, and where we stand (p. 44). I am a middle manager who embraces change and desires to be successful in my role. Two personal purposes of the research were to learn from middle managers who have navigated their higher education roles and to share those insights with others. From my experience and from reviewing literature on the topic, I believed mid-level managers have been important communication conduits and change agents in the university setting. Higher education has been in a state of increased change which required a high-functioning core in the organization, which was composed of mid-level leaders. In addition, I believed middle managers needed empowerment, better information, and leadership development. Yet even when these things were not present, some middle managers could be successful.

I continued to remind myself of my lenses as I interviewed and analyzed, from start to finish. I did my best to not “filter, skew, shape, block, transform, [or] misconstrue my observations” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Conclusion

Middle managers in higher education have shouldered the management of change (S. G. Marshall, 2012). While some studies showed that these middle managers fail to persist (Rosser & Javinar, 2003), others become successful leaders of change (S. G. Marshall, 2012). This study explored the experiences and professional identities of middle managers to better understand the phenomenon of navigating the role.

Chapter Four: Findings

This study examined the experiences of four middle managers in small private universities. They came from all across America, spanning three time zones. It was a balance of two females and two males. They were seasoned leaders of student-facing teams who each had a minimum of eight years of higher education experience not counting student roles, and all had graduate degrees. They had been successful in that they progressed in their careers, and they had moved up to middle manager roles. I wanted to hear how they experienced their roles and how they framed an understanding of their professional identities in the context of a higher education landscape that is constantly changing.

I did not know any of the participants prior to this study. However, the fact that we were connected through mutual acquaintances in our professional networks helped to foster access and rapport. Furthermore, because I also held the role of middle manager at a small private university, it seemed to add to their comfortability in sharing their experiences, challenges, questions, and emotions. They were all very busy people and I felt grateful to have the opportunity to listen to them. This provided added motivation to take the utmost care for their words as I moved from interview, to transcription, to coding, and to sharing my findings.

Participants

This first section is an introduction to the individual participants through sharing their experience of how and why they came to be a middle manager. As I interviewed participants about their career choice, I learned how and why they initially got into higher education and how their career progressed to this point. This was important background information for understanding why participants chose the higher education middle management career. These

participant profiles provide the necessary context to their experiences and perceptions, in lieu of sharing any institutional or positional information.

Participant One: Brett

Brett graduated from college and has worked in higher education ever since, though that was not his original plan. He really thought he wanted to be a high school teacher. However, while student teaching, he realized that teaching was not his passion. However, he did love students, the educational setting, and the student position he had on campus. Abruptly that summer, an entry-level position opened on campus. He applied, was hired, and he never looked back. His campus experiences prepared him and his strengths fit the role exactly. Brett enjoyed the variety of work activities he did in an average week, and he loved the relational connection he could have with students.

Brett, a self-described achiever and workaholic, excelled at his job and even took on special projects. Through that, he discovered he also enjoyed analysis and working with data. So after a few years he was promoted into an administrative role, and that went well too.

One of the biggest reasons I have been successful is I put in a lot, a lot, of hours. I was able to show that I can do the right work right. I think I work more than I should. There have been times where I haven't shut off and I'm rewarded for that. That is how I have advanced in my career, and that is a trade that I have made.

Brett began to focus on advancement and he got his master's degree. He has aspired to be a VP over a large department or even a college president. Brett has been working in higher education for a decade now, and he has been promoted to his current upper middle management role. Brett has seen his opportunities to have influence across campus increase in this role. Brett's administrative role still connected to students in some of the same ways that he enjoyed in his

previous role. However, in the past year in this role, he has started to wonder if he was actually better suited for a role closer to the students.

Participant Two: Deborah

Deborah also describes herself as being an achiever. She has steadily progressed in her career from student employee to an administrator role, and completed a master's degree in higher education along the way. Most recently, Deborah left a job she loved to progress in her career, which also required her to move to another institution. She was specifically drawn to the role for the opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration on campus. She saw gaining a variety of experiences as essential for future job growth.

When I asked Deborah why she moved out of a job she enjoyed into a management role, she described it bluntly. She said it was an expectation that entry level employees move up. Advancement was expected, though she had a threshold for how far she was willing to progress; she drew the line at vice president. In addition, after serving in an on-call position which sometimes required action in the middle of the night, Deborah has liked the structure of middle management.

My door is open from eight to five, and you can find me during that time. Then I get to go home at the end of the day. I am just not meant to be an entry level staff for the rest of my life. Kudos to the people who have made a career out of being on the front line with students. I do not know how they do it.

Even more than the preferable schedule, Deborah has found the variety of tasks a highlight of the position.

I've considered other professions, but I think a middle manager at an accountant firm has days and weeks that probably look really similar. In higher education, things can change

on a dime, and you have to be prepared for that. I love that, it is exciting, and it is challenging. It just gives me so much joy. And, yeah, “joy” is really the word that comes to mind when I think that every day is going to look different. And when someone says, “what does a normal day look like for you?” I get to answer that a normal day is to expect the unexpected.

Deborah felt that the exciting variety was one of the things that has kept her motivated to work in higher education.

Participant Three: Samuel

Samuel had a student leadership position while studying at his university. In that role he made a number of great connections on campus. So when he graduated, he was offered and accepted a job in Admissions, which he thought that was going to be a great fit. He soon realized it was not actually something he wanted to do, so he shifted to an administrative role in an academic department, and eventually worked his way into the department he was in currently.

Sometimes the move to middle management is a function of leaders recruiting or promoting good employees. Samuel took a position at another institution, but after a few years he was recruited back and later promoted.

I've pretty much been recruited to my last three positions, and I did not expect to be here in this role so soon. The previous person in my role was removed for various reasons. I was an internal hire, and they knew the work that I had done. So the interview process was basically “Do you want this position or not?” Due to the situation, there were very little expectations put on me.

Since moving up to this current middle manager role, Samuel has a broader perspective of the university. He has been excited to be able to see the bigger picture of what other offices were doing, how that impacted his office, and how they could work together more efficiently.

One of the biggest things that motivated Samuel was helping others participate in education itself. As a first-generation college student, who now has a doctor of education degree, he appreciated how education has grown him into the person he is today.

I know higher education increasingly gets a bad rap. The cost is certainly a lot, especially for private institutions. But there's something you can't put a price on how it changes a person. I think college is where you really transform into the person you will become. I'm not that same person anymore. In fact, I'm not even the same person I was when I started my doctorate program. We should all be life-long learners.

This high value on the transformational power of education motivated Samuel to continue working in the university context.

Participant Four: Kelsey

Unlike the other participants, Kelsey worked outside of higher education and then transferred her professional skills to the university setting.

I had not had any exposure to higher education, other than my own experiences as a student. I never saw it as a career track to be in higher education. Honestly, when I took this position, I thought of it as just another job.

However, the role connected with Kelsey's passion to help people and she stayed in higher education. Kelsey had been in the department five years when her boss was given an interim vice president role. So, she was asked to be interim director for that year.

“Sure, I can do that.” I had already started to think management would be a direction I might like to go eventually, and this gave me a year to try it out and see what it was like. Being interim has challenges, but the benefit is that you are not really expected to do anything other than keep the place afloat. I had some of my regular work and took on all the administrative duties as well. I found that I enjoyed it.

It was a low-risk opportunity in which she learned the administrative responsibilities and found she enjoyed it. So, when her boss ended up leaving the university, Kelsey was hired for the director role in a permanent capacity. This came at the right time for Kelsey, who had found that dealing with the intense issues in her student facing position was exhausting work.

I was really thinking about leaving, because I was just fried, like really burnt out. “I don't have the resilience for this, I can't do this anymore.” I wasn't sure what else I could with my experience and education. “Maybe I should be a part-time receptionist at a nature preserve.” And so just in that season, when I was contemplating moving on, this management position opened up.

This path to progress in her career without starting over made the jump to management seem like a gift. She was glad to keep building on her years of experience and her education. In addition, the middle manager role gave her a new variety in her work.

I have just the right amount of connection with people in my job. I do really enjoy the administrative work, and I feel recharged by that. Answering emails is like a lovely way to spend an afternoon.

For her, a self-described introvert, it is the perfect balance between human interaction and administrative duties.

Emergent Themes

Although the participants involved in this study were from four different schools in three time zones across the United States, there were similarities in their role experiences and how they viewed their professional identity. These themes included: (a) staying student-centered; (b) leading people; (c) managing change; (d) burnout and self-care.

Staying Student-Centered

All of the participants expressed some sense of loss or justification as they entered into their middle management role. Much of this was connected to a lack of direct connection with students as they moved up the university hierarchy. So they sought to focus on the ways they were able to keep caring for students or further the university mission in other ways that helped students learn and grow. A tension existed between their administrative work and the mission of holistically educating students.

Samuel has had other positions where he worked more closely with students. Yet he still felt called to serve students, even in his current role where he did not have a lot of direct student interaction. He talked about the mission of the university to put students first and how that felt empowering to him. He has volunteered in a non-profit student ministry outside of the university setting, but he felt like he was ministering to students in his day job too. However at the university it looked different, it came through supporting and improving processes that affect students. It included everything from eligibility, scheduling, enrollment, transfer processes, curriculum development, and policy related to student services as well as student life.

In this middle manager role, when he connected with students it was often because there was a problem or an issue. So in a counter-intuitive way, he supported students best when he never saw them. That meant their problems were prevented or resolved before they escalated up

to him. He went on to share that his approach has been to look at the problem and find the solution that makes the most sense for the student instead of what was easiest for his department. Furthermore, he has used his positional influence to encourage others to focus less on stringent policy and more on student needs.

As Kelsey moved into middle management, she shed much of her daily student interactions to make room for her administrative duties. She framed her position as a customer service role, with students as the customers. She has enjoyed the part of management that has allowed her to help people feel heard and connected with the resources they need.

It is my job to make sure my team is meeting the needs of students. I know my staff wants to serve students. In a changing world, the needs of students keep changing. I look to provide professional growth opportunities to my team, so they can feel competent and prepared to serve students well.

