WHEN ALL IS SAID, WHAT'S DONE? HOW OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT STAFF CONTRIBUTE TO PUBLIC UNIVERSITY MISSIONS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Office and administrative support staff can be found throughout almost every work environment within higher education institutions. While inherently tied to the success of higher education programs, faculty, and students, the contributions of this small but important group of employees is often overlooked by higher education institutions and researchers alike. This study explored the work and roles of 24 office and administrative support staff working within a public research university and how these staff believed their work related to the operations, missions, and personnel of their institution.

This dissertation serves to broaden the understanding of the work of Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff within public research universities and determine how they believe their work relates to institutional missions. OAS staff provide operational support to colleges and universities via everyday interactions with faculty, management, and students. This study shows how these employees hold unique institutional expertise and occupy positions that are important for institutional success, though their value is often overlooked, underutilized, or misunderstood. Using an instrumental case study approach, guided by the theoretical framework of Argyris and Schon's Theory of Action, this study illustrates how misperceptions and lack of definition around support staff work obscure employee contributions. The study findings also show how support staff may hold more sway over institutional success than expected and provides implications for theory, practice, policy, and future research.

To Monica, my greatest supporter. I dedicate this work, and everything else, to you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Deborah worked as an Executive Assistant to a Dean at Striving Research University (SRU), managing the dean's schedule and supporting daily operations of the office. Before entering her support position, Deborah had gained a master's degree and worked briefly in a professional field, but disillusionment and work conflicts had led her to seek positions working in higher education, a field she had always admired. Deborah struggled, however, with the transition to a support role at times, believing her daily contributions and those of her coworkers often went unnoticed by university leaders. "I like to describe support staff on campus as a totem pole," Deborah explained, "but we're the part underneath the ground you can't see. We're here, and essentially the foundation of the university, and we are always going to be here; you just can't see us."

Hector worked as an office manager within a college of health. Aside from a brief stint working construction after high school, Hector worked at Striving Research University his entire career, earned a bachelor's degree while working, and was currently working towards an MBA. Hector believed his greatest asset was institutional perspective, which consistently provided him with ideas about how he could contribute to university goals. Hector's most recent idea was to repurpose an empty office that would serve as a formal work space for adjunct faculty within his department. The department chair, and Hector's supervisor, did not see this office as a priority and told Hector he would have to complete the project on his own time, so Hector did. When the project was complete, it received praise from the college dean and other faculty. Hector's supervisor was given credit for the idea, though he still felt pride about his contribution. "I pushed for that, against his will, against the odds, against no resources. Got it outfitted with computers, desks, the whole shebang. Zero cost to the university."

Emma worked as an office manager and assistant to the director of a nursing program at Striving Research University (SRU). Emma worked in and out of various higher education institutions over the years, at one point even serving as director of admissions for a small business school. Emma began her career, however, as a nurse, though personal obstacles, such as a divorce and the need to take care of her aging father, led her to leave nursing for a more predictable, though less lucrative, administrative support position in higher education. The choice to trade her professional career for a support position, however, was an easy one. Emma believed providing support for others was one of the most noble things one could do. Long removed from her years as a nurse, Emma celebrated her support role and the opportunities it provided to relieve any "burdens" from faculty or students she was tasked to support. "I tend to be a caretaker, after all. I mean, that's why I initially went into nursing, to make a difference."

The stories above represent common narratives for office and administrative support staff working in higher education environments. Deborah's education and professional experience

make her a valuable asset to the university, though she does not always feel her abilities are valued or noticed working in a support capacity. Similarly, because of his long-term employment at Striving Research University, Hector's wealth of institutional knowledge allows him to identify and solve organizational problems well before his coworkers, and with few resources. While proud of his accomplishments, Hector often feels his work is taken for granted. Emma, on the other hand, feels dedicated to providing support to her coworkers at Striving Research University. Emma's devotion to her support role comes from a strong, personal belief that helping others is one of the most important jobs a person can do.

A common theme throughout each of the previous stories is the potential and importance of office and administrative support staff working in higher education institutions. These staff occupy vital organizational roles whose primary purpose is to support the operations of the university as well as the success of its students and faculty (Graham & Regan, 2016; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014). Unfortunately, support staff often feel underutilized and underappreciated (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015), are associated with concerns over whether higher education institutions are increasingly bureaucratic at the cost of instructional quality (Archibald & Feldman, 2017; Hogan, 2011; Rogers, 2013), and hold roles that are often misunderstood or ill-defined (Szekeres, 2011). However, there is a considerable shortage of research that focuses on the work of specific support staff as well as their contributions, even though support staff occupy positions found in most any university work environment and are tasked with supporting the success of some of higher education's most important constituents, faculty and students.

While staff other than faculty and graduate assistants consist of 12 of the 14 human resources occupational categories of higher education institutions, as defined by the Integrated

Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), this study focuses on a specific category of employees who are particularly overlooked; Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff. While these staff make up only slightly more than 11% of employees working across higher education institutions (NCES, 2017), their roles and physical positions within universities have potential to considerably affect university operations. The following provides additional context for the problems surrounding the study of classified staff in higher education as well as how those problems drive this study to research the particular classification of office and administrative support staff.

Statement of the Problem

In truth, little is known about how to accurately define the work or contributions of many classified staff working in higher education institutions. For office and administrative support staff, however, a lack of definition around support staff work only begins to define a larger problem for higher education institutions. Not only does a lack of research around OAS staff work marginalize the contributions of an entire employee base, but it also inhibits understanding of how work gets done within higher education, what barriers exist around support work, and how OAS staff influence the larger organizational operations of colleges and universities. As employees inherently tied to supporting the success of university programs, faculty, and students, a lack of understanding around how support services are provided, to whom, and for what purpose, should be a concern for any higher education institution. In short, a flawed understanding around how support staff view their work and roles implies a flawed understanding of how work gets done within higher education.

While concerns around the nature of OAS staff work run deeper than definitions, attempting to identify who these employees are and where they work within higher education

institutions is a necessary starting point. Classified staff is a general term, used to refer to staff holding positions ranging from maintenance to IT support (Bauer, 2000), and is tied to employee work exemptions and the United States Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), a topic discussed more in Chapter 2 of this study. While the term classified staff provides general categories used to refer to employees working in higher education institutions, considerable ambiguity exists surrounding the roles of classified staff work, how they differ between institutions or regions, and how these employees impact the focus of higher education institutions (Gumport & Pusser, 1995; Sebalj et al., 2012; Whitchurch, 2009). This ambiguity is problematic when considering how many classified staff work in higher education today and the roles they hold, which focus broadly on organizational support. The most current data regarding staffing categories in postsecondary institutions indicate employees other than faculty or graduate assistants make up 51% of staffing classifications across institution types (NCES, 2017). Within public, 4-year institutions that number increases to 52%, and for private, nonprofit 4-year institutions, the number increases again to 53%. However, the only category of classified staff that actually includes the word "support" in their title, office and administrative support staff, consists of 10.5% of employees across 4-year public and private institutions (2017).

Despite the fact classified staff make up such a large portion of higher education personnel, very little research exists on the specific roles and contributions of these employees in fulfilling institutional missions or outcomes, particularly within the United States. As higher education organizations continue to grow in both size and mission, ambiguity surrounding how classified staff contribute to institutional goals, for what purpose, and under what conditions, is likely to cause conflict for many institutions and the employees working within them. The potential for conflict is particularly relevant for public institutions who are held accountable to

various external stakeholders. Examples of such conflict can be found throughout common organizational narratives within higher education, such as that of academic drift. Academic drift, also referred to as mission creep, discusses concerns around changing or expanding institutional values and goals among higher education institutions (Gonzales, 2013; Jaquette, 2013; Morphew, 2000). Narratives like academic drift, however, often focus on the effects changing missions and values have on student enrollment, instruction, or faculty work. Research notes how academic drift can pull faculty away from work which they value, burden faculty with new and changing responsibilities, or force faculty to adapt to changing curricula and student needs (e.g., Gonzales, 2013 and Jaquette, 2013). However, narratives such as academic drift have potential implications for classified staff as well, specifically office and administrative support staff. OAS staff are often tasked with providing faculty and programmatic support, however the nature of that support and what drives their work has gone wholly unresearched, especially when it relates to university goals and missions.

Office and administrative support staff, though small in number compared to instructional staff, can be found in almost every work environment within higher education institutions. OAS staff are likely to hold positions that researchers have described as frontline and backstage positions. Frontline positions are those in which staff are the initial point of contact for institutional constituents, support varying missions ranging from enrollment to instruction, and, due to their frontline positions, have potential to affect perceptions of campus environments (Bauer, 2000; Graham, 2013; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015). In contrast, backstage positions consist of employees who support the day-to-day operations of institutions. Backstage employees are likely to be "at the whim" of changing administrative goals within their institutions and tasked to support the goals of their supervisors, whether right or wrong (Somers

et al., 1998, p. 46). Because OAS staff roles vary, a lack of research focused on how their work is defined, and for what purpose, is a highly overlooked problem in the higher education staffing literature. More discussion is needed to determine how the work of OAS staff is defined as well as how these employees are utilized within higher education institutions. Failure to understand the work of OAS staff not only limits our understanding of employees tasked with providing support for key organizational goals and personnel, but also organizational factors that direct their support efforts.

Before attempting to discuss the specific work of office and administrative support staff, however, developing a basic understanding of the context and other classified staff they work with, as well as how they are commonly viewed within their institutions, is important. Without some level of context and definition that acknowledges the differences between classified staff within public institutions, the term itself simply becomes a catch-all phrase used to describe a large group of employees, many of whom carry distinct responsibilities. Administrative researchers have recently argued how broad staffing categories among classified staff are problematic because their purpose is to "attempt to normalize variability" among workers who hold distinct campus roles (Powers & Schloss, 2017, p. 70). This kind of generalization ignores context and individual employee contributions and, in the case of support staff, limits the ability for institutions to argue for or against the need for additional support. The following sections provide additional support for why we need to consider the work of OAS staff in relation to changing organizational missions and how their roles within higher education organizations are largely misunderstood.

Making the Invisible Visible: Defining the Roles of OAS Staff

As previously mentioned, the term classified staff itself covers such a broad array of employees that attempts to group staff into a single category is not only unproductive, but reductive as well. Using the term classified staff to refer to all non-faculty personnel implies staff work is generally similar in nature, or at least has similar goals. On the contrary, the administrative work of classified staff within public universities varies greatly, so much so that attempting to define the work of these employees has been the focus of a select few scholars for some time. Over 20 years ago, in a study exploring administrative growth in higher education, Gumport and Pusser (1995) noted "there is no uniform definition in higher education research of what constitutes administration or administrative functions" (p. 496). This lack of definition continues to remain a topic of concern for some scholars who also argue common definitions are difficult to provide since the roles of administrative personnel may differ across regions or institutions (Graham & Regan, 2016; Sebalj et al., 2012; Whitchurch, 2009).

In reality, classified staff in higher education occupy positions ranging from top, executive management positions to part-time service and support categories. For example, IPEDS data break human resources staffing categories into 14 distinct categories (Powers & Schloss, 2017). While more details are provided on each of these categories in Chapter 2, these categories do not provide enough detail for organizational researchers to understand the nuances or varying responsibilities among staff. Moreover, the IPEDS human resources reporting categories are inherently tied to titles and work responsibilities defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) via their Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. Mapping IPEDS categories to standard occupational codes further generalizes the work of higher education employees by attempting to equate higher education work to the work of all other industries.

Office and administrative support staff seem to serve as an extreme example of this overgeneralization. Within the IPEDS system OAS titles are exclusively tied to BLS SOC codes and responsibilities, with no acknowledgement of how OAS roles within higher education might differ from those outside of colleges and universities.

IPEDS provides no definition for the OAS staff occupation but, instead, refers researchers or practitioners to several dozen position titles ranging from potentially applicable positions, such as executive assistants, to those which clearly have no relevance to higher education, such as the category of gambling cage workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). These categories also appear to assume OAS work is always focused on specific types of work, such as finance or communications, when OAS staff in higher education institutions are likely to provide support for a variety of work and people. As mentioned, frontline OAS staff may act as a first point of contact for students, legislative officials, or other institutional stakeholders (Bauer, 2000) while backstage OAS staff may occupy positions supporting administrative operations or institutional goals (Somers et al., 1998).

Moreover, a lack of definition around specific classified staff in higher education led one researcher to label OAS staff as invisible employees (Szekeres, 2004) in an effort to call attention to concerns surrounding their marginalization or misunderstood work. As noted by Judy Szekeres (2004), the researcher who coined the phrase invisible employee, the problem with misunderstanding OAS staff work is a problem of antiquated thinking and lack of effort to define their work, as explained in the following excerpt:

> When provided at all, many of the constructions of administrative staff demonstrate false impressions of what administrators actually do, the nature of their work and their relationship to the organization. The commonly held belief of the administrator as a

> secretary who is at the beck and call of academics to do typing, distribute notices and take phone calls does not capture the complexity of their roles today, the skills required, or the difficulty of where they sit in the organization (Szekeres, 2004, p. 20).