As a leader, Kelsey has tried to be at the leading edge of conversations on diversity and mental health. She has helped facilitate this through presenting information and resources to different groups of students, faculty, or staff on campus. After a recent presentation, a student emailed her:

“this campus is better because of you, thank you for being here.” It was one of those moments for me where I was like, oh, I am not just an administrator behind a computer. There is a human connection in this. I do feel like I have a more systemic level of impact, when I speak with more than one person at a time. [In this role] I feel like I'm part of this big organization, and the things I do have a broader impact in terms of the milieu that we're all in.

Kelsey moved from serving students individually to serving broadly on campus. It was clear that her impact on students had grown in the process.

More than anything during her time working in higher education, Deborah has enjoyed conversations with students and valued hearing their life stories. She has placed importance on remembering the significant things happening in their lives, asking the hard questions, and then remembering to follow up with them. In moving up to a manager position, she has had less time for that.

I love the conversations that I get to have with students, but now I have about twenty other things that I am doing. For example, a student came into my office today while I was working on things. I found myself getting frustrated because I was in the middle of working on a project, and she just wanted to talk. Getting to know students falls on the back burner. That is the part I miss.

In her middle manager role, she has had the opportunity to design programs and change structures in her department. She has also expanded her voice into discussions of diversity, retention, on-campus programming, supporting commuter students, and sexual violence prevention. However, there was a keen awareness of what she had given up.

There is a bureaucracy that comes with higher ed, so the further you move up, the further away from students you are. That is just the unfortunate truth. I have known that since I started my career in higher ed because everyone talked about the higher ups who had lost touch with students. That's why I've never aspired to be a VP or president is because I never want to lose the connection with students.

Deborah does not want to sacrifice authentic student connection to progress in her career. In fact, it is something she has thought about since moving into her current role.

A question I have continued to ask myself over the last year has been, why do I want to wake up in the morning and continue doing this? And then I have a really good student

conversation where I feel like I helped them or made a difference in their lives. And a student is thankful that I invested my time.

To stay grounded and fulfilled, Deborah has strived to be able to retain that personal connection, even if it was just with a limited number of students. She was aware that is what people lost first as they took on more administrative responsibility in higher education.

Similarly, Brett also shared that he absolutely loved working directly with college students. He really enjoyed meaningful conversations with students, but as he moved up, he did not get to have those nearly as often. He said he needed to do some of that in this role to be fulfilled. Unfortunately, most of his direct student connection in the past year has been COVID-19 related. However, Brett did not believe the work he was doing was meaningless. He has been able to help students' voices be heard on campus, and in the meeting room he has advocated for their needs. He also felt like he was helping students learn and grow through his work with academic and support services. In fact, he was constantly reminded by others on campus of the impactful work he has done for students. He has tried to acknowledge that in himself and his team. However, Brett has been missing the activities and volume of direct connection he had with students in previous roles.

I enjoy having one-on-one conversations with students where we talk about their life, their story, and their dreams for the future. But how can I when I am detached from the students because I spend my time on administrative duties. Most of my time is spent in meetings, writing reports, creating budgets, and predicting how many students we will have next term. That is all very necessary for the organization to run, but maybe is not what I want to do.

He has started to wonder if this middle manager role was the best position for him. Brett had a mentor who had been a director of residence life for 15 years. Brett recalled a conversation they had a number of years ago where the mentor shared:

He had been asked a number of times, “Why aren't you moving up? Aren't you ready to go up to the next level?” He responded that he did not want to move up because he enjoyed the type of work and the type of interactions he got to have with students in his role. I told him “you're silly, you're not going to lose that when you move up.” But I was wrong.

Brett, who I would describe as near the top end of middle management, admitted that for the longest time, he wanted to be a vice president or maybe even a college president someday.

Though now that he was a promotion away from that dream, he wondered if he would enjoy a role with less administrative pressure and more direct connection with students.

Leading People

Another theme across the participants was the strong relational component of their role. Relationships reached across campus from students to executive leadership, but the way they related to the staff they supervised was the most extensive piece that was shared in the interviews.

Individualized Communication. All of the middle manager participants talked in some way about how they made it a priority to build relationships and connect individually with their supervisees. A priority for Deborah has been fostering relationships by consistently checking in with staff. So it was not surprising that she has appreciated the value placed on individual check-ins at her institution. It has been modeled at the executive leadership level, as the vice presidents regularly met individually with the president. Her impression was that in the business world,

one-on-one meetings were about getting a task list and reporting if it had been completed.

Deborah felt fortunate that the universities she had worked in, had not treated it that way. When she met individually with staff, she led in the way it had been modeled to her.

It might be 25% business and 75% is checking in personally. “How are you doing?”

“Where do you find rest?” “What do you need to do the best job that you can do?” I

really try to listen to them and pick up on nonverbal cues, otherwise it is hard building trust with people. Really, really intentional, one-on-ones is at the core of how I lead.

She shared that she was thankful that did not have a large team, because she did not think she could do that. It was not her leadership style to oversee a large, overarching division and still be strongly relational.

Kelsey, on the other hand, needed to remind herself to make sure that she stopped by people's offices to say hello. She felt that good leadership involved ample opportunities for two-way communication, which does not happen naturally. She acknowledged that it was even harder when the pandemic forced them into remote working situations. While working from home, she made sure to carve out times where she could have conversations virtually, just to check in to hear how people were doing.

This was especially crucial in Kelsey's department because they did much of their work independently. She has needed to intentionally create space to come together to talk as a whole team. Likewise, she hosted individual conversations with team members.

Kelsey reflected that it had been a learning curve in recognizing the importance of cultivating relationships with her team. Leading her team was not just about getting things done and doing them well, but it was also about planning time to be together. Making sure there were enough relational connection times to laugh together and have fun shared experiences. She knew

that her employees needed to feel like they were part of a community. That is something that nourishes them personally and professionally. That in turn fed into a sense of mission and vocational calling. Ultimately, the goal was to create a healthy team, and her goal was to make sure people felt cared for and supported.

Brett admitted he can get caught up in his schedule and to-do list. As a self-described achiever, he had prided himself in accomplishing his work. However, a previous supervisor taught him that it was okay to be a relational leader. He encouraged Brett to allow himself to leave things undone if it meant he had spent extra time with a student or employee. They both acknowledged that relationships were equally, if not more important than getting work done. It helped Brett set what he saw as the right priorities.

The need to reprioritize things in my mind, to keep relationships first, probably happens three times a day for me, right at that moment where I'm talking to someone. I'm thinking in my mind, "I need to get to my next thing." "How do I wrap up this conversation?" But it's like, no, people just need to be heard sometimes.

He has found that keeping those priorities takes work and determination, because it went against the way he was wired.

Samuel described his leadership style through the lenses of being a calm listener. In addition to letting his staff be heard, he also felt that checking-in with staff was an opportunity to keep them informed. He has always tried to be open, honest, and transparent. He shared that since the people he supervised are supervisors themselves, he was often able to be more hands off, as long as he was always available and provided advice when needed.

Flexible Leadership. In addition to connecting to supervisees individually, the participants each believed that they needed to tailor their connection style to each employee

based on what the person needed. One of Brett's philosophies of leadership was that leaders should adapt to employees, not the other way around. He shared examples of how this looked different across his team.

I have an employee who needs regular follow up to get his work done. Another employee needs a daily hello and asked "what can I help you with?" Then there is an employee who works in another building and we only connect once a week. Yet that is fine with her. So I think I have learned how to be more adaptable myself.

It would be easier to have a consistent approach, but he has continued to connect in the way each individual needs. They have responded well to this approach.

Similarly, Samuel said that a leader needed to be flexible in how he or she manages each employee.

A leader can't lead just one way, they have to be able to lead from the aspect of the people and teams they are leading. They have to be aware and knowledgeable about the people that are leading, and what their what gets him excited about their work.

He felt strongly that managers needed to understand how best to lead each of the individuals that they were supervising, and then be flexible enough to lead in different ways with different people.

Deborah concurred that each employee responded to a different type of leadership. She learned to be a flexible leader from a past supervisor who modeled it.

One of my past supervisors said that everyone is a lock, and you have to figure out what key you need to unlock that. So my leadership style allows me to adapt to the type of key that I need to be for that person. I do that by listening by asking questions and by getting to know them individually. I could ask five people that I oversee the same three

questions, and I would get three very different responses from each; somewhere between one-word answers, and getting totally off track down a rabbit hole. So knowing how to adjust to each person's personality is really important and not trying to make them fit my mold. I start by just walking with them on the journey of life and respond however that person needs. So it's very individualized.

Deborah acknowledged that work life intersected with non-work life, and can be complicated and messy. So she did not give up on someone because they were struggling at work. She wanted employees to know “I cared about them and that I did everything that I could to problem solve how to make it work.” That was what she hoped someone would do for her. She has treated others as she would want to be treated, which is the Golden Rule she lived by.

Kelsey described herself as an introvert who did not have the intense social needs as some other people on the team. Because of that, she has had to cognitively remind herself of what other employees relationally need.

I read in leadership books that we're supposed to do fun things together. So, I try to make sure I'm working on things like retreat days, and just meetings where we're just catching up and connecting. Ultimately, it has been meaningful when we do social activities, even if, when I was a staff person, I never felt a need for them. I even dreaded check-in meetings with my supervisor, they always seemed like a waste of time to me. However, I'm learning to recognize the importance of those relational activities to my staff.

So, Kelsey actually moved beyond treating others as she would like to be treated, but rather she treated them in the way they wanted and needed to be treated. She resisted her own natural inclinations and pushed herself to build relationships.

Leaders that Trust and Empower. Deborah trusted her staff to do the jobs that she had asked them to do. She assumed that they were doing their work and doing a good job, unless she heard otherwise. She gave her trust in advance. Deborah's demonstrated trust in her team, in turn empowered them to make decisions about their work. She said that when staff came to her for answers, she responded with an abundance of questions, which "sometimes drove the people [she] supervised crazy." However, she believed that everyone on her team had the ability to find the answers they needed. Her leadership style was to ask, "Well, what do you think about that? Okay, you think that's a solution? Then do that." She has trusted the employee to do what was best for their area.

Brett's leadership style was also focused on trust. He avoided micromanaging his employees and has not felt the need to check on them every single day. He believed that trust should be up front, not something that needed to be earned. An interesting relational dynamic Brett faced was that when he moved into the role, he had already supervised some of the team but others had been peers. As he transitioned into the role, he took special care to listen to those who had been his peers for what they needed from leadership, and if that was different from what they had received from the last person in his role. Yet he thought that there were times where his employees were frustrated with him because they did not see him as much as they would have seen the previous supervisor. However, the team has enjoyed that Brett has empowered them to have their own ideas.

They really like the autonomy that they have in their roles. So a lot of my work is just checking in and helping them solve the problems that they have, rather than dictating to them what they need to get done. I definitely step in, but most of the time, they do what

makes most sense for their area. I want them to feel empowered to do that with their ideas.

He wondered if they would like him to be more hands on, but he would rather err on the side of trust than micromanaging. He has tried to find the right balance. Brett shared that he appreciated the vulnerability of individuals who expressed frustration. He honored that by setting aside time to listen.

Samuel agreed that leaders should trust employees do their work in their own style. As an employee, he found that empowering, and he wanted to pass that on as much as he can to his staff. Most of the time, Samuel's team does not need him to tell them what to do. He did however make sure they were well trained, well informed, and well resourced.

That had not been the case before he stepped into the role. He found that his team was unaware of things that went on in the department because they were never included. Samuel has wanted staff to be informed, so he shared copious information and the context of why they do what they do. He has tried to bring understanding and meaning to the work. He did this in part because Samuel believed no one should lead alone. Which means he needed to be able to rely on others to lead as well. So Samuel has empowered people to participate in important work. Samuel linked those contributions to input and decision making.

I'm always willing to listen to different ideas and opinions about how to do things before I make the decision. At the same time, I give them the opportunity to make their own decisions in their areas. I want to empower them to do that. So my leadership style is very much about empowering supervisors and even the worker bees.

The relationships Samuel built with his employees allowed him to trust and empower them to contribute to the greater work of the department.

Supportive Leaders. When leaders have built relationships with their employees, they were more likely to understand how to support them. Deborah led a productive team that managed many responsibilities. She explained that her direct reports saw her as a supportive leader and someone they can go to for help. Sometimes that has been for the actual work, but often it has been for encouragement. Deborah believed her employees found her encouraging, empathic, and full of grace. She also used language that indicated she would defend her employees and team. She shared, “I tend to fill in the gaps with good, I tend to assume the best, and I tend to make excuses for other people for why they can't.” It is interesting that even when she talked about accountability, it was about making sure they were following through with self-care plans.

Brett shared several ways of how he supported his team. For example, when he saw his team was really busy, he would jump in and help. He said doing acts of service for his employees filled his soul. However, he also acknowledged that at his level he probably should not be spending his time in this way, with all of the other important things on his plate. Brett also shared that he appreciated the vulnerability of individuals who expressed frustration. He supported them by setting aside time to listen to their concerns.

Like Deborah, he also talked about defending his team. He called it his “backstop method.” In baseball, the backstop is the support barrier behind home plate that protects the crowd from wild pitches and foul balls. Brett explained that he was a strong backstop for his employees. When things came at them, from any direction, he was always there to block it. These stray pitches can come down from the VP level, up from students, or from other departments across the university.

Samuel also would say that supporting his team was an important thing he does. He did share an interesting way of doing that, by normalizing failure.

On my staff, I have many type A personalities, or perfectionists may be a better way to put it. I realized I actually needed to give them permission to make mistakes. I literally sat one person down and said, "I release you. I give you permission to make mistakes." I know she is not going to go crazy and make lots of mistakes. I trust her, and I trust her team won't make lots of mistakes either.

This freedom allowed them to learn and grow. It also helped them speed up their work while easing the pressure they face. The small mistakes that did get made, were easy to correct.

Kelsey has also worked to support her team. She shared that initially, when employees shared struggles or frustrations, she thought that was her cue to fix it. To support her team she did what she could to make everything work for people. However, she has been learning to step out of that fixing role with her employees.

Our relationships are healthier when we are not in a fix-it role. But I think I hadn't quite transferred that to a leadership place where we are looking to fix things all the time. It is discouraging when there's complaining in the ranks, or when it seems like I just can't do enough. I am still sorting out when to work at fixing something or making it less stressful, and when my role is just listening and empathizing with them.

Over time, she has increased her understanding of the importance of that emotional support piece. She encouraged her staff to authentically share frustrations but also recognized that we all struggle.

Kelsey shared that in many ways, empathic listening was the primary task for a team leader. In those conversations with her employees, Kelsey acknowledged that:

Their job is exhausting and they are doing hard work. That's where I think the affirmation is important. I make an effort to recognize people for their grit, their resilience, and the care that they are giving students. I want to make sure that they feel noticed, heard, and appreciated.

Still, supporting the staff in tangible ways was also important. Sometimes, Kelsey found ways to make little changes that improved the work environment for her employees. For example:

I am always encouraging staff to work in self-care into their day. So blocking out time for paperwork, blocking out extra time over lunch, to go get a workout and making sure that things aren't so stacked in their day that they don't have a chance to pause and breathe.

So, when I can't fix things exactly how they would like, I am making sure they know that I hear them and value them. Often that is enough to keep them fueled on the way.

So, Kelsey supported her team by staying focused on cultivating healthy relationships, instead of just fixing problems.

It is interesting to note that in response to questions about management, the participants spoke less about managing the work and more about managing the people. The bulk of their leadership efforts had to do with the individualized ways they were building trusting relationships with their employees, so that they could support and empower them to do good work.

Managing Change

Change is inevitably part of life and part of working at a university. However, the participants expressed that higher education was changing faster than ever and that the pandemic only increased the need for speed. Brett commented that he has read for a while now that higher education has never been changing faster:

Now I'm like, okay, they weren't kidding. We have had to make decisions so quickly. There have been times we met to make a major decision but then it will completely change by the next week. I feel like we used to talk about change, but I just didn't imagine this much change and how fast it has happened right now.

Likewise, Kelsey shared an example of rapid change in her context

More than one person has said that a silver lining of the pandemic is that the people who had said, "I will never teach an online class," two weeks later, are teaching all of their classes online. Somehow, they figured it out because that is what students needed at the time.

Similarly, Samuel had been working on a project for six years, but it took a pandemic to make it a priority that received the necessary budget. Almost overnight there was a rapid shift to fund technology solutions needed due to COVID-19. Change that may never have happened, seemed to happen overnight. The pandemic has created a sense of need for change and an urgency to do so.

Kelsey and Samuel both acknowledged that the crucial first step to creating a pathway for change was communicating the need. In Kelsey's case:

I stepped into an environment that wasn't sustainable in terms of the workload. The staff got on board with change when they realized the current situation was too stressful and too much work. So I approached the major change to our model by building on their experience of frustration. I recognized that what motivates us to change is things we don't like, and there was a lot that they didn't like. So I very intentionally tied the changes to those places of discontent for them to help frame this as answers to the things that were difficult for them.

Samuel shared that leaders must be able to articulate the problem in different ways to different people. He said:

I can't talk to my boss about a problem in the same way I have talked to my staff about it. I have to provide more context to my boss than to my staff. And if I'm talking to my boss about something that he's going to communicate to his boss, I will communicate it differently because of that. So knowing who my audience is, and then being able to articulate that, and doing that multiple times over, multiple modalities to different types of people. So communication of the need is key.

Samuel also saw the importance of communication throughout the change process because it was difficult to innovate alone.

Brett expressed that an effective change agent in higher education right now needed to communicate with transparency.

It has been a fault of our past administration that they would change direction on a public decision they had made, but would not share the reasons why it changed. It left students and employees in the dark, which bred rumors and fear. Obviously, these are things we don't want.

So, Brett has tried to model transparency with his employees, as well as asking for input. There was rarely a decision that he did not get input from his employees or from students first, especially when making major changes. When he has been transparent and has asked for input, change has gone really well in his department.

Kelsey took transparency and input a step further. She saw the change process as a collaborative effort with her team. She has tried to find the balance of pulling employee voices into the process and her, as the leader, figuring out the nuts and bolts of the solution. It was an

iterative process of sharing a draft and then integrating employee voices. When people were part of the process and understood the reasoning, there was less animosity when the change was hard because they all decided together. Even with this process, sometimes individuals resisted the change.

I have tried to assume employees have a valid reason for resisting change. So I listened to what has worked for the person and what motivates them. Usually, the most meaningful motivators are relational, how the change will help the students we work with. That has been what is most likely to open us up to the possibility for change. So even if my idea wins out, in the end, I want to make sure it's clear that we're all working towards the same goal.

Samuel was known as an innovator at his university. So when he was promoted into his current role, it was expected that he would bring change to a department that needed it. He was motivated to make things more efficient, effective, and accurate for students and staff by integrating the resources, tools, thinking, and technology that was needed. Samuel said one of the difficulties of innovative change was seeing it to completion. He has found that it can be a long process of getting your need communicated, finding a solution, getting the funding for it, and then going through the implementation process. It could take months or it could take years. To complete a project, Samuel needed other people to come alongside him. He needed buy-in from multiple people and cross-departmental coordination. It took getting the right people at the table and setting reminders to follow up with them to make sure the work was getting done. Staff often resisted change because it upset the processes they were comfortable with. However, through the good relationships Samuel had fostered, he was able to convince others to see his changes as a priority.

Relationships intersected with much of what the participants talked about in the interviews. Samuel and Kelsey's experiences highlighted how it was vital to change management as well. The same was true for Deborah. She shared that her good relationship with her Vice President helped foster positive change.

I feel that I have been able to voice my frustrations to him. If something needs to change and I have shared valid reasons, he will go back to the cabinet and communicate it. So if I have communicated that this is a priority for students that needs to be funded, he will advocate for me.

She expressed that it was important to keep giving feedback to the executive leadership so they avoid making decisions based on insufficient information. She also tried to be an example to her team of staying connected to leadership in their attempts to engage the campus community. She did this by prioritizing town halls and discussion groups.

The reality was that much of the change initiatives the participants could recall were COVID-19 related, and that was understandable. However, this limited the discussion on change to reactionary change instead of strategic, innovative measures. Several of the participants acknowledged this tension between the immediate need to react and long-term strategic objectives. Samuel found that people prioritize whatever is on their desk that needs to get done right away over long term change initiatives.