While the quote above refers to research conducted outside of the United States over 15 years ago at the time of this study, and refers to staff as administrators, the references to office work, such as typing or answering phone calls clearly parallels the misperceptions of OAS staff working in public higher education. This quote also acknowledges the varied skills necessary among OAS staff. More recently, though still outside of the U.S. higher education context, researchers noted some OAS staff may even be described as blended professionals who occupy specialized roles, require a growing number of educational credentials, and contribute to multiple goals within their institutions (Whitchurch, 2009).

Whether as "front-line" representatives promoting student enrollment, retention, and satisfaction (Bauer, 2000; Graham, 2013; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015) or as "backstage" employees supporting the missions or daily operations of the institution (Somers et al., 1998), office and administrative support staff should be seen as anything but peripheral to a well-functioning university. As institutions continue to grow, and concerns remain around the affect trends like academic drift have on faculty and students, understanding the specific work of OAS staff, and how that work supports the organizational goals and members of higher education institutions, is increasingly important if stakeholders hope to advocate for additional support from these employees. Being able to understand the work of OAS staff, and how their work relates to higher education initiatives, is particularly relevant for public research universities, as these institutions are held accountable to public stakeholders and have historically positioned themselves as institutions designed to benefit the public good (Thelin,

2011). Acknowledging the lack of understanding and definition surrounding administrative personnel, this study focuses on better understanding the roles and contributions OAS staff hold and how their positions are inherently tied to supporting higher education employees as well as changing trends within institutions. The following section attempts to begin to provide definition to this largely misunderstood group of employees.

Attempting to Define Office and Administrative Support Staff

Because there is extensive variability related to the roles and work of classified staff, this study will concentrate on a specific category of staff as defined by the IPEDS Human Resources (HR) reporting categories. The term Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff is a term pulled from the IPEDS HR reporting categories to define the group of staff explored by this study. However, since the IPEDS system does not provide any specific definition of OAS staff, as mentioned, I provide my own definition here. My definition of OAS staff leans heavily on the definition of administrative staff provided by Szekeres (2004), clerical staff as discussed by Bauer (2000), and the idea of the "bounded professional" envisioned by Whitchurch (2009). Szekeres (2004) provides the beginnings of a definition for administrative staff in the following excerpt:

> …people in universities who have a role that is predominantly administrative in nature, i.e. their focus is about either supporting the work of academic staff, dealing with students on non-academic matters, or working in an administrative function" (2004, p. 8).

While Szerkes's definition provides an excellent framework, it still covers a broad group of employees and includes some staff, such as marketing professionals or information technologists, whose work focuses on specific organizational goals rather than general support.

While this study will later show how OAS staff responsibilities may overlap in some ways with those of other higher education staff, differentiating OAS staff from other valuable higher education staff is important. For example, student affairs professionals or librarians hold unique institutional responsibilities (see Anderson et al., 2000; Perini, 2016, respectively), and facility/service occupations reflect a particularly underrepresented group of employees who are often subcontracted out by the university (Rhoades & Maitland, 1998) and deserve individual consideration (see Magolda, 2014). The office and administrative support staff discussed in this study, I contend, fall more in line with who Whitchurch (2009) defined as "bounded professionals," whose positions provide clear structural boundaries (e.g., functions or job descriptions) and whose work identities are constructed through the shared practices of similar employees. While bounded professionals may require knowledge of specialized expertise in their work, the perception of their roles within organizations is often predetermined and geared toward some level of standardization. OAS staff also typically navigate a variety of responsibilities and may hold advanced degrees or industry experience.

In summary, I define OAS staff as those whose day-to-day responsibilities are largely administrative in nature, who provide direct support to management and faculty, and who may or may not hold supervisory roles over other OAS staff. OAS employees, I argue, should be seen as those who provide support to institutional missions via everyday interactions with students or educational stakeholders and have unique institutional knowledge. These employees also occupy positions that are seen as "invisible" by the institution (Szekeres, 2004) and whose value is often overlooked and underutilized, or whose roles, on paper, are viewed as clerical or primarily oriented toward administrative support.

Statement of Significance

As mentioned, the work of office and administrative support staff in higher education institutions is often omitted from higher education staffing literature, disconnected from organizational narratives such as academic drift, and overly generalized. Generalizing the perspectives of OAS staff can negatively affect institutions through reduced job satisfaction and increased employee turnover (Henning et al., 2017). Misperceptions of support staff work can even negatively affect institutional factors such as campus climate, student enrollment, or employee commitment to organizational goals (Bauer, 2000; Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015). However, through fostering a better understanding of the work of OAS staff, institutions can improve employee retention and engagement, better recruit employees, and help existing employees contribute to their institutions in ways that benefit both the institution and individual.

When considering the significance of this study, I was often reminded of the idea of Kaizen, a process improvement technique popularized by the Toyota Corporation. At its core, Kaizen is a process that values the work and feedback of all individuals within an organization. In the automobile industry in which it was born, this process values the work of every employee within the organization, understanding each worker carries a unique perspective that can improve the work of the organization at large. A Kaizen approach requires workers from multiple levels within the organization to discuss operations, goals, and improvement as a team, each bringing their own experience to the table. Coming from the characters *kai*, meaning change, and *zen*, meaning good, Kaizen can be generally understood as a process aimed to achieve change for the better (Cuthcer-Gershenfeld, Brooks, & Mulloy, 2015). By bringing the perspectives of OAS staff into discussions surrounding academic drift or student and faculty support, public universities can better understand how work is done by support staff within their universities,

and how that support is directed towards existing or changing institutional goals. Better understanding the work of OAS staff can also help institutional stakeholders justify the benefits of support programs and services these employees provide, which in turn will improve the ability for institutional stakeholders such as faculty or department heads to argue for additional support resources. Furthermore, by improving understanding of how OAS employees contribute to organizational goals, public institutions can improve internal working relationships between all staff by articulating how the work of each support staff member relates to, and supports, key missions and personnel within higher education institutions. Creating a better understanding of how OAS staff support institutional goals is particularly relevant for large, public research universities whose missions are often tied to public interests.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to broaden the understanding of the work of Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff across public research universities and to understand how OAS staff work relates to the organizational goals of their institutions. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Office and Administrative Support Staff view their roles within their institutions?
2. How do Office and Administrative Support staff describe their work in relation to university operations and goals?
    a. Do Office and Administrative Support staff feel they could better contribute to the goals of their institutions? If so, what are some common obstacles Office and Administrative Support staff say keep them from contributing to these goals?

3. How do Office and Administrative Support staff believe their work is viewed by other employees within the university?

Definition of Key Terms

Discussions surrounding the work of office and administrative support staff in higher education often suffer from lack of definition surrounding key terms, which can create confusion (Gumport & Pusser, 1995; Sebalj et al., 2012). For this study, I use the following terms to provide clarity and definition to specific employees or concepts surrounding the work of OAS staff.

Academic Drift – A term used broadly in higher education to attempt to describe expansions or changes in institutional missions or values of higher education institutions. The terms mission drift, mission creep, or striving often are synonymous with or accompany the term academic drift (Gonzales, 2013). As OAS staff are generally tasked with providing support to both institutional stakeholders (e.g., students and faculty) as well as to the missions of institutions themselves, the work of OAS staff should be viewed as considerably relevant to discussions around academic drift.

Classified or Administrative Staff – The terms classified staff and administrative staff are broad terms used to refer to all employees working in higher education institutions who do not fall under the categories of instructional staff or graduate assistants, as defined by the IPEDS reporting categories. Other terms commonly used to describe administrative or classified staff within the literature include professional staff or support staff. In the context of this study, classified or administrative staff does not refer to executive management positions in higher education institutions (e.g., provosts or deans), as these positions are often occupied by employees who also hold varying instructional staff titles. The terms classified and

administrative staff are used interchangeably in this study with preference given to the term classified staff.

Instructional Staff – Refers to higher education staff whose primary responsibilities include instruction or a combination of instruction, research or public service (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). Instructional staff may also be referred to as faculty throughout this study and often may hold administrative positions.

Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff – These staff are the primary focus of this study and occupy one of the 14 IPEDS reporting categories further discussed in Chapter 2. Office and administrative support staff occupy both frontline and backstage positions, may hold advanced degrees or industry experience, and represent employees whose contributions are often overlooked or misunderstood (Szekeres, 2004). Moreover, these employees often work in close proximity to higher-level managers and administrators within university environments. Working closely with institutional leaders is an important trait of OAS staff, as it allows them to potentially influence university leadership or, conversely, be placed in positions where they must conduct work per the direction of their supervisor, whether that work is right or wrong (Somers et al., 1998). Moreover, OAS staff have been decreasing in recent years, despite perceived needs for additional support voiced by public higher education institutions. Within public, 4-year universities, OAS staff as a percentage of total employee population has decreased regularly over the past five years. The most recent data on these employees currently place them at 10.3% of the employee base of public, 4-year universities (NCES, 2017) Additional information about these employees in relation to the study design is provided in Chapter 3.

Chapter Summary and Dissertation Structure

In this chapter, I positioned the work of office and administrative staff in a broader context around public higher education, relating their roles to organizational narratives, such as academic drift, and illustrating how research around higher education staffing has thoroughly overlooked the roles of these employees. I have made the case that within this context, a lack of understanding about the work of OAS staff limits the ability for all stakeholders to argue for or against increased staffing trends among support personnel and resources. The ability to argue for support is particularly relevant for public institutions who consistently battle for increased funding and public support.

This dissertation is structured around eight chapters. In the following chapter, I provide additional context to the study via a review of the literature on the organizational structure of public universities and the types of staff who work within them. I also provide context around organizational narratives, theories, and obstacles that relate to OAS staff in higher education. Chapter 3 provides information and justification for the research methodology used for this study. Chapter 4 presents information to the reader around the context of the case study used to guide this dissertation, orienting readers to the characteristics of OAS staff participants within the current study and general participant beliefs regarding the missions of the case study institution. Chapters 5 through 7 present findings of the study around three overarching themes. Chapter 8 discusses the results of the study as well as implications for its findings and areas of future research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the previous chapter, I provided a brief overview of the significance for exploring the work of office and administrative support staff (OAS) in public higher education institutions. Particularly, I discussed organizational narratives, such as academic drift, that may call into question the roles specific support staff play when institutions experience changing values or missions. I also discussed a lack of clarity around the roles of OAS staff in relation to institutional missions as well as how OAS staff occupy physical or symbolic positions (e.g., frontline or back stage) within organizations that have potential to impact faculty and student outcomes as well as institutional operations. Additional context is needed, however, to understand the environments in which OAS staff work, the obstacles they face, as well as common models or theories that researchers can use to understand the work of administrative support staff. To provide context, I begin this chapter by briefly summarizing how higher education systems, and the staff working within them, are commonly viewed and structured.

Participation in higher education systems in the United States has expanded exponentially in recent decades, with colleges and universities becoming some of the chief suppliers of scientific discovery and professional training across the nation (Bok, 2013). Models of higher education institutions in the United States range from open-access, 2-year community colleges to prestigious, and exclusive, private universities. Among the variety of higher education institutions, however, public research universities represent many of the largest organizations in higher education, produce more highly trained employees than any other higher education sector, and are inherently tied to the interests of the state, either through funding or mission (Bok, 2013). To support this role, these institutions employ thousands of faculty and staff to support a growing number of degree offerings and institutional missions. However, the activities of a considerable

population of employees within these universities are largely ignored in the higher education literature; the ranks of classified staff.

Classified staff, due to the broad nature of their work, are difficult to define yet have come to make up a majority of employees in public higher education institutions (Szekeres, 2011; NCES, 2017). This chapter serves to provide context around the staffing policies and structures of higher education institutions, specifically through the lens of public research universities and the classified staff who work within them.

The first section of this chapters provides an overview of the governance structures and missions of public higher education institutions and the people who work within them. Governance structures and missions are important to understand when discussing the work of classified staff because they shape the environments and conditions under which staff work. The chapter then discusses common models and theories used to describe and analyze how public institutions typically operate. The chapter closes with a discussion of the roles, policies, and obstacles related to the work of classified staff, and how public higher education institutions can benefit from better understanding and engaging this growing and diverse group of employees.

Governance Structure and Missions of Public Universities

Governance Structure

The diversity of colleges and universities in the United States is substantial. More than 4,500 degree granting institutions exist throughout the United states today, ranging from small community colleges to elite private universities (NCES, 2017). While the model of the large, public research university in the United States may commonly be associated with the land-grant universities fostered by the Morrill Act of 1862, the more publicly recognized model used today did not come into prominence until the 1950s (Bess & Dee, 2008; Thelin, 2011). Public universities rely heavily on state funding to carry out their day-to-day operations and, in response

to accountability issues that come with receiving state funding, often take a bureaucratic approach to operational management.

Understanding how public universities are governed is important when considering the work of administrative personnel. From state-level coordinating boards to department-level chairs, governance structures within public institutions determine what programs or departments exist, and why, as well as the staff that support them. In short, governance structures within public institutions are directly tied to the work of classified staff as well as the narratives of administrative bloat discussed in chapter 1. In many cases, administrative governance within public universities is dependent on the level of differentiation and integration of tasks within the university.