Brett said his team had been really creative in how they responded to COVID-19. This included how they did testing, case management, and quarantining procedures. There were many things in the past year that they responded to very quickly. He was proud that they had found ways to deliver traditional events in creative ways. That being said, Brett has struggled to set a long-term vision. He said he had failed in that area because his efforts were just focused on

putting out the fire at his feet. During a pandemic, this was no small or unimportant feat, but Brett hoped for more.

Our COVID-19 response was important. Obviously, things like making sure students are fed in quarantine is important, but so is everything else that we do at the university. Our mission has been to transform the lives of our students. Executive leadership has continued to challenge us that our mission is equally important as responding to COVID-19. From a student services point of view, if all we did is make sure students were following the COVID-19 protocols, they could have done that at home.

Brett has tried to lift his head up to focus on the mission. He does not want to miss the opportunity to impact students at a transformational level. Yet it had been discouraging.

I think my role should be more focused on leading our department and the vision for where we are going. I'm worried that if you were to survey my employees about the goal of our department, you would get ten different answers. With COVID-19, I've only been reactionary this past year. I have done almost no innovations in my area, or even vision casting for the future. Even the plans that had been in place, I put the brakes on because I spend so much time on our student COVID-19 response. I felt like we've taken a year or two-year step backwards in trying to reach our long-term goals. We have not been talking about the research I started. It's just sitting there in the back of my mind. I've got a folder on my computer, and I haven't even touched it.

On the other hand, Deborah questioned if now was the time to be making long-term strategic plans. Her university leadership was holding town halls this Fall to set a strategic plan for 2050. Deborah shared:

I can't even think about next Fall, how the heck am I supposed to think about 2050?

Some people are in the camp that everything's going to be great in 2050. Everything is going to go back to normal, we are going to have all this money, and everything will be great. The other camp wonders if this pandemic may never go away. We just don't know what the future is going to hold, and what the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be. 2050? Those students haven't even been born yet!

While it seemed useless, she did appreciate that leadership was soliciting input from employees and taking feedback to heart. However, to Deborah it shared that she felt they were not accomplishing anything meaningful by focusing on thirty years in the future.

Sometimes change efforts are not long-term strategic initiatives or fire-response reactions, but they fall into the category of continuous improvement. Kelsey for one, did not love that terminology.

I used to think continuous improvement meant we were doing something poorly and we needed to do better. Now, as a leader I see it differently. I see that the needs of students are continually changing. So we get a chance to bring fresh ideas to what we are doing. In that way, continuous improvement isn't punitive, it just means we keep bringing our creativity to what is needed today. That is fun.

Deborah also saw opportunities to continually move towards improvement. Several times in our conversations, I heard that she was frustrated with people who resisted change because they were satisfied with how it had always been done. She thrived when she was able to bring about positive change.

Great, we did that thing, but how can we make it better next time? What does it look like to move forward? We want it to be the best thing for the next group of students. We don't

want it just to plateau, that drives me insane. I am really thriving when I can come up with new ideas and use my creative imagination. Some people need to celebrate after an event. However, the first thing I do when an event wraps up is ask “what are we going to do better next time?” So I am really thriving when we get to talk about that and start to implement those new ideas.

She shared that her achiever strength drives her to continually improve what her team does.

While Kelsey focused on her creativity, Samuel linked his success with change to his ability to see different perspectives.

I know the culture and way of doing things here, and I'm very familiar with the people and the systems. However, I think it's the ability to think like somebody coming from the outside that has gotten me to where I am now. So while being an insider, I am trying to remain thinking like an outsider. I can think differently and act differently and that's okay. In fact, most of the time, it is going to be refreshing to most people outside my division.

Samuel has tried to envision things from an outsider's perspective in order to find different ways of trying to solve a problem. This has led to creative change solutions.

All of the participants were involved in change management at some level in their contexts. Much of what was happening in this season was related to the global pandemic, and that was understandable. The pandemic environment impacted what change was needed to serve students well. Long-term strategic change initiatives were still important, but they were met with varied priority. What was consistent was how integral to the change process were the leader's relationships with those above, below, and across the university.

Burnout and Self-Care

The participants advanced in their career from an entry level job, to the middle manager role. They had each completed a graduate degree. All had spent eight or more years in the field. Yet, their careers and their current roles were not without struggles and even burnout. This theme highlights what the participant shared about those challenges and what self-care strategies they used to persist in the field.

Deborah shared that in her career she had experienced burnout. It was tied to the struggle she had with her idea of servant leadership. Deborah entered her first leadership position with a perceived expectation that the best leaders were servant leaders. To her, that meant that leaders needed to always be serving others, which led to some resentment.

I would get frustrated with my coworkers who were not operating out of a servant-leader mindset. I told myself they were being selfish when someone had a request, and they would not respond right away because they needed to take some alone time. I thought a good leader would always be ready to serve.

This translated into Deborah continually pouring herself out to serve others. However, in doing so, she really burnt herself out. She found that as a leader, she could not pour into someone else, or pour into a project, if she had not first poured into herself. She had been running on empty and needed to fill herself up again. The terminology of servant leadership was about putting others' needs first, so it made her feel guilty when she needed to take a step back and serve herself. She said that she learned the hard way that as middle managers in higher education sometimes need to be selfish. She went on to say that it was a balance, which is something she has been working on. If you tried to do everything for everyone, you would fail at being a good leader. Deborah added:

I think when you burn out, you are forced to pull back and see that you have not been doing a good job. You get so caught up in the little things. So I think that was a really good experience to have, and how I evolved into the leadership style that I've established. Now I do tell students “nope, I can't do that right now.” Even with people above me, I have said “sorry, I can't be on one more search committee.” I can't say yes to everything. I really want to, but I know that takes away from serving myself well and doing my job well.

Since burning out, she has tried to lead by example. In a full 180-degree turn, she now would get frustrated when her staff said yes to too many things. She has modeled what it looks like to say no to the right things. She felt that has helped her whole team.

Additionally, Deborah has worked to step back and think about what really filled her outside of work.

We can all binge Netflix with a nice glass of wine, and I've been known to do that. But I don't feel satisfied with doing that. I'm an achiever, so I don't like to sit around and do nothing. So I started doing a creative craft outlet. I'm accomplishing something that I get to give as gifts. I think that's one way that I have learned in this time to serve myself.

Fostering healthy friendships is always important and more so during a pandemic. Deborah has had a weekly game night with friends from across the country over Zoom. Crafts and game nights may seem like simple things, but they have helped keep her from having another burnout.

Kelsey found that working directly with college students all day was emotionally intense. Over time, she hit a point of burnout and needed a change. She was actually ready to change careers,

I was ready for a change, even if that meant being a part-time receptionist at a nature preserve. Anything sounded better because I was just fried, like really burnt out. When I started on my career path, I felt it was a calling that I felt led to, and I specifically thought of it as such. However, I felt more led by burnout to become an administrator.

As a supervisor, she has evaluated staff workloads. In the back of her mind, she has remembered that she hit a point where the job burnt her out.

In the middle manager role, there are different sources of stress. This school year, she talked about the feeling of carrying the whole department on her shoulders. This had to do with not having a fully staffed team including the lack of a department assistant. Kelsey shared that she always has some temporary excuse for why she was doing too much. She said that she chronically thought she could see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, which came with the expectation that work would get easier soon. She was curious if other middle managers would just let things go undone in those busy times. She thought she needed to figure out how to do that because of the palpable burnout risk.

Similar to Deborah, what has been different this time for Kelsey was her intentional strategies to avoid burnout. The first thing that helped her avoid burnout was her own cognitive and emotional work. She has learned to recognize her triggers are when things are not working well, when there was complaining in the ranks, or when she felt she could not do enough.

I can push really hard, stay up late, and sacrifice some sleep to get a project done.

However, I am aware of that workaholic push. So I make sure I don't listen to that siren call, and I just recognize that it will never bring deep joy and lasting happiness. I've learned for me that I just need to notice when that's happening and remember that I'm

giving it everything I have. So that has to be enough. There is nothing else I can give besides what I have.

Similar to how she has intentionally checked in with her staff, Kelsey has had a practice of checking in with herself at the scheduled end of each work day. Sometimes, staying a little bit longer to finish up a task was a healthy choice. Other times, she gave herself permission to say “no, I’m exhausted, I think I need to close the computer and walk away.” Working at home had made that line a little blurrier. So she was intentional about staying healthy and limiting extra hours. She has also paid closer attention to her internal physical and emotional indicators. Acting on them helped her prevent a second burnout.

She has also noticed that she was rejuvenated through professional relationships with other people in similar roles and groups of like-minded leaders. She has found that more than any other professional context she has worked in, relationships have been crucial. Kelsey was part of a group of middle management leaders on campus that initially were pulled together through a leadership development program. Kelsey explained that they had similar pressures from above and below, and most of them are managing teams of people. Once the leadership development training course was over, the group stayed connected as a social group and support network. Kelsey recognized that cultivating relationships with other leaders fed her personally and professionally, and it normalized her leadership experiences and the stressors of it.

Samuel also expressed some frustrations and a lack of commitment to staying in his role, but did not specifically use the term burnout. He said the most challenging piece was having people in the right places. One of the struggles in his current role was that he had not hired any of his direct reports. He shared that he felt stuck with the wrong people, in the wrong places. He shared there was little hope of changing an employee who was a bad fit, but leaving them in their

position would hinder his leadership. He struggled with the idea that his perception was tied to the performance of who he was leading. He saw a challenge of leadership was being able to make the hard decisions to let someone go who was bringing the team down.

Even when things were challenging for Samuel, one key to remaining successful was building relationships with other middle managers. He tried to connect regularly about what was going on in their areas, and where they might be able to help each other out.

Another key to resisting burnout may have been that Samuel's identity was broader than his professional role. He had volunteered with students at a non-profit and his dissertation research followed in that vein. He talked about the value of being able to keep his day job and focus on service as well. In addition, he also had done some adjunct teaching in higher education leadership, and he wanted to continue to pursue that. Samuel has started down a different path with his doctorate. He does not want to stay in his specific role the rest of his career. He said that his team and his boss already knew that. He admitted that it might be pretentious, but he thought he could have a larger impact on the university in a different role.

For Brett, the crisis of the immediate was causing a sense of burnout. He was getting bogged down in the day-to-day issues. He was compelled to fight the fire right at his feet instead of being able to lift his head above the smoke to guide where they were headed as a department. He got stuck responding to what was most immediate, rather than what was most important. He offered that in his professional network of middle managers from other schools, there was a similar feeling of burnout, because of all the small things that came up on a daily basis.

When I point blank asked Brett how he would overcome that sense of burnout, he responded that he did not know if he would. That was when he shared that he was the fifth person in his role in four years. That was hard to imagine, but he reiterated, "it was just bang,

bang, bang, bang, every six months.” He went on to say that he did not know what the turnover rate was nationally for his position, but he wondered if he might be one of those statistics soon.

A self-described workaholic, Brett thought he had a higher work threshold than many people. In addition, he believed a fault of higher education was that it rewarded bad work-life balance. He said he was a product of that, it allowed him to be successful in terms of promotion. Yet he questioned the cost, and that cost was something he and his spouse had processed quite a bit. For the time being, Brett was willing to do more, but he was not convinced it was what he wanted to do. Fighting the daily fires has kept Brett from being able to have the meaningful conversations with students that brought him fulfillment.

Then Brett shared something that surprised me. He was considering moving backward to a lower-level job. He wondered if he was better suited at the level he supervised, rather than his current role. The struggle with burnout and the possibility of connecting with students again in a role he loved seemed tempting.

As the long weeks build up, I am not sure if this is the best role for me. I have seriously considered, quote, unquote, moving backwards to a position that works directly with students. I'm really processing that right now.

A move like that would roll back his influence at the university and it would definitely be a pay decrease, but those would be mute points if he burnt out in his current role.

The struggle was real for this group of middle managers. With that awareness, they attempted to adjust their life, work, relationships, and priorities to avoid burnout and pursue adequate self-care. Yet I still wondered how long some of them will be in their roles.

Summary of the Findings

This study was designed to understand the experiences and professional identities of four non-academic middle managers in the ever-changing landscape of small private universities across the United States. Analysis of the data led to four themes: (a) non-academic middle managers experience their work through the lens of a passion for supporting students; (b) middle managers experience a strong relational leadership component of their role; (c) middle managers continually react to change and improve their departments; (d) middle managers are aware they are prone to burnout.

I realize that this research represents an incomplete picture of the participants' experience. Yet the research did illuminate several shared experiences, traits, and motivations of the participants. These participants pushed themselves to achieve by working hard and long hours. They educated themselves and built professional networks to advance their careers. They did this in the context of a higher education landscape that is constantly changing. They managed that change which came at them with ever increasing speed, and they reacted to the unimaginable in the COVID-19 pandemic. The fires at their feet sometimes pushed the participants to the brink of burnout, but they were resilient. They implemented self-care routines, fostered supportive relationships, and analyzed the best path for their career.

Regardless how much time with students on a given day, they felt that they were serving them, if not individually, at least in a corporate sense. They focused on the needs of students and cared for them as their strengths and roles allowed. As middle managers who supervised other employees, there was a sense that they served their teams as well. These leaders fostered good relationships with individual employee's which allowed them to adapt to their needs as they found the best ways to train, support and empower them. That required transparency,

communication, collaboration, and most of all trust. Ultimately, these participants were resilient and flexible leaders who strove to support and empower students and employees alike.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study examined the experiences of four middle managers in small, private universities. More specifically, the purpose of the research was to gain insight into how middle managers experience their professional identity and role in a university hierarchy that centers them between the top executive leadership and the ground-level workforce. This study took place in a time of accelerated change in the higher education landscape, and middle managers had to navigate the challenges those changes brought for their teams and themselves. After an analysis of the data, four major themes emerged from the participants' experiences. These themes revealed the joys and challenges of leading people and managing change.

In this chapter, I connect the findings to the two research questions that guided the study. I also identify additional findings beyond those research questions. The chapter concludes with implications of the research and suggestions for further study.

Summary of Research Questions

In the tradition of phenomenology, this study examined the shared experiences of participants, in my case middle managers, who shared some common circumstances (van Manen, 1990). With this type of investigation, it was appropriate to ask two broad questions (Moustakas, 1994). The specific findings in this chapter provide summary answers to the research questions.

The two research questions of the study include:

1. How do the participants experience the professional role of manager in the middle of the university hierarchy?
2. How do the participants understand their professional identity as they manage and/or lead through significant change in the university context?

I found that the participants' experiences of their roles and their professional identity formation were closely tied, and at some points inseparable. So for coherence, I have organized the discussions of the research questions around the four themes that emerged in the findings: These themes included: (a) staying student-centered; (b) leading people; (c) managing change; and (d) burnout and self-care. Within each theme section I addressed both research questions.

Staying Student-Centered

Experience: Supporting Students was Our Primary Focus. The study participants were middle managers of student-facing teams at their universities. In each case, their career progressed from a role with more student interaction to their manager role with less direct student connection. I observed that each participant experienced some role tension between directly serving for students and their administrative function.

University middle management was born out of a business mindset to manage people and processes, and with that, Szekeres (2004) asserts that students can be seen as customers. Treating students as customers may have negative ramifications, yet Samuel and Kelsey specifically mentioned how they experienced their roles as customer service, and positively embraced students as the customers. Their goal was to serve the students well.

Viewing students as customers was a slippery slope to viewing them as a commodity (Szekeres, 2006), and it could reduce students to headcounts, id numbers, and barcodes. Brett experienced that tension. He talked about how he prepared budgets based on student tuition revenue projections, which was a reality for many small, private universities. Brett shared that at his institution, enrollment had been in decline. In spite of that, when Brett spoke about students, his focus was not on numerical growth but on individuals and their needs.

I theorized that the ability to individually care for students in a middle manager role is partially a function of being a small school with less students. There was a greater likelihood of knowing students personally. However, even in this group of small schools, I could perceive a decrease in individual student involvement by the middle manager as the size of the university increased. It was not solely a function of the manager's level of authority.

Another element of the business mindset that affected the university middle manager was the pressure to gain greater efficiency and cut costs (Ritzer, 2013; Szekeres, 2006). Samuel specifically talked about working with his team to improve in the area of efficiency. On the other hand, Samuel shared that his approach has been to find the solutions that make the most sense for students instead of what was easiest for his department. Those seemed like competing priorities.

In education, middle managers have sometimes been seen as auxiliary to the core work of educating students (Fugazzotto, 2009). Non-academic positions are often seen as less student-centric, however these middle managers viewed their role as vital to the holistic educational success of students. This agreed with W. Young's (2007) observation that middle managers and the departments they lead are integral to student learning, because what students need to be successful extends beyond the classroom. Brett felt he was helping students learn and grow through his work with academic and support services. These services were more essential to the learning process than just dealing with students issues (Scott, 1980). However, it can be difficult to categorize what is essential to learning. In a year in which COVID-19 dominated the higher education landscape, the initiatives to test, quarantine, provide telehealth, and move processes online kept students moving forward with their education. Brett talked about needing to address what he said were the Maslow (1943) level one and two needs of health, food, and lodging in

quarantine. These had to be addressed so students could ultimately reach self-actualization and growth through education.

Each of the participants had a pattern of attending to individual student's needs. However, in their middle manager role, they had also gained positional power to advocate for students globally. Samuel has used his positional influence to encourage departments to focus less on stringent policy and more on student needs. Brett has found his seat in the meeting room has been a pulpit for advocating for the needs of students. Kelsey led progress on diversity and mental health issues, which were conversations Deborah was engaged in as well.

A challenging element in this theme centered around the ever-evolving student population. Several participants acknowledged that in a changing world, the needs of students kept changing. The shift in student population included the demographics, age, race, and nationality, the type of degrees students were interested in, and the value they put on this costly education. These were shifts also addressed in the literature (Fugazzotto, 2009). Kelsey and Deborah also noted that the emotional needs of students were changing. Factoring in the COVID-19 pandemic, the needs of students had never been greater.

These middle managers did not feel that they were auxiliary to the educational process at their universities. Their experiences, as leaders of student-facing teams, gave them the feeling that they were integral to student success.

Identity: Student Supporter. In the move to middle management, these participants also had to deal with the change in role responsibilities. Analysis of the data revealed a tension between their administrative work and their mission of holistically educating students. This tension was connected to a lack of direct connection with students as they moved up the university hierarchy. Each participant explained how they supported students and that gave their

role purpose and meaning. Deborah was careful not to sacrifice authentic student connection, while Brett felt like maybe he already had. Samuel and Kelsey have shifted their focus of serving students to processes and advocacy. So at some level each of the participants has been engaging in job alignment crafting.

Wrzesniewski et al., (2013) building on Bakker's work on job crafting, wrote that "alignment crafters seek to align their jobs with a preconceived positive view of their work meaning or identity" (p. 296). I observed that the participants realigned their conceptions of their current roles to fit with what they wanted their professional identity to be. It was a professional identity that was based on a calling or personal mission of supporting the wellbeing of students.

Samuel still feels called to support students, even in his current role where he does not have regular direct student interaction. Kelsey also seemed to have successfully aligned her calling, while moving from serving students individually to supporting them broadly on campus. It was clear that her impact on students had grown in the process, which she saw as an acceptable trade-off for giving up the individual interactions.

Deborah remained cognizant of a line she would not cross. She told herself that her current role still had enough student interaction to satisfy her calling. However, moving up the hierarchy could put that in jeopardy. At that point, she would reach a level at which alignment crafting would no longer work for her. Those who succeeded in crafting their jobs to facilitate their desired experience of mission or calling, reaped the positive psychological benefits that came from perceiving a positive professional identity (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

However, Brett was wrestling in this area. His attempt to align his passion for supporting students with his administrative workload was causing him to rethink his career choices. He was

considering the radical step of a downward role move. He wondered if he would enjoy a role with less administrative pressure and more direct connection with students.

The tension between administrative responsibilities and authentic student connection was something the participants grappled with. Through job alignment crafting, each participant attempted, with varied levels of success, to construct a professional identity of student supporter that fit with their mission.

Managing Change

Experience: Reacting to Extreme Change. The literature review which laid the groundwork for this study suggested that usually transformational change does not originate with the middle manager (Belasen & Belasen, 2016). Instead, middle managers would experience strategic change initiatives handed down from the executive leadership above for them to implement (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; S. G. Marshall, 2012). This puts middle managers in a position to be change agents (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997).