Differentiation refers to the "degree of departmental specialization" within the university, whereas integration refers to the level of "linking and coordination of departmental functions" among institutional members (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 176). The larger the institution, the more likely there is to be higher levels of differentiation. Within large, public institutions, questions around who is responsible for the management of the university, and why, are common themes throughout the literature. Discussions about governance, however, often focus on the roles of faculty and high-level administrators. Glaringly absent from this discussion is the role of classified staff.

While there is no common definition of classified staff, their ranks can be found throughout the university in offices ranging from information technology to student affairs. In fact, when taken as a whole, classified staff often outnumber faculty and management positions in many universities, yet little is known about the authority or influence these employees have within institutions. More often, classified staff are viewed as "invisible workers" who provide

undefined general support to the university, yet the number of these staff are increasing, and their roles, once considered powerless, are becoming more specialized (Szekeres, 2011). An increase in the number and specialization of staff brings into question what authority classified staff hold and how their work might directly or indirectly influence university missions and operations. However, governance of public universities is more likely to be viewed as a hierarchical process rather than through degrees of differentiation or integration, as these institutions often take a top-down approach to governance and staffing. To begin to understand where classified staff, and more specifically office and administrative support staff, are situated within the university, understanding the hierarchical nature of their work environments is an important place to start.

Public universities are governed by either a state coordinating or governing board. Coordinating boards typically serve to provide a "unified voice" for all types of public higher education institutions within their state and attempt to reduce budgetary competition between institutions (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 22). Governing boards, also referred to as Boards of Regents, focus instead on only one sector of higher education (e.g., research universities). These boards take a more hands-on approach to governance and are concerned with whether institutions responsibly use public funds. As a result, university governing boards often have more say in the creation or expansion of programs or the selection of institutional personnel (Bess & Dee, 2008).

While coordinating and governing boards govern institutions on a macro-level, many public institutions also have a board of trustees who aim to guide the decisions of the university at the local level. Boards of trustees focus on the financial stability and performance of the university as well as strategic planning (Bess & Dee, 2008). The university president typically works closely with, and is accountable to, the board. University presidents often act as the "face" of the university and are responsible for communicating the goals and missions of the university

to the general public. While, to some extent, all public university employees carry responsibility for ensuring the goals and missions of the university are met, the university president is essentially the symbolic leader of the institution.

If the president serves to provide public leadership and vision for the university, then the executive vice president, or provost, directs that vision. The provost is responsible for the practice, planning, and coordinating of day-to-day activities across the university and directs all classified staff (Bess & Dee, 2008). However, much like the director of a large-scale movie, the provost typically does not direct alone, but requires the help of assistant directors to carry out various goals and operations. Provosts within large, public universities typically delegate diverse responsibilities to administrative staff officers, or vice presidents, throughout the university. These responsibilities are often made clear via individual job titles. For example, most public universities have some iteration of a vice president for student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment, administration and finance, research, and development, the latter being largely responsible for building external relationships with the university (Bess & Dee, 2008). Each of these VPs are, in turn, responsible for the direction of offices throughout the university, ranging from admissions and human resources, to research and development.

Rounding out the management structure of public universities are the deans of individual schools or colleges and the department chairs and faculty who work within them. Deans are responsible for developing operational budgets and policies related to their college's respective field (e.g., education, law, psychology, etc.). Department chairs are often drawn from the faculty ranks of these colleges and are primarily responsible for "leading the fundamental academic unit of the institution" (Gmelch & Schuh, 2004, p. 1). Chair positions are unique leadership positions within higher education institutions in that their roles include administrative, management, and

faculty responsibilities. Chairs also have varying levels of authority and often act as mediators between upper-level administration and faculty (Bess & Dee, 2008; Gmelch, 2004). Faculty, while to some extent can be found occupying any of the positions mentioned above, are most often associated with decision making at the department level, particularly related to teaching, curriculum, and research activities. At public research universities, faculty are also often responsible for selecting doctoral students for admissions into PhD programs, a process that often requires collaborating with classified staff in admissions or student affairs offices. An argument can be made that faculty within public research universities hold more power than any other position, since faculty represent a difficult to replace collection of subject matter experts most closely associated with prestige or resource generating activities (e.g., grants, publications, teaching, etc.) However, governance authority of individual faculty often may be relegated to decisions within their respective disciplines and hindered by limited knowledge of the administrative or financial operations of their institution (Bok, 2013).

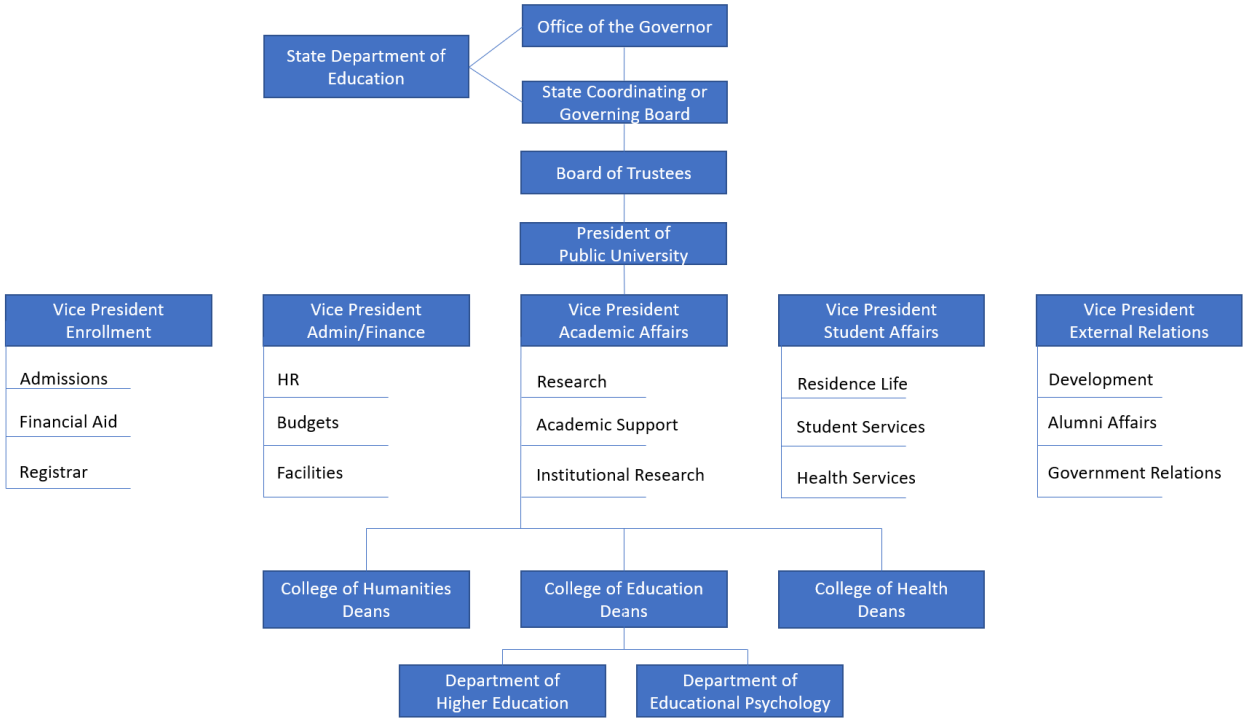

Figure 1: Sample Organizational Chart for a Large Public University. Modified from Bess and Dee (2008)

Understanding the organizational structures of universities can help to clarify where classified staff are positioned within public universities and why. However, structure itself does not necessarily explain purpose. While governance structures shape the environments in which classified staff work, as well as who they report to, missions help define the goals of all staff working in public universities. Institutional missions, therefore, should be viewed together with governance structures when exploring the work of classified staff.

Missions of Public Universities

The missions and goals of the public university have varied throughout history, often reflecting the sociocultural ideals and environments of their time. Missions have ranged from humanistic pursuits, such as teaching and public service, to industry driven pursuits focused on employability or applied research (Saunders, 2014; Scott, 2006). Many public universities define teaching, research, and service as core missions, with service being a relatively recent addition and unique to American universities (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

The public service mission of American research universities was born from the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. This act of federal legislation filtered state funds into the development of public colleges and universities for the purpose of "establishing collegiate programs in such 'useful arts' as agricultural, mechanics, mining, and military instruction" that would benefit the public good (Thelin, 2011, p. 76). And while public universities opened the doors for increased access to higher education for some, it also created a complex relationship between state governments and public higher education institutions where an increased emphasis on record keeping, evaluation, and industry development, often pulled attention away from student education (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Thelin, 2011). Nevertheless, the Morrill Acts essentially defined what is now commonly recognized as the American public research university, which in

turn created doctoral programs and a "proliferation of new academic units" that would begin to define the organizational structures of these universities (Thelin, 2011, p. 104).

The expansion of public higher education fostered by the Morrill Act would eventually lead to an expansion in university size and administrative personnel. In a piece for the National Education Association Almanac of Higher Education, Rhoades and Maitland (1998) noted much of the research on labor contracts in higher education focused on faculty, yet faculty only made up only 29% of the campus workforce. Moreover, employees outside the category of faculty included so many employee classifications that the authors described the variety as simply "extraordinary" (p. 110). Twenty years later, there is still little research that helps define this group of employees and questions remain as to how well the field of higher education has monitored changing staffing trends among classified staff (Szekeres, 2011; Sebalj, Allyson, & Bourke, 2012; Rogers, 2013). What is not in question, however, is how the missions of public universities have consistently changed and expanded over time, and so too the employees who work within them (Bok, 2013). This expansion of size and purpose creates a need for researchers to monitor changes in staffing among public higher education institutions, beyond academic staff, so institutions can understand how employees are utilized, and for what purpose. But to do that, researchers need a clearer idea of how to define the types of employees working within public higher education institutions. Catch-all phrases, such as classified staff, can create ambiguity around varying staff roles and assume all staff share a similar sense of purpose. To gain a better perspective of the variety of classified staff working in public higher education, further definition is needed.

Classifications and Compensation of Staff in Public Higher Education

Fair Labor Standards Act and Employment Exemptions in Higher Education

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is a U.S. Federal Law enacted in 1938. Designed to protect employees from the questionable practices of their employers, such as child labor or nonexistent overtime pay, one of the defining characteristics of the FLSA is that it places employees into two distinct categories: exempt and non-exempt. Employees categorized as non-exempt from FLSA restrictions are protected by provisions that define minimum wages and conditions for overtime pay. Certain exemptions to the FLSA, however, allow employees to occupy positions that are not restricted by the FLSA. These employees are classified as exempt (Northwestern University, 2017). Exempt employees are classified as such via exemption tests that gauge salary level, salary basis, and job duties. Once classified as exempt, employees fall into three broad categories; executive, administrative, or professional employees. Due to the typical nature of their work, exempt employees are sometimes referred to as "white collar" exemption categories. Basic requirements for claiming a white-collar exemption are listed in Appendix A.

While FLSA classifications help universities classify staff into broad categories, they do not necessarily help researchers, students, public officials, or even the general public understand the roles higher education employees occupy. The most detailed tool available for classifying staff across universities is the National Council for Education Statistics' (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which classifies employees using distinct Human Resources (HR) Occupational Categories.

IPEDS HR Occupational Categories in Higher Education

In a study exploring administrative growth in higher education, conducted over 20 years ago, Gumport and Pusser (1995) noted there is neither a "uniform definition in higher education

research of what constitutes administration" nor common definitions for those who conduct administrative work (1995, p. 496). And while all categories of administrative and non-instructional staff make up over 50%[1] of full- and part-time higher education employees in the United States (NCES, 2017), the lack of definition Gumport and Pusser noted remains true today, in the U.S. and abroad, and is further complicated by differences between institutions and regions (Graham & Regan, 2016; Whitchurch, 2009).

Seemingly in line with the concerns of Gumport and Pusser, IPEDS reporting categories have undergone several alterations over the years. Prior to 2012, IPEDS employee classifications remained relatively consistent for over two decades before changing to align with the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The motivations for this change was to update employee categories to reflect changes in the nation's workforce since 2000. However, the current IPEDS HR reporting classifications do not always directly align with 2010 SOC categories and include several categories defined to represent the unique workforce of degree granting institutions. While the SOC system includes 23 major reporting categories, IPEDS HR classifications include only 14 general categories. As an in-depth discussion of each of the IPEDS reporting categories is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following sections will provide a general outline of the IPEDS reporting categories, which I have broken into five groups: (1) Postsecondary Faculty, (2) Executive, Administrative, and Managerial employees, (3) Professional Service Staff, (4) Support Staff, and (5) Graduate Assistants, which IPEDS breaks into three categories and I count as one. A complete table listing all current IPEDS HR reporting categories, and their relation to the SOC reporting categories, can be found in Appendix B. Since this study focuses on classified staff positions, and

[1] Faculty (instruction/research/public service) and Graduate Assistants make up 49% of Fall 2017 IPEDS staffing categories across public and private postsecondary institutions.

specifically support staff, I provide a summary of three of the five categories above but do not discuss postsecondary faculty or graduate assistants. More information on how faculty and graduate assistants are categorized can be found in Appendix B via the IPEDS glossary (2018).