However, when I asked about change in their context, I did not hear that change initiatives were being passed down from above. Instead, executive leaders were described as busy dealing with the broad changes facing their universities. Within the middle manager's silo of responsibility, I found that they addressed changes with few initiatives, oversight, or interference from above. Most changes were decided at the department level, and they felt empowered to do so. The literature did suggest that middle managers were often put in a place where they needed to make decisions and prioritize the work that staff perform, even when they lack adequate information from above (Cawthorne, 2010). I observed that this was the case.

It was not surprising that COVID-19 dominated the discussion on change. In fact, it was hard for participants to think past their current reality, and for good reason. The pandemic forced

each of them to change processes, come up with creative ways to support students, and keep students emotional and physically healthy. They did this well and each shared success stories. Their adaptability, flexibility, and staff leadership were commendable. Yet I would classify their examples as reactions to change more than long term strategic initiatives.

What I found was these middle managers did not have the opportunity to be strategic change leaders, but not for the reason I might have suspected. The magnitude of the changes that they were facing were not strategically planned, but a necessary reaction to the changing situation. Brett talked about the increased speed of change. He experienced decisions being made and remade within a week's time because of the rapidly changing environment. He talked at length about how he had to fight the fires at his feet but could not lift his head above the smoke to lead the team in innovation.

The issues the middle managers were facing required them to be creative and flexible, but for the most part, they were too busy to focus on long term change initiatives. There is the expectation that middle managers are in the business of the management of change (Hotho, 2013), yet the accelerated change in higher education kept the participants on their heels.

Identity: Change Manager. It is challenging to completely describe how participants viewed their professional identity in regard to change in the university context. It was too broad to say they saw themselves as institutional change leaders. Marshall (2008) describes that type of leader as strategic, future-focused, and risk-taking. Those attributes did not surface in the interviews.

Managers oversee short-term issues, but leaders focus on long-term results (S. G. Marshall, 2012). There were few clear examples of change leadership shared in the interviews. It seemed that Samuel was limited by budget, Brett was limited by time, and Deborah was limited

by her supervisor. This may be a result of universities not designed to let them lead strategic changes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Yet they were also not necessarily agents of change, championing and implementing the changes handed to them from executive leadership, only because I did not hear that change initiatives had come down from executive leadership above.

Their professional identity was not one of leading innovation at the institution, or even implementing it. Instead, the participants mostly identified with being change managers. This is not aimed at portraying a leader-manager dichotomy, rather just a realistic understanding of the challenging situation they found themselves in. Instead of leading or implementing university change as an agent from the middle, they functioned as heads of silos who managed the change they faced each day. They were empowered by top leadership to make the changes they saw the need for. Using the unique institutional knowledge and operational wisdom middle managers have (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011), they served students and their universities well.

They had to find solutions in the absence of direction from the supervisor (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). In addition, they had to learn as they went, adapt, and achieve objectives (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). It was a challenging job, especially in the time of COVID-19, and they managed it well. I believe that the managers desired to have a more strategic plan for change, but the global pandemic did not allow for that. Kelsey acknowledged that when middle managers are overloaded, the first thing to become neglected was setting the vision and bigger picture goals.

Leading People

Experience: Connecting and Protecting. Executive leadership hires middle managers to manage the work and staff below them. It was interesting that in response to questions about management, the participants spoke less about the work and more about the people. In fact, more

than any other aspect of the middle manager experience, participants shared about how they related to the staff they supervised.

The participants adapted to the individual staff needs, customized their connection with them, plus trusted, empowered and supported them. These relational interactions would tend to fall on the leader side of the leader-manager dichotomy (Davis et al., 2016; Do & Nuth, 2020; S. G. Marshall, 2012). This relational leadership style was consistent with what recent literature suggests. Middle managers were placing an increased emphasis on the well-being and empowerment of those they supervise (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; Geer, 2014). This served to increase team productivity and collaboration, while building trust in and respect for the leader (Branson et al., 2016; Daniels, 2016). It was evident that these leaders had the trust and respect of their teams.

With the close connection the participants had to their teams, it was not surprising that they identified with the team they led, over the group of middle managers they were peers with. That identification and loyalty to the team they led was more in line with what Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) propose than Lencioni's (2002) call to prioritize the team the manager's supervisor leads.

Out of that loyalty, there was an urge to protect their teams. At times Brett felt the need to be a backstop to protect them from what was coming at them. This is similar to Gjerde and Alvesson's (2020) example of the *umbrella carrier* protecting staff from what rains down from above. At times, Deborah has also felt the need to step in to defend her team. Middle managers who understood their inclusion into the team they supervise often assume this protector role, but those who more closely identified with upper leadership tend to be performance drivers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020).

Each participant talked about the need to care for staff (protector), but not at the expense of excellence (performance driver). Kelsey defined the tension to be both as splitting. Buller (2018) also used the term splitting, and he implied that it might not be sustainable because middle managers can feel caught between the priorities of staff and upper leadership. Kelsey was striving to find that balance. Kelsey's experience aligns with Lapp and Carr (2006) who wrote that middle managers essentially split time between caring for the team needs and meeting the top leadership's performance goals. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) concluded that trying to perfectly balance the two actually cancels each other out. This may be why Kelsey expressed that managing employee emotions while striving for excellence was the most stressful part of the middle management experience.

Identity: People Leader. The goal of the study was not to come to the conclusion about if the participants were managers or leaders, rather it was to listen to their experiences about supervising people and uncover the participants' self-understanding around interactions with their supervisees. These participants were promoted for doing good work, and in many ways that came natural to them. The added responsibility of moving up the university hierarchy was the people leadership that came with it.

It was clearly evident that these participants viewed their professional identity in regard to their experiences supervising employees. Wilson (2016) wrote identity-work requires understanding oneself in relation to others. This was key in the middle manager role that is defined by the hierarchical relation to others. Change in professional identity from staff to supervisor was tied to interactions with their team. Consistent with the literature, the internal narrative of significance these middle managers believed about themselves was influenced by interactions with their employees (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Sims, 2003).

The aforementioned experiences led me to understand the participants' identity as people leaders as opposed to merely people managers. Managers focus on processes, outcomes, solving problems, and delegating responsibility (S. G. Marshall, 2008). Yet the bulk of what the participants shared had to do with the individualized ways they were building trusting relationships with their employees. This enabled them to support and empower their teams to do good work. This supports what Marshall (2008) identified as attributes of successful people leaders who led staff in times of significant change in their universities. With the focus on leading the staff interpersonally over managing their work, I assert they evolved beyond the management function into a leadership role. The participants were not just managing the people, but actively leading them.

A middle manager's professional identity as a leader is largely a self-designated identity which is developed through interpersonal interactions (Bolden et al., 2008; Warhurst, 2012). Leadership begins when those in the middle understand themselves as leaders and not just managers (Warhurst, 2012). It was clear the participants viewed themselves as leaders. Kelsey and Deborah specifically talked about coming into that realization in their career journey. Each of the participants was able to talk about their leadership style. Leadership behavior was influenced by this sense of identity and understanding of an expanded role (Do & Nuth, 2020).

I found this to be an especially crucial aspect of their identity because ambiguity of professional identity or self-concept can negatively impact the manager's ability to build strong relationships and make good decisions (Lapp & Carr, 2006). This would suggest that their understanding of their professional identity as people leaders directly impacted relationships with staff, which created a feedback loop. Positive interactions with their teams fostered a positive self-concept of their leadership. In addition, the middle manager's individual perceptions of their

professional identity, in this case as a people leader, had an impact on their job satisfaction and resistance to burnout (Rosser, 2004).

Burnout and Self-Care

Experience: Work-Life Imbalance was Rewarded. Over the past 20 years, there has been consistent research around the concern for middle manager burnout in higher education (Jenkins, 2019; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Wilson et al., 2016). So to further the research in other areas, I intentionally avoided designing the interview to revisit this topic. Instead, I intended to look at other elements of the middle manager experience. Regardless, the participants ended up sharing their burnout experiences. This only reinforces that burnout is a prevalent issue for many university middle managers.

Burnout was defined in the literature as the “state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources leading to physical and mental exhaustion” (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 111). The participants' stress, and ultimately exhaustion, derived from multiple obligations was due in part to increased responsibility and working excessive hours to meet expectations. These issues are prominently found in the literature (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; S. M. Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, 2006).

What is less prevalent in the literature is why middle managers subject themselves to a role requiring that level of commitment. Based on the analysis of the data, one reason was these participants were already working extended hours before reaching a middle manager role. Brett and Kelsey described themselves as workaholics with a higher work threshold than the average employee. Both talked about having worked in the evening and on weekends. Brett consistently took on special projects and put in extra hours to show he was a quality worker. Kelsey shared that she has made excuses for why she worked extra hours. She told herself that it was only for a

certain project or season, but it was really because it was hard for her to leave work undone. Interestingly, these middle managers all seemed to set their own workload. Brett said that those who worked longer hours and disregarded a healthy work-life balance were rewarded. He related that he was a product of that system and it allowed him to be promoted multiple times. He believed this to be a systemic issue in higher education (A. Floyd, 2016; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001; Szekeres, 2006). Deborah also had that mindset earlier in her career, but her burnout experience has forced her to prioritize self-care in her middle manager position.

Analysis of the data also revealed that the middle manager role has only become more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants have worked longer hours with increasing demands put on them. Brett shared that he had a month of 90-hour work weeks to successfully bring students back to campus this Fall. In addition to the amount of work, Kelsey experienced that working from home has blurred her work and home life. It was easy to answer emails well into the evening, even though she valued a good work-life balance and prioritized her family.

Leading people was more demanding in a global pandemic because managing employees' emotions and stress was challenging. Interpersonal stress was an indicator of burnout potential prior to COVID-19 (McClellan, 2013), and according to the participants that stress became more prevalent.

Participants perceived that they worked harder and longer hours than others. This allowed them to be recognized for their competence and to be promoted to a middle manager role. I found it an interesting paradox that what allowed them to succeed could also cause them to fail.