Executive, Administrative, and Managerial Staff

Executive, administrative, and managerial staff are those whose primary responsibilities are focused on the management of the institution. Staff who fall within this classification are typically defined by work that directly relates to the "management policies or general business operations of the institution…department or subdivision" (Zabeck, 2011, p. 13). Employees such as presidents, provosts, or deans may also fall into this category, as long as their principal activities are administrative and not instructional in nature (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Higher education employees fall into this category only when their primary assignments require them to spend more than 80% of their time in a supervisory role (Zabeck, 2011). Using this metric, employees under this classification work in roles ranging from marketing directors to financial managers. A defining characteristic of these employees is that, by definition, their jobs "customarily and regularly" are required to "exercise discretion and independent judgment" on behalf of the university (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). Since the roles of executive, administrative, and managerial staff tend to cross boundaries between management and faculty positions at times, these employees are uniquely positioned to incrementally or drastically influence the operations of their respective institutions, as well as the work of the staff they manage.

Professional Service Staff

Prior to the alignment with the SOC classification codes, IPEDS reporting categories distinguished between "professional" and "non-professional" work, with entire groups of employees defined as "Other profession support/service." Essentially, these employees held

similar levels of education and training to executive, administrative, and managerial staff, but held roles that were focused more on institutional support than management. For example, these employees could include student service professionals, lawyers, or even surgeons and ministers (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). A common thread between these employees is their positions are often tied to professions that require higher levels of training. And while the category of "Other Professional" staff is now broken into multiple categories to provide more definition, their jobs are still defined by professions that feel distinctly "white collar," especially when compared to the service and support roles of other university employees.

Service and Support Staff

Prior to the SOC realignment, service and support staff in higher education were historically broken into four IPEDS reporting classifications: technical and paraprofessional staff, clerical and secretarial staff, skilled crafts, and service and maintenance. These employees represented what were once considered the non-professional categories within higher education, though that description is hardly accurate given the nature of their work. Nevertheless, the non-professional designation, and related classifications, serve to provide a general overview of how higher education institutions have traditionally viewed and divided staff by their work.

Technical and paraprofessional staff (TAPS) consisted of positions that "require specialized knowledge but provide support to professional staff" (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014, p. 6). Oriented towards vocation, TAPS often require a maximum of an associates-level degree or may acquire on the job training. Examples of TAPS range from paralegals to nuclear technicians. *Clerical and secretarial staff* were defined as employees responsible for "internal and external communications, recording and retrieval of data, and/or information and other paperwork required in an office" (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). Also referred to as office and

administrative support occupations, these employees included departmental bookkeepers, payroll officers, or desktop publishers.

Skilled crafts classifications have traditionally covered employees whose jobs require manual labor and who receive training through apprenticeships or on-the-job experience and are currently grouped into the categories of "production, transportation, and material moving" (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). These employees include jobs such as welders, carpenters, or waste treatment plant operators. The final category of *service and maintenance employees* are staff who require "limited degrees of previously acquired skills and knowledge" and "perform duties that result in or contribute to the comfort, convenience, and hygiene" of students and personnel and "contribute to the upkeep of the institutional property" (IPEDS Glossary, 2017). Other employees commonly interact with service and maintenance staff, since these employees hold positions such as police officers, food services workers, or grounds workers.

Office and administrative support staff, at the heart of this study, occupy one of the 14 IPEDS categories discussed in this section and are often found in professional service or support staff roles. OAS staff support broad service categories that may not be overtly tied to instruction but are indirectly supportive. Because of their inherent focus on supporting institutional leadership, such as faculty, as well as the organizational goals of the institution, OAS staff are particularly relevant to debates focused on diminishing support structures of public universities as well as what staff are necessary to support the expanding missions of public research institutions.

While this chapter so far has provided an overview of the structure and missions of public universities, and where classified staff fall within those categories, I have still not discussed general theories and models related to how and why classified staff are utilized. The models

discussed in the following section help provide the reader an understanding of the ways in which staff interact or are utilized within public institutions. Concomitantly, the theory I discuss, Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978), plays an integral role in the methods I use to explore the beliefs of certain OAS staff within this study.

Models and Theory of Staffing in Higher Education

While the previous sections provided an overview of the missions and structures of public higher education institutions, as well as the employees working within them, there is much discussion surrounding how these organizations operate in theory. In a 2012 book on the organization of higher education, Bastedo (2012) noted "the study of higher education organizations has been massively generative for organizational theorists" as well as those hoping to provide further definition to the study of work itself (p. 14). Bastedo broadly defined work in higher education institutions as the "tasks, problems, and cognitive demands faced by students, faculty, and administrators" (p. 8). This definition provides an individualized perspective on organizational theory in higher education, yet tacitly acknowledges the collective nature of work for higher education employees. From this viewpoint, the following sections will discuss two popular theoretical models of organizational work in higher education, higher education organizations as loosely coupled systems and professional bureaucracies. Finally, I provide an overview of Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978), which can serve as a theoretical lens to analyze the ways in which OAS staff within public higher education institutions view their work and how they believe it relates to the missions of their respective institutions.

Higher Education Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems

Organizations characterized as "loosely coupled" are those in which individual elements of the organization are linked and responsive to each other yet retain relative autonomy in their decision-making processes (Weick, 1976). Higher education institutions are often described as

loosely coupled systems (Bastedo, 2012; Tierney, 2012), in that they consist of various academic and administrative departments that are linked yet operate in different ways with unique goals. As Tierney (2012) notes, tightly coupled organizations take a more top-down approach to management, while loosely coupled organizations are more decentralized in their management. To emphasize this point, Tierney uses the example of a McDonald's restaurant franchise owner who closely knows what roles each employee plays and the outputs expected of the franchise. A university president, however, will likely know little about the specific efforts of an instructor or what the expected "outputs" of their class will be (Tierney, 2012, p. 161-162). In short, "loosely coupled systems are held together not through managerial control, but through the interactions and sentiments that organizational members construct together" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 224).

When viewing higher education organizations as loosely coupled systems, the individual (or group of individuals) operating within the institution plays a key role in developing institutional focus. As Rojas (2012) notes, concerns of individuals within or outside of the university, or disputes among scholars, can create collective action that has potential to change academic programs, disciplines, or institutional focus. This potential for collective change could not so easily be said about other organizations whose operating units work together toward acutely defined organizational goals. The loosely coupled nature of departments within higher education institutions allow these organizations to be more adaptive and resilient, like a well-diversified stock portfolio where each system can change focus without necessarily putting the entire organization at risk. When considering the work of classified staff, however, the idea of how staff operate within a loosely coupled system may become complicated. Many classified staff occupy roles which Whitchurch (2009) defines as "blended professionals" (p. 408). These staff carry responsibilities that require them to work within and between professional and

academic areas, often in ambiguous roles. For example, information technology (IT) professionals may often be responsible for the administration of learning technologies directly related to classroom instruction, while the work of research administrators exists to support faculty research and scholarship. These employees may be recruited from within or outside of higher education institutions and carry various levels of academic credentials. By their nature, the work of these employees may not necessarily be tied to a specific system but may often require them to jump between linked systems, bringing into question their influence on the organization as a whole.

Higher Education Organizations as Professional Bureaucracies

Professional bureaucracies are organizations that assume a flat organizational structure where professionals, supported by other staff, are primarily responsible for the operations of the organization (Mintzberg, 1979). Governance and authority in these organizations lie in the hands of the professionals, who develop organizational policies and structures via the ideologies of professional associations. Due to their focus on professional identity, professional bureaucracies govern less through hierarchical authority and more through individual expertise. Professional power comes from understanding the professional's work is "too complex to be supervised by managers or standardized by analysts" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 55). However, because expertise is the focus of professional bureaucracies, professionals within these organizations tend to identify more with their professional fields than the organization itself. For example, physicians may see themselves first as medical professionals and second as employees of a medical institution. The same can be argued for professionals within higher education. Faculty may see themselves first as scholars of their respective fields, second as members of an academic unit, and third as members of a university. However, professionals often choose to work within professional

bureaucracies as a way to share resources, learn from each other, and serve a larger clientele. Administrative management within professional bureaucracies is also often delegated to professionally credentialed employees. Administrative delegation to professionals helps to ensure decisions around organizational focus are aligned with those of other professionals and are as democratic as possible. As Mintzberg (1979) notes, every university professor typically serves in some administrative capacity, such as on a university committee or advisory panel.

Non-professionals working within professional bureaucracies typically take the role of professional and administrative support. Unlike reporting structures among professionals, authority within non-professional structures is tied to an office and is hierarchical. As Mintzberg writes, "one salutes the stripes, not the man" (1979, p. 58) and authority is gained through the practice of administration, not disciplinary expertise. While many classified staff in higher education institutions are accountable to professionals at some level (e.g., deans or provosts), many day-to-day activities are governed by non-academic supervisors who, in their work, are far from powerless.

Mintzberg (1979) argues that, in general, professionals place value on their disciplinary work, and administrative work may sometimes be seen as an unwelcome distraction. In response, professionals often rely on administrative staff to negotiate the details of administrative work. From this perspective, administrative staff can hold considerable power over decisions made within a university. For example, while professional faculty may see a need for new technology, procurement managers and IT staff may ultimately negotiate what technology is adopted and why. Development officers build relationships with university stakeholders to acquire gifts that may be accompanied by conditions of use, and marketing staff navigate the public image of the university. Receptionists are a first point of contact for students or other stakeholders, and

administrative assistants may influence the work or views of high-level executives. Individually, each of these positions can incrementally influence university operations. Collectively, their influence can begin to define how universities operate.

The idea of collective influence is important when considering the work of classified and administrative staff working in higher education. If staff do not understand how their actions influence university operations, or how their beliefs are misaligned with the professional values of the organization, conflict can occur. One theory that shows how actions and beliefs are not always in agreement, and how that disagreement can influence organizations, is Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978).

Theory of Action

Earlier I discussed how missions can shape the histories and focus of public higher education institutions. I also noted how the missions and focus of these institutions have changed over time. These missions, which could also be viewed as institutional beliefs, are to some degree likely to influence the work of all staff who work in colleges and universities. As Bess and Dee (2008) note, values and institutional beliefs "constitute an important part of the organizational culture" within universities and institutionalized beliefs "reflect the shared values of organizational members" (p. 369). These authors also note, however, that employees working within universities may be unable to clearly express the missions of their institution, because organizational values are often ambiguous, latent, or "not articulated openly" (p. 369). This often leads to misinterpretation or misalignment between employee actions and university goals. In short, what employees do within an organization is not always what they report, and vice versa. Because misalignment between the actions and beliefs of university employees can often cause

conflict, understanding how and where the misalignment occurs can be helpful for employees and institutions alike.

A longstanding and straightforward theory used to explore the actions of beliefs of employees is Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978). This theory posits that what people say do, or their espoused theories, often contrasts with what they actually do, or their theories-in-use. Argyris and Schon describe the differences between these two theories as follows:

> When someone is asked how he [*sic*] would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his [*sic*] espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he [*sic*] gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he [*sic*] communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his [*sic*] actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his [*sic*] espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility of the two theories (Argyris & Schon, 1974, p. 6-7).

When considering the actions of an organization, for example, that organization may state the primary goal of the organization is to put people first. Putting people first would be the organizations espoused theory of action. However, the same organization may be more concerned with increasing profits and pleasing shareholders. To that end, the organization may work employees long hours or provide inadequate work environments. Placing profits over worker well-being would be the organization's theory-in-use.

Argyris and Schon (1974) note conflict occurs within organizations if espoused theories and theories-in-use are not consistent. However, identifying areas in which espoused theories and theories-in-use conflict can be difficult, since theories-in-use can often be implicit, or individuals are not necessarily aware of their theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Using this theoretical

framework to explore the work of staff in higher education institutions, as well as the goals of institutions, has potential to alleviate organizational conflict and ambiguity in a number of ways.

Argyris's and Schon's theory of action is a helpful way to look at the work of office and administrative support staff in relation to institutional goals as well as contextual narratives such as academic drift . This theoretical framework can help researchers identify the espoused missions of public institutions and compare those missions to the beliefs and actions reported by OAS staff (e.g., their theories-in-use). Identifying the theories-in-use, as described by OAS staff, can help the organization better understand the ways in which staff are working within the organization and help identify how their work supports or contradicts the goals of the university. Identifying inconsistencies between the espoused theories of institutions and the theories-in-use of OAS staff can also help improve vertical and horizontal coordination within the institution. When considering human resource structures of higher education organizations, vertical coordination refers to how organizational units are linked through "authority, rules, [and] planning" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 177) and can be used to understand how the competencies and capabilities of groups support the overall missions of the university. Concurrently, horizontal coordination refers to how groups are connected and support each other's work within the organization. By exploring how OAS staff believe their work relates to the goals of the institution, as well as their day-to-day actions, institutions can better understand how to improve vertical and horizontal alignment between groups and organizational missions.