Identity: susceptible to burnout. Of the themes that emerged in the study, three sets of experiences each led to a professional identity formation. It is interesting that in regards to this theme, the middle managers' past and present professional identities in other areas influenced the

experience of burnout. The participants' experiences, with their intense workloads and the steps they had taken to address self-care, point to the belief that they were susceptible to burnout.

It would have been reasonable to devote part of the discussion to participants' identities as hard workers. Kelsey and Deborah were diligent employees who had already come back from an overworked burnout situation. As they looked back, that experience has influenced their current professional identity in a positive way. They were able to justify the need for self-care in themselves and those they supervised. They still believed that they were hard workers, but with healthier boundaries.

Deborah entered her profession with an identity of a servant-leader, and she perceived an expectation to empty herself in the service of others. After that led to burnout, she has adjusted her self-concept to a more postmodern view that the servant-leader becomes some of both servant and leader (Lapp & Carr, 2006). Deborah found that sometimes the best way to lead is not to serve, when it meant sustaining her long-term ability to lead and avoid further burnout situations.

This was a role identity issue that Deborah eventually overcame. Tull (2006) argues that job dissatisfaction and burnout are directly related to role identity issues. The lack of positive professional identity development led to low morale, burnout, attrition, even leaving the profession completely (Huelskamp, 2018; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2016). Burnout was linked to job dissatisfaction, and has led to depression, work and family conflicts, and attrition (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; S. M. Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006).

Brett questioned the cost of the long hours and administrative burden. It was something he and his spouse had processed quite a bit. He has tried to tell himself that his work was

impactful and far from meaningless, but his professional identity was torn between the achievement of career growth and the altruism of serving students.

Deborah said she repeatedly asked herself why she woke up in the morning and continued doing her job. Her answer came through having quality conversations with students where she felt she made a difference. That positive reinforcement of her professional identity of a student supporter helped her justify the hard work each day. It was an example of an everyday sensemaking activity that fostered her positive professional identity and helped her resist burnout (Fugate & Soenen, 2018).

Kelsey found that managing the emotions of a group was the most stressful part of middle management. It was an internal challenge for her to stay empathetic while listening to complaints. The experience pushed back against her professional identity of being a people leader, and she was aware that this could lead to burnout.

These participants viewed themselves as change managers. As such, Samuel embraced flexibility and adaptability. The literature showed that those with the ability to deal with change had higher resilience and avoided burnout (Wilson et al., 2016). On the other hand, when Brett felt that he was not managing the change he was facing well enough and not impacting students in a deep way, he felt job dissatisfaction. The negative professional identity of not being a change leader or a student supporter fostered a sense that burnout was imminent, which he explicitly acknowledged. When the work did not match up with the desired professional identity, the middle manager felt more susceptible to burnout.

Conclusion

The participants' experiences spanned four separate thematic areas. It was clear that the supporting students was their primary focus. They did this while adeptly reacting to extreme

change during a global pandemic. In addition, they took special care to connect with their teams and protected them from attack. All of these things together required excessive work, which was applauded by the university.

I observed that the participants' understanding of their professional identity was tied to those experiences. They clung to the identity of being student supporters because that was their passion. They also cared deeply for their teams and took seriously their identity as people leaders. In addition, they were successful change managers who wished they had the bandwidth to move toward leading change. Overall, positive professional identity formation helped middle managers resist burnout but negative self-concepts were a factor in burnout susceptibility.

Additional Findings

In addition to the four major themes, the study uncovered other interesting findings. One of the most intriguing was connected to the theme of leading people. However, in this case, the manager's personal friendships overlapped with their professional identity. Examples of what I would call blurry boundaries were freely shared by three of the participants, but they were not something I directly asked about in the interviews.

Several of the participants were promoted to a middle manager role and became the supervisor of their former peers. Kelsey, was keenly aware of the power differential this created.

It was a fascinating switch for me to go from being part of the team to being the boss. I was managing people that I've been peers with for a long time. I have this very clear memory of a time an employee's car broke down, and he was late. I made a joke about it, and it was suddenly clear that I could no longer joke about people being late because I was the boss. Earlier, I would have made that joke, and we all would have laughed. But when I made it as a boss, it got tense. I was like, "Oh, I can't do that anymore."

Kelsey said that she wanted to be friends with everyone on her team, but she noticed the dynamic that there was the team and there was the boss. She noticed how it changed her as well. She said it changed the way she saw their Facebook posts. As a peer, she did not have to think about why someone stayed home from work or the self-care routines in their day or week. Now she questioned the credibility of those excuses at times, especially when an absence put pressure on her to manage the work. Kelsey found that to be a stressful part of being a middle manager. She has moved to rely more on professional friendships with other middle managers on campus and her network with people in similar positions at other universities.

From her experience, Deborah perceived that higher education has blurry boundaries between what is personal and professional. When I asked Deborah about how she led her team, she recited this poem she attributed to Albert Camus:

Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow.

Don't walk behind me; I may not lead.

Just walk beside me and be my friend.

Deborah was a very relational and empathetic person, and she saw leadership much like supporting the journey of a friend. She wanted to connect and make a difference in employees' lives, at a personal level. She explained that:

If someone tells me something from their personal life, I bring it up a month later. To me that shows I really care about you as a person. And when I care about you as a person, I can support you to do the work that you need to do better. There is something devastating when someone tells you that something important is happening in their lives, and you don't ever bring that up.

When I asked more about what she had learned about being a leader in her context, Deborah responded with a lesson on how not to be a leader, one she had learned from her supervisor. She shared this interaction they had in the past year:

I was really close with my supervisor, until she felt like she overstepped a professional boundary with another employee. So, when I came into my next one on one, she said, “I’ve decided to reestablish boundaries.” What I heard was essentially, I want to work with you professionally, but I don’t want to care about you as an individual. I was really hurt by that, because to be a good professional, I need you to care about me. Especially this year, with COVID-19, to have [my boss] say “we’re just talking about work things” was really, really hard. That is not what I needed.

Deborah bluntly said that a person was not a good leader if they only cared about their employees' work and not about them personally. She felt this was as important of a lesson as what she had learned from good supervisors and mentors.

So, I think I’ve learned from that experience, and it made me reexamine how I was leading my team. I do tell the people I supervise, “I’m not your friend, I am your boss, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you. There are things that go on in your life that I don’t need to know and some things I really don’t want to know. Yet I’m here to listen if you need someone.”

She went on to say that things in an employee’s personal life can prohibit them from being their best self at work. A leader who only looked at what a person does on the job front was not getting the whole picture. She felt that was when employee morale dropped.

Brett’s rural campus setting leant itself to being a close-knit group of people. He shared that he was friends with the people he worked with and supervised. He expressed:

I love the personal connections I have with my team and to the institution that I have been part of for many years now. We have become more than co-workers. These are my friends and this is my family.

Brett said that he cared for members of his team as friends, not just his employees. So when he met with individuals on his team, he checked in with them about work priorities, but also about how they were doing personally and how he could help. He acknowledged that it made it harder when there was a need for a difficult conversation, because he did not want to hurt their friendship.

Brett has even had conversations with employees who he felt needed to consider a career change. Brett acknowledged that those conversations were difficult. He had recently had a conversation with one of his best friends who was also one of his supervisees. He recalled that he told him:

“I have noticed that you have been struggling recently. I want to see you do well, and personally I think this job is getting in the way of that. If this job is too much, or if you are not motivated to do it anymore, let's not waste your time. If you are in a spot where you are just dreading going to work or doing a certain task. Let's see if we can alleviate that or maybe this is not the right job for you.”

Brett thought his friend appreciated the candid conversation. In fact, they continued to be in dialog about it. Brett believed his friend knew he was looking out for him as a person and not just an employee. He tried to do that for all of his team.

I think they expect me, first and foremost, to care for them as people outside of their jobs. I think those moments when I can see each of them as people first, over workers, they really appreciate that. I mean, I've heard them say it and that's why I continue to do it.

Brett, like Kelsey and Deborah, experienced a blurred line between professional and personal relationships. Yet, these participants believed they had healthy professional friendships. Tull and Freeman (2011) warn that middle managers should monitor relationships with supervisees to avoid the possibility of dysfunctional dependence. This could be an area of further research.

Implications of the Research

The findings of this study suggest that there are several areas of importance in scholarship and educational practice. There are gaps in the academic literature that are slightly smaller now in the areas of middle manager motivations, professional identity, and change management. There is added distinction between academic and non-academic middle managers. Additionally, there are implications for universities to train and retain middle managers instead of having them burnout. Finally, there are suggestions for middle managers to pursue professional identity development, networking, and self-care.

Implications for Scholarship

Previous research evidences a gap in the literature of the middle managers' professional identity and work experiences (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). This study added to the literature in the areas of student-centrism, change management, team leadership, and experiences of burnout.

Moreover, the non-academic, middle manager experiences were marginalized in peer-reviewed literature (Szekeres, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). The findings of this study intended to address the non-academic middle manager perspective. The first distinction uncovered was the reason and motivation for accepting a middle manager position. Participants expected to be promoted, as it was their primary career path and even seen as the "holy grail" role (Thornton et al., 2018, p. 208). In the literature, academics conversely had to consider if a move to

administration would be detrimental to their professional academic and research career (Franken et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2018). Academic middle managers who did move to roles such as a department Dean, had often shown they were gifted educators. While non-academic middle managers were promoted for being hard workers. In this study there were work-load situations that became unhealthy for the middle manager, and yet they were rewarded and promoted for it.

Middle manager motivations are tied to identity. In both groups, the middle manager often still identified with the group they led, and the mission and work of the department (Thornton et al., 2018). For non-academic middle managers in this study, serving students gave their work purpose and meaning. They carried their student-centric identity to the middle manager role. When they advanced beyond a tangible connection to students, their job satisfaction could suffer. Participants' use of job alignment crafting was an attempt to reconcile a student support identity with a role that did not have consistent student connection (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). While academic deans could return to teach, and in some cases were expected to after a time (Thornton et al., 2018), it was very hard for a non-academic middle manager, like Brett, to consider moving backward in a role. It would set back their career growth, influence, and compensation.