Using the theoretical framework of Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978) has potential to help organizations improve internal processes ranging from recruitment and training of employees to the revision of institutional missions. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, this theoretical framework also has potential to identify or reduce organizational conflict within

organizations. For classified staff working in higher education, conflict, whether with other employees or with the organizational culture itself, is likely to be a daily concern. The following section discusses some of the current obstacles facing college and university classified staff.

Obstacles and Considerations for Researching Administrative Staff

classified staff in higher education face a number of obstacles in the workplace, ranging from workplace marginalization to questions of professionalization (Szekeres, 2011; Whitchurch, 2009). Unfortunately, research on these topics is limited to a few scholars, many of whom have conducted their research outside of the United States. This section provides a brief overview of the obstacles classified staff face in higher education today and why increased consideration of these employees is important.

Studies have shown employee satisfaction is critical for organizational performance and may be especially important for non-academic employees who often act as representatives for their institutions (Smerek & Peterson, 2007; Bauer, 2000). For example, Bauer (2000) notes the job satisfaction of clerical support staff may be particularly important for institutions as their "attitudes and level of helpfulness can substantially contribute to the constituents' perceptions of campus climate" (p. 87). However, job satisfaction for many support staff is questionable at best and has been acknowledged in work environments outside higher education for some time. Over 40 years ago, researchers noted a loss of status and diminished credibility among clerical support staff. Described as a proletarianization of clerical work, these researchers warned that marginalization of support staff could result in decreased production, absenteeism, and worsening work conditions within organizations (Nakano Glenn & Feldberg, 1977). Despite these warnings, some researchers have more recently noted similar concerns for support staff working in higher education.

Classified staff in higher education institutions have reported feelings of alienation, limited autonomy, inequitable working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional growth in their workplaces (Smerek & Peterson, 2007; Szekeres, 2004). Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) explored this topic via a study on what they called "hierarchical microaggressions" in higher education. This study found administrative staff in higher education often experienced regular interactions in the workplace that communicated a "systemic valuing (or devaluing)" based on their institutional role (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015, p. 62). These interactions told staff they did not belong, were different than others, or were simply not capable. For example, certain terms used to define classified staff, such as non-academic staff, are viewed by some researchers as pejorative, in that they inherently define staff as what they are not (Szekeres, 2011). This type of behavior can lead to increased turnover among staff, lowered productivity, or perceptions of poor workplace environments.

Another obstacle classified staff may face is a perception their roles are symptomatic of an increasingly bureaucratic and market-oriented higher education environment. The massification of higher education has caused many, if not all institutions to begin to perceive students as customers (Saunders, 2014), while increased enrollments have also given rise to increased regulations and accountability from state funders. Each of these factors, in their own way, has resulted in the growth of non-academic and administrative work, particularly within public universities (Saunders, 2014; Szekeres, 2011). This growth of administrative roles has created a workforce divide wherein the work of classified staff may be viewed as representing a shift in institutional mission away from traditional academic values. This trend is commonly referred to as administrative bloat and is often associated with increases in costs among public institutions (Hiltonsmith, 2015). However, while administrative bloat may be a tempting

explanation for why tuition and personnel have increased in higher education, it is potentially a red herring.

While an increase in the number of administrative roles in higher education over the years is undeniable, increase alone, as some researchers have argued, "is not evidence of bloat or waste" (Archibald & Feldman, 2017, p. 81). Potential causes for an increase in administrative staffing needs abound, ranging from increased enrollments and service expectations, to decreased state funding that creates new departments or activities aimed at increasing revenue generation (Archibald & Feldman, 2017; Bowen & McPherson, 2016). For example, increased emphasis on research, if successful, produces an increase in external grant awards, many of which require administrative support staff. New staff hired to administer grant awards, however, would be supported by the grant money itself and so would not increase costs to the institution. Increases in administrative positions may even be perceptual, caused simply by a reclassification of workers. For example, Bowen and McPherson (2016) argue "what we are seeing is not 'administrative bloat' but the professionalization of non-faculty staff," a trend reflective of the larger economy where skilled trades become increasingly "squeezed out" by technology which, in turn, creates an increased need for professional staff (p. 109)

What has been shown, however, is negative perceptions of administrative positions have strained relationships between academic and classified staff to a point where classified staff may feel as though they are treated as "poor relations of the university system, representing an underclass in terms of pay, conditions and flexibility" (Szekeres, 2011, p. 684). These kinds of organizational conflicts have potential to cause considerable problems for the operations of large, public universities. Without additional research on how and why institutions utilize classified

staff, continued ambiguity may result in increased conflict that disrupts the ability for higher education institutions to operate effectively.

Context for Reconsidering the Roles of Staff in Higher Education

In line with some of the concerns discussed earlier surrounding administrative bloat, higher education has entered an era of neoliberal ideologies that values operational efficiencies oriented toward market competition (Slaughter & Taylor, 2016). Acknowledging neoliberal perspectives in higher education environments is considerably relevant when considering the work of classified staff in that neoliberal perspectives inherently value some work over others (e.g., work that increases competition and revenue generation). Within public universities, neoliberal perspectives may have direct implications for the work of classified staff as narratives of administrative bloat routinely scrutinize staffing trends and diminished state funding drives the need for new modes of resource generation.

The ideals of neoliberalism are far removed from the historical ideologies of higher education as an instrument dedicated to learning, service, and personal growth (Altbach, 2015; Pelikan, 1992). An outgrowth of the Keynesian economic ideals that defined the post-World War II economic climate in the United States, neoliberalism gained popularity in Western society and China in the mid-1970s and changed how many public and private organizations operated. Since that time, higher education institutions have begun to view students more as customers in an environment that prioritizes prestige and revenue generation (Saunders, 2014). Along with this change in organizational focus came a change in the roles, responsibilities, and attitudes of those within these institutions. Research on faculty attitudes has shown increased feelings of lost autonomy, stress, and the devaluation of teaching and service (Gonzales, Martinez, & Ordu, 2014). Concurrently, institutional administrators have begun to feel added pressure to compete with other higher education institutions for outside funding, causing universities to pursue goals

that are often misaligned with the historical or organizational values of their institutions (Altbach, 2015; Gonzales, 2013).

While much of the research on neoliberalism in higher education has focused upon issues surrounding faculty work and institutional management, some groups remain curiously absent from the conversation (Szekeres, 2011). The growth of neoliberal values in public higher education has brought with it a constituency that now includes corporations, donors, foundations, and increasingly complex relationships with government entities. Derek Bok notes these external stakeholders identify "needs that academic institutions can help to meet" but also create a need for institutions to hire more specialized staff to oversee new departments and programs (2013, p. 33). Unfortunately, increases in staffing and differentiation among staff has tended to create greater levels of "distrust and misunderstanding" between academic and administrative staff (Bok, 2013, p. 33). As public higher education institutions are likely to continue to grow their offerings, institutional conflicts surrounding staff roles can be expected, but that does not mean they must persist. To ensure the roles of staff within universities do not move further away from the core ideologies of their field, institutions need to consider how to engage classified staff in ways that allow them to act as contributors to institutional missions and the traditional goals of public universities. If public universities hope to argue for additional resources, they must be able to address, or argue against, the narratives of administrative bloat that seem pervasive in public higher education today. classified staff must also be able to see how their roles contribute to the espoused missions of the university, rather than see their role as oriented towards profits and markets.

The obstacles for classified staff mentioned above feel strangely at odds with other organizational issues facing higher education today, as well as the historical missions of public

research universities. Research has shown faculty and other academic staff are more consistently reporting feelings of increased administrative loads that distract their focus from teaching and research (Gonzales, 2013), yet tensions remain between academic and classified staff. Moreover, state legislators and other public stakeholders have criticized public institutions for their inability to create jobs that foster economic development. However, when these issues are examined through the theoretical frameworks and missions discussed earlier, an argument could be made that this is a problem of perspective. For example, if higher education institutions reflect the structures of professional bureaucracies, then classified staff play an important role in lightening the load of administrative responsibility reported by academic staff. Also, if viewed through the understanding that the goals of public research universities are to support the public good, staff within these universities contribute to the education of thousands of students per year, and their institutions reflect some of the largest state employers (see Figure 2). From this perspective, reducing or devaluing classified staff in public universities could negatively affect university operations and, in turn, have a considerable impact on local economies and employment rates.

Figure 2: Public universities as large, U.S. employers (Gillett, 2017)

Some researchers and universities have begun to see the importance of engaging classified staff to address internal and external pressures public universities face. In 2013, the

College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky underwent a complete reorganization of staff, to include faculty and professional staff. With a goal of "placing people first" the college conceptualized a system that would allow over 600 faculty and staff to contribute to the "interplay of individuals, organizations, and society" at the core of their field, while still adhering to the "fiscal and moral commitments" of a public research university (Turner, 2015, para 19). Similarly, in 2005, the University of Michigan launched a "Voices of the Staff" campaign designed to provide classified staff with opportunities to engage university executives around ways classified staff could help advance institutional priorities. Since its inception, more than 2,000 University of Michigan staff have engaged in activities around this campaign and serve across six teams designed to foster and advance university missions. As a result, turnover rates for staff who actively participate in this campaign was reduced by half (Voices of the Staff, 2015-2016 Annual Report).

Some studies have found classified staff actively contribute to common organizational goals, such as student success, but are underutilized. In a recent study on the contributions of professional staff on student outcomes, researchers in the United Kingdom and Australia found administrative staff regularly contribute to positive student outcomes but are not seen as pedagogical partners within their institutions (Graham & Regan, 2016). These researchers suggested institutions should make clear how administrative staff, which they call professional staff, can contribute to student outcomes and provide staff with opportunities to develop in ways that are beneficial for both students and the institution. A few scholars from the United States have also suggested engaging classified staff could lead to improved institutional effectiveness in areas ranging from increased student success (Schmitt, Duggan, Williams, & McMillan, 2015) to improved campus climate (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015), yet the scarcity of

research on the specific roles of classified staff in U.S. institutions suggests there is more to learn before these arguments can be effectively made. What these studies do suggest, however, is the work of classified staff can be more closely tied to the goals of the institution and administrative personnel may not be as far removed from the instructional goals of institutions as the narratives of administrative bloat suggest.

In response to increased enrollments and demand for higher education, the numbers of classified staff will continue to grow in public universities throughout the United States. If universities do not take the time to consider how the roles and actions of these employees affect core institutional missions, those missions will be interpreted broadly among staff, potentially leading to misalignment of efforts or the perpetuation of market-oriented ideals that place the historical missions of public education at risk. An increase in administrative staff does not need to be viewed as a threat to public university missions or histories. Increased numbers and variety of staff can instead be seen as an opportunity for public institutions to develop a strong, diverse workforce focused on restructuring public institutions to become what they were always meant to be – organizations that promote and serve the public good.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the current literature on classified staff with an emphasis on the staffing trends of public universities. What little research exists on this topic, however, is limited by regional focus, method, or context. Valuable research on the obstacles of classified staff has been done by researchers in the United Kingdom and Australia (e.g., Graham & Regan, 2016; Whitchurch 2009), yet difference in structure, staffing classifications, and governance of the higher education systems in these countries makes transferability of the findings to U.S. institutions questionable at best. Moreover, many of these studies discuss classified staff as one broad group which does not consider varied roles among classified staff. These studies also tend

to focus solely on individual contexts without considering broader organizational contexts or outcomes by institutional sectors (e.g., public or private institutions). Through focusing on one category of classified staff within a particular sector, office and administrative support staff within public research universities, this study acknowledges differences in classified staff responsibilities and work environments. Through also considering social contexts such as organizational missions, and using a theoretical framework to guide my study, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of how and why public institutions utilize a specific classification of staff and how the work of these office and administrative support staff relates to broader contexts.

Studies that explore the individual actions and beliefs of staff within broader contexts, such as institutional missions, can help universities better understand how classified staff contribute to their respective organizations. Moreover, understanding the beliefs and contributions of staff can help identify organizational conflicts between departments and personnel. Reduced conflict can in turn improve organizational relationships that help employees understand how their work relates to and supports the work of other employees in addition to the institution at large. A better understanding of employee contributions can then help higher education employees work collectively to respond to organizational change, promote a positive campus climate, and improve public perception of higher education institutions. Office and administrative support staff are a natural place to begin research on classified staff as these employees occupy spaces and support organizational goals throughout the university. In the following chapter, I discuss how office and administrative support staff were recruited for this study and provide information about the study methodology and design.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to broaden understanding of the work of Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff within public research universities and how these staff believe their work supports the goals of their institutions. This chapter outlines the research methods proposed for this study, as well as the theoretical and epistemological frameworks chosen to guide data collection and analysis. In addition to a summary of data collection and analysis techniques, I outline methods chosen to ensure research quality, including a positionality statement of the researcher.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, limited knowledge around OAS responsibilities and roles has potential to lead to a variety of negative organizational outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction among OAS staff or poor public perception of the work of OAS employees. Moreover, a lack of knowledge around the work of OAS staff in public universities hinders an institution's ability to anticipate support strategies or justify the need for many staff working within higher education institutions. To explore OAS staff work, and how these staff believe their work relates to institutional goals, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Office and Administrative Support Staff view their roles within their institutions?
2. How do Office and Administrative Support staff describe their work in relation to university operations and goals?
    a. Do Office and Administrative Support staff feel they could better contribute to the goals of their institutions? If so, what are some common obstacles Office and Administrative Support staff say keep them from contributing to these goals?