This study revealed a second gap in the literature. That is, further research is needed to understand the middle managers' experience of leading teams through times of significant change (S. G. Marshall, 2012). The literature seems to suggest that strategic change initiatives would be passed from top leadership to middle managers to implement. Middle managers then could champion the change or merely compliantly manage the change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). The research and literature seemed to contradict each other in the area of change management. From the participants' experiences, I surmise that during a global pandemic was not the ideal

time to implement strategic change initiatives, not at their level or the executive level. However, they addressed a massive wave of change during the pandemic (Baer & Duin, 2020). So to identify as a change manager is not to say, as the literature suggested, that the middle manager is merely a change compliant agent of control who feeds the corporate bureaucracy (Cooper & Boice-Pardee, 2011). Rather, it is more a function of the accelerating changes facing higher education. They diligently met the daily challenges thrown at them, even if they did not have the time and resources to strategize for the future. In this way a change manager is a positive term. It may mean that clearer distinctions need to be made in the literature for university strategic change leadership and forced change management, because both are needed. In addition, change was not just about the environment and the work. The managers shared how they compassionately led their teams through the remote-work challenges and emotional turmoil of the pandemic. This kept the staff moving forward in a difficult time. This may be the most important role of change managers.

In spite of a design to look elsewhere, this study reinforced what was known about middle manager burnout (Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). What is useful to add to the literature is the anecdotal experiences, motivations, and self-care strategies the participants shared. These insights, and those in the areas of change management, team leadership, and non-academic middle manager identity, may add a small insight to the established literature.

Implications for Practice

For Universities: I found that middle managers were promoted to their role for their record of exceptional work, both in quality and quantity. Yet the middle manager role was heavily focused on leading people. It was clear that continuing to produce quality work and

manage staff was a combination that was stressful and could lead to burnout. It would be helpful for executive leadership to acknowledge that middle managers experience their role as a leader of people as they attend to the emotional needs of employees (Belasen & Belasen, 2016; Geer, 2014). It is counter-intuitive, but middle managers were often expected to develop leadership and communication skills before assuming positions as middle managers (Ackerman, 2007). The literature described universal training in the middle manager role as problematic because the roles are very different based on the department they lead (Buller, 2018; A. Floyd, 2016). However, I would argue that the most valuable training may be in leading people. This is training all middle managers would benefit. The university could recommend training in a formal educational setting as Samuel had in his Doctor of Education program, or as Kelsey had in campus leadership cohorts, practitioner-based books, and conferences. Preparing managers to lead people well would reduce stress, burnout, and turnover. Rosser and Javinar (2003) reported that the turnover for middle managers is high compared to other areas of university. Turnover leads to a loss in institutional knowledge, a reduction in efficiency, and a cost to train new managers.

For Middle Managers: The findings of this study point to the need for middle managers to be attentive to their professional identity development, networking, and self-care. To foster a positive professional identity, it is important for middle managers to understand their role and make sure it matches with their mission. Based on the findings of the study, there will likely be an increased distance from student interaction and increased pressure to manage change and lead people. Wrzesniewski et al., (2013) wrote that people who align their role with their view of a positive professional identity will have greater job satisfaction.

Middle managers would be wise to build a professional network with people in similar leadership roles. Additionally, creating a network of like-minded leaders on campus would provide social support. Kelsey recognized that cultivating relationships with other leaders fed her personally and professionally. It normalized her leadership experiences and the stress she experienced. Networking is collective sensemaking and leadership identity activity that improves self-esteem, self-confidence, personal credibility (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Warhurst, 2012). As people have shifted to remote work and online meetings, the middle manager needs to be more intentional than ever to build those personal connections.

When asked what it took to be successful in their environment, participants talked about self-care strategies. Kelsey shared it was important to recognize work triggers by paying closer attention to internal physical and emotional indicators. Acting on them helped her prevent a second burnout. It would be wise for every middle manager to create a discipline of self-care. Strategies to do this could include strong friendships, life-giving hobbies, life-long learning, and finding self-worth outside of work. This is what the middle managers said they needed to persist in their roles.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study was an exploratory study of the broad role experiences and professional identities of middle managers. This type of study leaves many pathways for further research. Personally, I found that the most interesting revelations came from the professional identity discussions with the participants. I can envision three intriguing areas of study that could add to the research on middle manager identity.

Future research into the professional identity of middle managers could compare the relationship between professional identity and personal identity. I observed that participant

behavior was influenced by a sense of self and role (Do & Nuth, 2020). With a more complete picture of a participant's self-identity a comparison could be made for congruence. Participants freely offered some of this information and intermingled it with their professional identity. Participants shared about their personal calling, personality traits (e.g. workaholic, introverted, perfectionist) and types (e.g. MBTI, StrengthsFinder), upbringing (i.e. family dynamics, work ethic), and gender experiences.

A second path to future study could be to use social identity theory to dig into how the middle manager's professional identity is formed through membership in a community. Samuel and Deborah shared that their own education learning community formed their leadership identity, which others have seen as foundational (Wilson et al., 2016). While Kelsey shared that her experience of being part of a middle managers group on campus normalized her leadership experiences. Warhurst (2012) wrote that a new identity requires changed forms of participation within an existing community or participation in a new community.

The third direction could focus on the middle manager's professional identity through situated identity theory (Alexander & Wiley, 1981). The study could look at change over time in identity, role-conflict situations, or look at middle managers who previously worked outside of higher education to measure situational comparability. The traumatic events of the global COVID-19 pandemic likely forced some middle managers into a situated identity. For example, participants who were merely managing change might identify as change leaders and change agents in a more stable time when they had time to think strategically about the future. Brett and Deborah specifically mentioned the struggle to see past the present situation. Do and Nuth (2020) regard identity as being fluid as it changes based on interactions and self-growth. It would

be fascinating to revisit participants two years after the study to compare how participants' behaviors and identity changed over time.

Conclusion

This study aspired to present the experiences of non-academic middle managers at small, private universities in the United States. Their job titles and university locations were diverse, yet there were similar experiences that crossed over between the participants in my interviews with them. The research highlighted the commitment the participants had to serving students and the alignment crafting the participants used to see their professional identities as student-centric. The conversations uncovered the compassion and empathy these leaders had for their teams. They took great lengths to care for them while still striving for quality work.

The study will also serve as a snapshot in time of the challenges of change management during the COVID-19 era. The rate of change in higher education had been moving fast, but the pandemic accelerated those changes and added a health crisis. These leaders helped to keep their universities functioning in what could be seen as one of the darkest times in American history. Yet these people leaders and change managers staved off burnout to serve students and advance the mission of their universities.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Interview #1: The participant's experience of being in the middle

1. Would you give me a brief sketch of your background in higher education and what motivated you to work in this sector?
2. Describe your role at the university?
 - a. What is your formal title, department?
 - b. What is your basic job description?
3. Where do you see yourself fitting into the wider university structure?
 - a. On an organizational chart where do you belong?
 - b. Would you say that is the middle of the organization?
4. As a middle manager, what is expected of you and where did those expectations come from?
 - a. What about from your supervisor? Or those you supervised?
 - b. Did you experience any contradictions in those expectations?
 - c. How did you navigate those?
 - d. Did you also experience expectations from other middle-managers?
5. Can you describe the need for information and communication in your role?
 - a. With whom do you communicate?
 - b. How does that look different up, down, and across the university structure?

Interview #2: The participant's professional identity as a leader, manager, and change agent

1. What do you think a leader needs to be in your context?
 - a. How would your supervisees describe your leadership style?
 - b. How does that compare to how you aspire to lead?
2. How has your thinking about leadership changed since you first stepped into a leadership role?
 - a. Are there experiences that have shaped that for you?
 - b. What have people around you help you see about your own leadership style and ability?
3. What motivates you to work
 - a. in your role?
 - b. in your profession?
 - c. at your institution?
4. What about your work role connects to your personal mission and values?
5. What traits do you see in yourself that have allowed you to achieve in higher education?
 - a. What do you see in yourself that has allowed you to persist in your middle manager roll?
6. In what ways are you leading change in your university?
 - a. How do you go about responding to new challenges and opportunities?
 - b. What compels you to innovate in your context?
7. Changes don't always pan out the way we'd like them to. How are you able to deal with failure?
 - a. How do you lead/manage people through the consequences?

8. What does it take to be a change agent in your context?
 - a. What changes does your supervisor ask you to implement?
 - b. How do you influence others to join in on the change process?
 - c. What does it take to follow through with change initiatives?
 - d. The people who are leading change on your campus, what do they have in common?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: People Leaders and Change Managers: Perspectives from the Middle
Principal Researcher: John Regier
Dissertation Chair: Terry Huffman, PhD, Professor of Education
Organization: George Fox University
Location: 414 N. Meridian St. Newberg, OR 97132
Contact: jregier@georgefox.edu | 503.554.6026

Prospective Research Participant: The purpose of this consent form is to provide you information to help you decide whether or not to participate in this research study and to record your consent to be involved in the study. Please ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are also free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of non-academic middle managers in higher education settings. These interviews will contribute to an increased understanding and awareness of the complex work and identity of university middle managers.

PROCEDURES

Consenting to be a voluntary participant in this study, means you will be asked to participate in two separate interviews, each lasting around 60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted virtually on Zoom and will be recorded for both audio and video.

POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. It may be possible that you may experience discomfort while answering a question that may trigger unpleasant memories. If you feel uncomfortable, please tell the researcher and he will ask if you want to continue.

You will not receive any financial compensation due to the unfunded nature of this study. You will not receive any other direct benefits from the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the nature of this small, qualitative study, the researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. The researcher will work diligently to take the necessary steps to keep your personal information collected for the study as protected and confidential as possible.

- Your identity will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms for participants and institutions and use these codes in working with and discussing the data.

- Electronic files will be stored on a device with password protection.
- All recordings will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you consent now, you are free to withdraw consent later, and withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with George Fox University or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the researcher will discuss your preferences for any data in which you were a part.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

This document explains your rights as a research participant. If you have questions regarding your participation in this research study or have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact John Regier using the information listed at the top of this form.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are indicating the following:

- You understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- You understand the procedures described above, and you understand fully the rights of a potential subject in a research study involving people as subjects.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction.
- You agree knowingly to assume any risks involved in the study.
- You agree to participate in this study
- You agree to be recorded

AUTHORIZATION

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.

Participant Name (Print) _____

Participant Name (Sign) _____

Date _____