3. How do Office and Administrative Support staff believe their work is viewed by other employees within the university?

Research Paradigm

This study utilizes an interpretive research approach that aims to "comprehend people's norms, values, and symbols – to make sense of people on their own terms and how they experience their world" (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015, p. 46). Because interpretivist traditions argue the realities of research participants are "socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (Glesne, 2016, p. 9), interpretive methodologies are well suited to explore the social and organizational nuances OAS employees may describe when discussing their work, how it is perceived by others, and how it relates to the goals of their respective institutions. Moreover, the traditional ideals of personal involvement and empathetic understanding associated with interpretivist research are suitable for this study when considering my positionality, which I discuss later.

Case Study Methodology

To broaden understanding of the work and beliefs of OAS staff working in public research universities, the current study utilized a qualitative, instrumental case study methodology. The "how" questions and explanatory nature of this study are also well suited to case study research (Yin, 2014). Case study research is also preferred when "examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated" and should include methods such as direct observations or interviews (2014, p. 12). More specifically, the current study uses a single case study with embedded units of analysis, in this case OAS staff participants. Within single, embedded case studies, there is potential for the researcher to focus solely on the embedded unit of analysis and not relate the findings to the larger case. As Yin

(2014) explains, a study of organizational climate may use employees as an individual unit of analysis but if the study does not refer back to the organization in some way the study effectively becomes, “an employee and not an organizational study” (p. 55). Acknowledging the need for context, and the desire to produce a greater understanding around OAS staff work, the current study utilizes an instrumental case study approach that ties theory and organizational context to the individual beliefs of study participants. The use of an instrumental case study is appropriate for this study as the study seeks to explore issues beyond the work of individual staff and produce greater understanding of how OAS staff view their work, how their work relates to organizational operations, and how OAS staff work is perceived by other employees. Instrumental case studies help gain insight or understanding of phenomena, relationships, or issues within the case (Stake, 1995).

The utilization of an instrumental case study was also chosen for its ability to test existing theory and allow the researcher to “use the case as a comparative point across other cases in which the phenomenon might be present” (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). The focus of instrumental case studies is often known in advance and designed around established theory or methods. This approach is particularly well suited for this study as it aims to explore beliefs and perceptions of office and administrative support staff throughout a single, case institution. Case studies also can embrace different epistemological orientations. As Yin (2014) notes, case studies can utilize interpretivist perspectives and theory, as the current study does, to “capture the perspectives of different participants, and how and why you believe their different meanings will illuminate your topic of study” (p. 17).

Case Selection and Sampling

Case selection for this study considers institutional type and representation of OAS staff. For institutional type, I have chosen a public research university for two reasons. First, as stated in chapter 2, public research universities represent some of the largest institutions in higher education today as well as some of the largest employers in states throughout the U.S. Second, these institutions also represent what Clark Kerr (1963) called the multiversity, a term used to describe higher education institutions that have high levels of internal differentiation among staff and heterogeneity of purpose. From a case selection standpoint, these characteristics frame public research institutions as what Flyvberg (2011) calls paradigmatic cases, or those that act as "exemplars" for cultural contexts (p. 308). Using Yin's (2014) framework for a single case study design with embedded units of analysis, an individual case for this study is defined at the institutional level with embedded units of analysis defined by OAS staff.

The institution chosen for this study was required to meet three criteria. First, the institution needed to be a public research university. Second, the university needed to have a clearly articulated strategic plan. This criterion is used to understand the espoused goals of the university and provide the study both context and a point of comparison for participant responses. Third, the university needed to be one in which OAS staff were non-union employees. The justification for choosing a non-unionized organization comes from the purpose of the study. Unions, by their nature, are organized to articulate the roles of specific staff and negotiate the needs and work of that employee base (Bess & Dee, 2008). Since the purpose of this study is to understand how OAS staff believe they contribute to the goals of the university, non-unionized classified staff organizations have potential to reveal inconsistencies between the espoused missions of the university and the work of OAS staff.

Participant Selection and Unit of Analysis

Qualitative research studies often utilize nonrandom, strategic or purposive sampling strategies for participant selection (Glesne, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). As previously mentioned, OAS staff, as I define them, consist of one of the 14 current IPEDS HR reporting categories. Yin (2014) cautions against using sampling terminology for case study research as it is associated with concepts such as statistical generalization. Instead, Yin suggests focusing selection based on concepts of analytical generalization tied to theoretical concepts. However, Glesne (2016) notes selection of participants in qualitative research is often done purposefully, though selection should be driven by "criteria that the literature and your experience suggest are particularly important," with the understanding that the selection strategy is often "refined as the researcher produces data" (p. 14). For this study, my participant recruitment strategy targeted employees who fall under the category of office and administrative support occupations, per the IPEDS reporting categories.

In order to recruit participants, I utilized two types of sampling in this study. I began initial participant recruitment by using strategic, homogenous sampling and then utilized network sampling (sometimes called snowball sampling) throughout the study. Homogenous sampling refers to sampling that "selects all similar cases in order to describe some sub-group in depth, such as a study of female professors," while network sampling uses "people who know people who meet research interests" (Glesne, 2016, p. 51). To recruit initial participants, using a homogeneous sampling approach, I relied upon the 2018 standard occupational classification (SOC) codes to search the public directory of the case study institution. The IPEDS HR occupational category for office and administrative support staff provides little definition for OAS employees and is mapped directly to SOC employee categories. These categories range

from office manager to executive administrative assistant. I searched the case study public employee directory using search terms related to OAS staff positions, such as office manager, assistant, or support, and emailed study invitations to employees whose titles fell within OAS categories. Upon initial contact, some participants agreed to the study and referred me to potentially interested coworkers, which consisted of the network sampling. In total, 78 emails were sent to recruit participants, and 25 total participants were interviewed for this study.

The justification to focus on office and administrative support employees was twofold. First, office and administrative support employees can be found in almost all departments throughout higher education institutions, occupy both frontline and backstage roles, and may hold a variety of skillsets or advanced degrees (Somers et al., 1998; Szekeres, 2004). Second, these employees often work in close proximity to, or direct support of, faculty and executive leadership positions within universities. Moreover, as Szekeres (2004) notes, "The commonly held view of the administrator as a secretary" who performs menial tasks such as typing or taking phone calls, "does not capture the complexity of their roles today, the skills required, or the difficulty of where they sit in the organization" (p. 20). Because of their varied positions and responsibilities within universities, office and administrative support staff were well-suited to explore the beliefs and contributions of support staff in relation to university missions and operations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to recruitment and data collection, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval. The IRB reviewed documents related to the study's protocol, participant recruitment strategy, and participant safeguard procedures. Study participants were provided an informed

consent form prior to their participation. The participant consent form for this study is included in Appendix C. The IRB approval letter for this study is included in Appendix D.

I utilized two sources of data collection for this study. The primary source of data consisted of interviews conducted with employees who met the definition of office and administrative support staff, as outlined in the previous section. Secondary sources of information included document analysis and field notes.

Document analysis is a commonly used method in case study research (Hancock & Agozzine, 2006) and one of the most important methods used to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2014, p. 107). Field notes are descriptive and help the researcher capture essentials of the case study such as time, space, or participant activity (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The types of document evidence used in case study analysis can be widespread, ranging from letters and emails to program evaluations or newspapers (Yin, 2014). Hancock and Agozzine (2006), however, place document data into four distinct categories; internet sources, private and public records, physical evidence (e.g., employee work profies), and instruments created by the researcher (e.g., surveys or questionnaires). Document analysis is often used to confirm or contradict information gleaned from other sources of data, such as interviewees, though Yin (2014) cautions data collected from document analysis should not be seen as "unmitigated truth" (p. 108). Documents in this study included items such as publicly available strategic plans for the case institution, public websites that included information about participant job descriptions or biographies, and participant questionnaires that collected personal and professional information. Field notes were also taken during and after interviews in the form of written field notes or audio-recorded memos. Field notes included data concerning participant work environments, interactions, participant education or work history, and notes concerning

employee work profiles when provided by participants. Document and field note analysis acted as a point of comparison for information gathered from participant interviews. Table 1 provides a list of data sources and how they relate to the research questions of the study.

Data Source	**Primary or Secondary Data**	**Relation to Research Questions**
Semi-structured Interviews with Office and Administrative Support Staff	Primary	Provided information on the daily work of OAS staff (theories-in-use) in relation to espoused institutional goals.
Organizational Documents, Field Notes, and Questionnaires	Secondary	Provided a point of comparison between participant reports (via interviews), the espoused goals of the university, and publicly available information regarding OAS staff.

Table 1: Data Matrix

An interview protocol, provided in Appendix E, guided interviews with OAS staff. The interview protocol included a first round of semi-structured questions to obtain baseline information about the interviewee's general work responsibilities (e.g., title and primary responsibilities) as well as how the interviewees believed their work contributed to the missions or operations of the university. The second round of questions focused on the strategic plans of the interviewee's institutions. During this portion of the interview, I asked participants about what they believed the missions of the university to be, as well as how they believed their work contributed to institutional missions and goals. These questions sought to understand how participants viewed their OAS roles in relation to university operations, identify where inconsistencies or obstacles existed between the work of OAS staff and operational goals, and reveal ways in which participants believed they might better contribute to the goals of the university.

The interview protocol included a final, open-ended question to allow participants to mention any other beliefs about how their work relates to the strategic goals of their institutions

or state any organizational obstacles they believe they may encounter in relation to their work. I recorded each interview with participant consent for later transcription.

Data collected for this study included approximately 25 hours of audio-recorded interviews, which translated to 524 pages of interview transcriptions. Secondary data included ten pages of field notes, researcher audio memos, 25 participant demographic questionnaires, and over 30 websites related to participant information or university operations and missions.

Interview Analysis and Coding

Coding is a common approach to qualitative data analysis (Glesne, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2013) and is generally defined as a "progressive process of sorting and defining those scraps of collected data that are applicable to your research purpose" (Glesne, 2016, p. 195). When considering how to analyze qualitative data, researchers may develop codes via emerging information collected from study participants, predetermined codes based on theory, or "some combination of emerging and predetermined codes" (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). Utilization of emergent codes during data analysis represents an inductive coding approach, whereas utilization of predetermined codes follows a deductive logic. The choice of whether to use an inductive and deductive approach, however, is actually "dialectical rather than mutually exclusive" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 238). For this study, I utilized an integrated approach of deductive and inductive coding to analyze data. An integrated approach can be appropriate and useful in qualitative research when deductive coding is used to organize data under relevant constructs. Sorted data can then be coded inductively to identify emergent themes within the data (Ali & Birley, 1999; Fereday & Muir, 2006). As the primary source of data within the current study was participant interviews, I describe here the interview analysis process in two phases, using deductive and inductive coding approaches for each phase.

This study used a deductive coding approach for the first phase of analysis. For this study, I developed a codebook that included *a priori* codes defined by the research questions and theoretical framework. A deductive coding approach can be helpful when using theory in research in that it provides code definition. Code definition maximizes coherence among codes used and can help peer debriefers cross-check codes, which helps ensure the reliability of data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A copy of the deductive codebook is provided in Appendix F. I used deductive codes to identify and sort interview data related to the actions and beliefs of OAS staff. This process utilized the theoretical framework in analysis and allowed the data to be sorted into segments for a second, inductive round of coding to identify new themes. For case study research, Yin (2014) states using theory development as part of the research design as "highly desirable," since theory serves to provide guidance to question development and unit analysis, as well as "criteria for interpreting the findings" (p. 37-38). Moreover, the use of theory in case study design can help serve as a kind of "analytic generalization" that helps readers better understand the transferability of the study design (Yin, 2014, p. 40). To explore the work of OAS staff across institutions, I used the organizational development theory discussed in chapter two, Argyris's and Schon's theory of action (1978). Specifically, I use the concepts of espoused theory versus theory-in-use to develop the *a priori* codes used during the first phase of deductive coding.

After the deductive phase of coding, I conducted a second, inductive phase of coding. Inductive coding consists of codes that "emerge progressively during data collection" and are grounded in the empirical research itself (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 81). Inductive coding is helpful when conducting empirical work in that it does not confine the researcher, allowing the researcher to uncover important factors that may be context or site specific (Miles,

Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). During this phase, I coded data using a process similar to the constant comparative approach drawn from grounded theory (Glaser, 1965). I conducted an initial read of the data and coded themes using singular words or short phrases. The aim of the initial coding during this second phase was to provide definition to the actions that occured within the data and identify emergent themes. Once a first round of inductive coding was finished, I read through the data and initial codes again to identify major themes. Once common themes were identified, I read through the data a third and final time using the common themes as codes, a process similar to the delimiting process of coding described in grounded theory. This process helped identify common themes throughout the data that did not explicitly map to the coding structure provided by the theoretical framework and also helped identify common themes that occurred across interviews and were used as a point of comparison when reviewing other types of data.

During the coding process, I also utilized magnitude coding procedures to determine the strength of beliefs reported by OAS staff as well as what aspects of their work they believed were most important to their work or most valued by their institution. Magnitude coding consists of "supplemental alphanumeric or symbolic codes or subcodes applied to existing coded data" that helps the researcher indicate intensity or frequency of data to "enhance description" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 80). Magnitude coding is appropriate in qualitative studies in the social sciences, health care, and education (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2013).

Coded data were stored in a password protected file on the researcher's computer. Coded data were organized within a filing system that took the form of an electronic spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was organized around each phase of coding and included interview page numbers and excerpts for coded data.

Ensuring Research Quality

Research validity is a contested term among qualitative researchers, with some believing the term is inherently tied to traditions of logical empiricism that clash with the epistemological ideals of qualitative research. Other qualitative researchers embrace the term as a way to promote the rigor of their work (Glesne, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). What is generally agreed upon, however, is the use of multiple sources of data and complementary collection techniques can help the researcher justify claims and themes found during research analysis (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). To address potential concerns surrounding research validity in case study research, I relied upon research methods used to help ensure trustworthiness of the data. Specifically, those which address concerns of credibility, transferability, and authenticity of the research.

Trustworthiness

Addressing trustworthiness in qualitative research generally refers to concerns surrounding how a researcher can "persuade his [sic] or her [sic] audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). These concerns often focus on how the research findings reflect the research subjects and conditions, and not the "biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer" (p. 290). Whereas more conventional or positivist forms of research may refer to terms such as internal and external validity, reliability, or objectivity when discussing research quality, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the qualitative researcher rely on the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Depending on the focus and context of the research, different methods can be used to help establish credibility in qualitative studies. For this study, I utilized three methods;

triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation is generally understood to be a process in which multiple data sources are used to "converge on a finding or confirm (or refute) a theory" (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015, p. 86). Creswell (2014) also notes using multiple sources of data or participant perspectives can help identify convergent themes within a study and provide validity. Triangulation may come from the use of different sources, methods, investigators, or theories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014). This study uses both data source triangulation and method triangulation. Data source triangulation for this study derived from conducting interviews with multiple participants across the case institution as well as analyzing varying sources of data. Conducting multiple interviews with varying participants helps to ensure that the study provides "multiple measures of the same phenomenon" and acknowledges the possibility of "multiple realities" (Yin, 2014, p.121). Document analysis was used to compare reports from interview data and act as a second source of data to aid in triangulation. Finally, the use of theory in single, embedded case studies, and the use of a case study protocol and data base, support case study validity and reliability (Yin, 2014).

Member checking and peer debriefing also help ensured research credibility. Participants in the study were provided copies of interview transcripts for review. Member checking allows respondents the opportunity to correct errors and "puts the respondent on record as having said certain things and having agreed to the correctness of the investigator's recording" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Member checking also gives the participant the opportunity to volunteer additional information that can "extend interpretations and conclusions" and can help the participant preemptively identify any information that may put participant anonymity at risk (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 63).

Peer debriefing was also used to aid in credibility of the findings. Peer debriefing is a process in which researchers provide their findings to a "disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). The role of the peer debriefer is to play "devil's advocate" (p. 309) to the researcher by confirming the methods of data collection and analysis are reasonable. The peer debriefer should be neither junior or senior to the researcher and should not be someone in a position of authority to the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Authenticity and Transferability. Authenticity and transferability of research findings in qualitative research is derived from the researcher's ability to provide extensive description of the time and context in which the data were collected. To be able to transfer findings to other contexts, the researcher must provide the "thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Ensuring transferability in qualitative research means providing enough information on the methods and sources of data to allow others to make a judgement of whether the study can be used in different contexts. Using the aforementioned member checks helps ensure the data provided are authentic to the source, and the use of thick description is used to provide enough context to help the reader understand how the findings may relate to similar contexts or studies.

A critique of case study research is that while it allows for an in-depth analysis of specific phenomena, findings of the study are not able to be generalized to a larger audience (Yin, 2014). The choice to look at specific institutional types (i.e., public research universities) as well as specific categories of staff (i.e., OAS staff), opens the study to critiques of generalizability.

However, I agree with Yin (2014) who argues "case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 21). As my study utilized a theoretical framework for analysis, and my research questions focused on expanding an understanding of theories related to the work of office and administrative support staff, a case study was appropriate. Moreover, my choice of institutional type currently represents a model institutional type among higher education institutions today (Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008). This choice can help readers of the study relate to the findings and process them within the context of their own university missions and goals.

Dependability and Confirmability. In addition to the previous methods of triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing used to ensure reliability, providing information related to the data collection procedure and methodological process notes help ensure the data collected are dependable and confirmable. Case study databases and audit trails are common ways to address dependability and confirmability concerns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014). Case study databases go beyond "narrative or numeric information" to include any documents collected during the study (Yin, 2014, p. 123). For this study, interview protocols, blinded transcripts, qualitative codebooks, and software analysis documents, such as the excel spreadsheet used to organize and track codes, were kept in a case study database. In addition, an excel spreadsheet and analytic memos were kept in the database to track the methods used during recruitment and data collection as well as data sources such as employee profiles found online.

Finally, clarifying the bias that the researcher brings to the study also helps ensure research quality. As Creswell (2014) notes, "good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background" (p.

202). In the following section I outline my own positionality and how I may control potential biases I bring to the study.

Positionality

My own background as a higher education employee working in a non-faculty position is likely to shape my interpretation of the topic being studied. I worked for four years as a program coordinator within a public research university wherein I held responsibilities ranging from research administration to budget development. I also served on a formal, non-unionized staff representative body for three years, during which I heard the stories and concerns of many OAS personnel. While I am lucky to have felt appreciated and valued in my previous position, and personally feel OAS employees are integral to the operations of a successful university, I acknowledged the need to be cognizant of my past experiences and personal biases while analyzing the data presented here. Moreover, since definition around office and administrative support work is severely lacking, and the missions of higher education institutions vary, I needed to ensure I was not analyzing the data in a way that could reinforce my personal opinions. I did so in the following ways.

First, the use of a theoretical framework and interview protocol, and situating my interviews in relation to the missions and operations of the case university, helped me remain focused on the purpose of the study. Second, I explained to participants at the beginning of each interview what the general goals of the study were and explained how I had worked in an administrative staff capacity within the case university but had not worked as a staff member there for at least three years. I believe this provided some level of legitimacy that helped me gather detailed information from participants researchers with different positionalities may not have been able to gather. Because I was not viewed by participants as a member of the case

institution, and I felt far removed from my previous employment, I was able to commit to the role of researcher and more easily control for any personal biases.

Study Delimitations

This chapter outlined the research methods proposed for the current study as well as the theoretical and epistemological frameworks chosen to guide data collection and analysis. This chapter also provided justification for the use of an instrumental case study methodology and the suitability of the methods used for data collection and analysis. While this chapter acknowledged potential critiques of case study research, the study is grounded in existing research, theory, and methods that help to ensure research quality. As with any research study, however, acknowledging potential boundaries for the study is important. Here I discuss three parameters of this study: the cross-sectional nature of the study design; the institutional choice of the case institution; and study boundaries related to participant characteristics.

The first consideration for this study is its use of cross-sectional data collected from participants at specific points in time. In Chapters 5 through 7 I discuss how the work of OAS staff may vary over time and in Chapter 8 I encourage future research on OAS staff using a longitudinal approach. However, because there is limited research on how to define the work and contributions of OAS staff, this study provides a starting point for future researchers to consider how to approach longitudinal research on support staff.

The second consideration of this study is the choice to recruit OAS staff from public higher education institutions. In this chapter, I explained how public institutions serve as an exemplar for studying OAS work in relation to organizational missions and help provide context for the theory used in this study. However, as higher education institutions vary in mission by

institutional type, the work and use of office and administrative support staff within private universities or community colleges, for example, could differ from the findings of this study.

The final considerations for this study are tied to the nature of the recruited participants. When recruiting volunteers for a research study, volunteer bias among participants is always possible. Volunteer bias refers to the idea that "volunteers may differ from a more representative sample of the population" (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015, p. 155). The variety of volunteers across university departments, limited use of network sampling, and saturation (Creswell, 2014) achieved during data collection mitigates the potential for volunteer bias. Moreover, participants recruited for this study largely identified as white females with an average age of 47. Future research should consider how differences in race, gender, or participant identity, however, influence support staff work or experiences, as I discuss in Chapter 8 of this study.

Chapter Summary

This study utilized a qualitative approach and single, instrumental case study design with embedded units of analysis. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and was supplemented by the analysis of institutional documents and field notes. Data analysis methods included an integrated deductive/inductive approach guided by an *a priori* codebook as well as a constant comparative approach during the inductive phase. This chapter also discussed methods of trustworthiness used to ensure accurate representation of the data and participant safety.

CHAPTER 4: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In order to better understand the roles and responsibilities of office and administrative support staff discussed in the following chapters, understanding the context in which the current case study was conducted is necessary. As Yin (2014) states, the "boundaries between the case and the context" of case studies are "not likely to be sharp" (p. 50). This chapter provides context for the study around three areas. First, the chapter provides a general overview of the case study institution to include the university type and general goals of the university. Second, this chapter includes a summary of the study participants that outlines participant positions within the university and general professional profiles. Third, the chapter provides an overview of how participants within the current study perceive the goals of their university. This final piece of contextual information is important for the reader to understand prior to the presentation of the study findings as it provides data that will help the reader compare participant characteristics and beliefs and espoused university missions.

Overview of the Case University and Participants

Striving Research University (SRU) is a large, public research university located on the east coast of the United States. Compared to other public research universities in the same region, SRU is a relatively young institution with less than a 100-year history but holds strong community and historical ties to the local area. Moreover, for much of its history, SRU could be described as a largely regional university. In recent decades, however, SRU expanded its reach and, at the time of this study, thought of itself as a global university, serving students from all over the world and had expanded to several regional campuses as well as one international campus outside of the United States. Organizationally, SRU consisted of over 10 colleges,

schools, or academic units and hundreds of programmatic areas of study, including many online and hybrid programs.

From its more humble beginnings, SRU, at the time of this study, expanded to a university that regularly enrolled over 30,000 students. Moreover, at the time of this study, SRU recently earned the Carnegie Classification of an R1 research institution, had an increasing endowment, and was regularly expanding undergraduate and graduate programs. Analysis of current strategic goals and missions of the university painted a picture of SRU as a university that aligned with the idea of Kerr's (1963) multiversity. Goals and missions were broad, but generally centered around commitments to diversity and international education; community and workforce development; and teaching, faculty, and student development. Values espoused by SRU included being innovative, diverse, and welcoming to all students, the latter being a top priority for SRU.

When considering staff, SRU employed over 5000 faculty and staff. Instructional or research staff consisted of about half of the employee base of SRU according to the most recent figures posted in the IPEDS database. In contrast, office and administrative support (OAS) staff within SRU consisted of approximately 8% of SRU's employee base (IPEDS, 2017). Other occupations, ranging from university librarians and management to health practitioners and student affairs professionals, made up the remaining employee base. While some OAS staff held part-time positions at SRU, over 90% were employed full-time.

Twenty-five office and administrative support staff were interviewed for the current study. One participant was not included in the final analysis due to her part-time status. All other OAS staff participants in the current study were employed full-time by SRU. The participant

demographics questionnaire for this study is provided in Appendix G. Participant information, along with pseudonyms, can be found in Appendix H.

Participants within this study held 16 different titles, the most common of which was office manager, held by 12 different participants. Of these 12, two participants held the title of assistant in addition to their office manager title, indicating they provided support services for their department as well as an individual within their department, such as a department chair. Additional titles among participants ranged from administrative specialist to executive assistant. Participants occupied OAS staff positions across six different colleges and 24 departments within SRU. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 72, with an average age of 47. The vast majority of participants (19) identified as straight, White females and worked in higher education for at least five years. Thirteen participants worked in higher education for 10 years or more. Finally, while many participants spent much of their career working in higher education, they also reported a variety of previous work experience and education. All participants reported obtaining some level of higher education, with almost all participants reporting obtaining at least a bachelor's degree. Nine participants reported either having a master's degree or were working on obtaining a master's degree at the time of the study. Moreover, some participants reported having decades of experience working in private industry or professional fields outside of higher education before taking an OAS staff position.

While SRU as an institution had defined goals across many categories, participant beliefs around institutional goals were relatively more focused. When asked what they perceived the missions and goals of SRU to be, participant responses converged around two general beliefs; money and students. The most common belief reported was that a primary mission of the university was to increase revenue in whatever way possible. Whether discussed via research that

brought in university money, increased enrollments that brought in money, or alumni relationships that brought in money, participants consistently reported revenue generation as a primary mission of SRU. Hector, an office manager who worked at the university for over 15 years, understood SRU had many goals but believed the university's primary goal was generating revenue. For example, Hector explained how SRU focused on research in recent years, but believed the decision to advance research was, "ultimately driven by money and capital" and the need to, "bring in the dollars" so the university could expand. Lily, another office manager, echoed Hector's beliefs that bringing in money was the primary mission of SRU and, in the following example, also tied it to varying other espoused goals as well as organizational issues:

> Well, I know it's all about money. I mean, it has to be. I know, as a state university, that we get less funding than we used to get from the state. So, generating partnerships, bringing in money from research grants, asking alumni for money, I know that's all important.

The second most reported belief around the goals of the university centered on student development or success. This belief was often framed around general ideas related to student success. Sometimes, the goal of student success was framed broadly. As one participant noted, the goal of the university was to "educate students who will be the future of whatever field they're here to study. I would say that's number one." Other times the goal of student success was discussed via specific metrics and overlapped with the theme of increasing revenue. One participant noted the goal of the university was, "Creating graduates. Getting people to move through the university, graduate, move onto careers that are successful, and to give back to the university in a financial way."

Seventeen of the participants reported money was tied to the primary missions of the university and 14 believed student development and success, in one way or another, was the primary mission of the university. While subthemes regarding university missions included goals such as promoting diversity and inclusion or increasing university prestige through research, almost every participant identified the goals of SRU to generally be revenue or student focused. While institutional documents such as mission statements and strategic plans certainly promoted student success in many ways, revenue generation was rarely mentioned. Moreover, OAS participants often discussed how their beliefs around university missions were not garnered from institutional documents but personal observations and interpretations of university operations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided contextual information about the current case study's case institution and information about study participants. Additional information about study participants is provided in Appendices E and F. The chapter also provided a general overview of what participants believed were the missions and goals of SRU, beliefs which focused largely on revenue generation and broad topics of student success. Context and perceptions around the organizational goals of SRU are important when considering the findings of this study, discussed in the following chapters, and are particularly relevant to the use of organizational theory, which guides the study findings. Espoused goals of organizations, such as those represented through formal documents or policy statements, often conflict with the perceptions and work of individuals within organizations (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Information in this chapter provided data that serves as a point of reference for identifying such conflicts in the current study. Chapters 5 through 7 provide study findings that seek to explain how office and administrative support staff roles and beliefs relate to the larger organizational missions and operations of SRU.

CHAPTER 5: SUPPORT STAFF AS INSTITUTIONAL EXPERTS

This chapter explores the first major theme found during data analysis and primarily addresses the current study research questions one and two: How do Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff view their roles within their respective institutions and how do they describe their work in relation to university operations and goals? Within this first overarching theme, three subthemes emerged, each reported by participants in varying ways but similarly pointing to the belief that OAS staff hold institutional expertise related to navigating institutional processes, systems, and knowledge. The first subtheme describes OAS staff as process management experts, or those who have unique knowledge of how to perform sometimes standard, but more often complex administrative tasks within the university. Process tasks ranged from navigating the bureaucratic procedures OAS believed were unique to their institution to finding impromptu solutions to tasks set upon them by faculty, management, or university leadership.

The second subtheme emerged as the belief OAS staff were holders of unique institutional knowledge only they possess. While this knowledge certainly helped participants navigate organizational processes, it had less to do with the logistics of knowing organizational procedures and more about the individual experiences of each participant. This institutional knowledge, from the perspective of participants, had less to do with training or familiarity with policies and more to do with their tenure, position, personality, or work environment. As such, this knowledge was not transferable but could only be gained through time or experience.

Finally, the third subtheme framed OAS staff as specialized workers within the university. A combination of the previous subthemes focused on process and institutional knowledge, OAS staff participants felt as though they had become professionals in their own, niche field. This subtheme emerged as participants discussed their individual contributions and

abilities to adapt their specialized knowledge to unique problems or tasks. This chapter provides findings focused on each of these subthemes to explore how office and administrative support staff believed themselves to be institutional experts within Striving Research University.

Office and Administrative Support Staff as Process Managers

Within every interview, office and administrative support staff described themselves as the individuals best suited to navigate a variety of institutional processes and policies within their work environments. Whether the process or policy was mandated by central administration, designated at the department level, or tied to individual tasks, participants believed they were distinctively qualified to manage specific processes and policies.

In some cases, participants who described themselves as process managers discussed this role at a high level. To these employees, their process management skills were not necessarily focused on a specific task or system, but rather managing process control within their offices. These participants described themselves as the sole employee responsible for managing administrative support around organizational processes, as evidenced by Sue, an Office Manager for a special education program at Striving Research University. When asked to describe what success in her role as an OAS staff member meant, Sue simply stated success meant, "Getting everything done and making sure everything's running smoothly." Sue's belief that her job was to ensure everything "ran smoothly," was a common, albeit vague, belief among participants of the current study. For example, Tracey, an Office Manager within a statistics program, stated she also felt successful when she was able to "…just make the office run smoothly." For many support staff, a primary function of their job was to make sure organizational environments ran properly and encountered the least amount of conflict or obstacles as possible. The description of this role was straightforward but not necessarily tied to a specific task. What it was tied to,

however, was a sense of ongoing duty. There was never an end to helping things "run smoothly," as Sue suggested when discussing her role as process manager for department events: "The interesting thing is, I like planning the events, but when I get to the event itself I don't really get to enjoy it because I'm making sure everything is running smoothly." For Sue, and many other OAS staff, process management was an ongoing responsibility required to ensure the efficient functioning of their work environment. There was no end to process management tasks for participants, as they believed their role was to monitor operations and systems, safeguard against obstacles, and anticipate what the next steps in this process would be.

Other support staff who believed themselves to be process managers described their work as more detailed and tied to specific process management tasks. These participants carried with them a stronger sense of ownership when it came to their process management role. Gwen, an Administrative Specialist, believed OAS staff managed the processes behind almost any administrative decision in the university, with great attention to detail. As Gwen explained, "[support staff] do all the paper work, we hire people, we fire people, we counsel people, and we keep it moving. And there are a lot of tedious details that have to be taken care of to get things moving." For Gwen, process management was not as simple as ensuring things ran smoothly but required knowing exactly what was needed to keep things running smoothly. Mary, a Program Support Manager for a doctoral program at SRU, provided even more detail when discussing the processes she managed within her role. In the following excerpt, Mary not only provided a mental map of the processes she managed, but also when those processes took place and who they affected:

> [My job] pretty much encompasses everything that has to do with the PhD program. I manage the admissions process in fall and spring. I manage the registration, paperwork,

> student services, finance, budgeting, pretty much anything associated with…Oh, fellowships, awards for the students. I assist the students with other types of financial awards, communicate with the students…Pretty much everything associated with the program.

For Mary, her duties as a process manager were extensive and more personally defined. There was a sense of ownership that went beyond a support role. Mary explained it was her responsibility to carry out organizational processes and she required a certain amount of autonomy to do so effectively. Mary compared her job was more akin to running a business than providing support:

> Even though this [PhD program] is certainly not my own business, in some ways I feel like it's my own business. I feel responsible. I can approve this here and I can change this here, and I'm given a lot of autonomy to do that. I mean, I'll run some things by my supervisor, certain things I can't do alone, but it does have that kind of feel to it. And if I don't do it, it doesn't get done.

For Mary, the responsibility of process management was to not only manage the "business" of the PhD program through understanding institutional processes, but also required expertise and a certain level of autonomy and trust from her supervisors. She believed knowing the "business" of her program and being able to manage that business appropriately was her job, though she was slightly hesitant to admit that belief:

> I don't know. I think for my job, I'm pretty much running the show. So, I'm not supporting, I'm running things and then telling other people what to do. I give the PhD committee the timeline for admissions, tell them when they need to make these

> [admission decisions]. I mean, they're ultimately making the decisions, but I'd say I'm more running it than supporting it.

Kim, an officer manager in a department of criminal justice, also believed a primary role of her position was to understand and manage processes. Moreover, like Mary, Kim believed her job was similar to running a business. Long before coming to work in a higher education environment, Kim enjoyed the idea of process management and improvement. Her undergraduate degree was in office management from a local university. After graduating, Kim worked in various office management and human resources positions within the private sector. She explained how she gained an affinity for process management techniques while obtaining her six sigma black belt training through a Fortune 500 company. “I loved it,” Kim explained, “I loved that approach to process improvement and planning, analyzing, implementing, and looking at change.” Due to a company layoff, however, Kim found herself applying to jobs at SRU, partly because of her admiration for the field but also the institution’s proximity to her home. During this transition, Kim had trouble acclimating to her new position. In the following example, Kim discussed how her experience with process management in the private sector, and the obstacles she faced adjusting to her public university position, helped shape her understanding of how her OAS staff role was primarily the role of a process manager:

> When you become a new employee here [at SRU] you have to have access to all of this stuff, but you can’t even touch the systems until after you’ve had training…But, there was a breakdown [in the training process] because trainings are just out there to tell you the basics and then everybody else, their processes are different. They can’t really teach you that because everybody’s processes are different.

Kim saw a disconnect between what the university wanted OAS staff to be able to do after receiving process or systems training and what OAS staff were actually able to do in their respective work environments. She felt as though many of her responsibilities as an office manager were not able to be learned from university-level training or from any formal training for that matter. Instead, Kim believed as an office manager, her role was to learn the unique processes required of her position within her department and that those processes were defined differently for many OAS staff. Upon this realization, Kim then went on to explain how she felt one of the primary roles of her position was to help other employees, and maybe even her future replacement, learn how to manage university processes from the perspective of her department and the responsibilities of her position. In the following example, Kim discussed how she developed documents that related to one of her office manager responsibilities, processing new hire paperwork:

> I've put together process maps for all the different hiring things that we have to do, all the stages of the hiring, where you really have to go, what systems you have to use, because it's different. Whether you're hiring a full-time faculty, part-time faculty is very different, graduate assistants are very different, or wage. There are different processes for everything. So, you think you know how to hire somebody then you find out, "Oh no, that was just for this particular type of hire, for this particular situation."

Kim also described how changing processes within the university made her job consistently more difficult, because process change among other organizational units would require her to reevaluate the existing process management procedures she had designed for her office. She mentioned how process change within central offices, such as finance, human resources, or information technology, was often geared toward making the work of employees within those

offices easier but, in effect, made her role more difficult. The organizational processes she managed or designed were not "simple, plug in processes" and required extensive knowledge of state or university systems. Because Kim believed these processes were so complex, and she had the best knowledge of how to manage these processes, much of her role was helping new hires, whether faculty or staff, integrate to "the university, the processes, the procedures, and telling them how they need to do things."

The vast majority of participants within the current study described how process management of systems or policies defined a primary part of their role as an OAS staff member. Moreover, like the participants described above, that responsibility largely focused on keeping their offices "running smoothly" so that others were not distracted by unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. However, many participants also noted how changing university processes or goals made their process management roles more difficult, as Kim reported. When processes or goals changed, participants often discussed how relying on knowledge tied to their individual positions, organizational histories, or abilities, rather than process management skills, was necessary. These discussions led to the second subtheme provided under the theme of OAS staff as institutional experts; the role of OAS staff as holders of institutional knowledge.

Office and Administrative Support Staff as Holders of Institutional Knowledge

The second subtheme that described support staff as institutional experts focuses on how almost all study participants described themselves as having unique institutional knowledge, which helped them do their jobs effectively. This type of institutional knowledge was described as knowledge developed by the individual employee through personal or professional experiences and was not necessarily tied to the employee's title, department, or even institution. Instead, this institutional knowledge was often described in a way that was personal and

suggested the knowledge was not transferable or, at the very least, easily transferable to other employees.

Joe, an Office Manager for a department of philosophy, discussed his unique institutional knowledge in relation to student recruitment. Joe worked within higher education institutions his entire career, as well as while attending college. As a person who identified as Latino, he discussed personal efforts to reach out to a local community to recruit students who he believed would be interested in the program for which he worked. Joe felt he had both personal and professional knowledge that allowed him to engage students living within the community in ways other employees could not. Specifically, Joe discussed the "inside knowledge" he had of the program that academic advisors did not have as well as his connections with academic staff. Joe believed his personal knowledge of the program and staff, gained through the perspective of an OAS staff member, gave him unique institutional knowledge that could potentially help the program reach out to, and subsequently support, students in the local community who might be interested in the program for which he worked:

> I worked with the associate deans and their program managers, and the students, and I would go into classrooms and see what they [students] were doing. I knew it [the program] at a really close level. The advisors, they just didn't. They had the general knowledge of it, and how you would get into the programs, but a lot of the times that's not what students want. They don't just want to find out how you get into a program. They want to find out how the program works. "Are the teachers good? If I do one thing, can I do another? How many people are in the classes? How many students usually withdraw from the course? How many students stay? How many people usually graduate from these programs?"

Joe believed his personal connections with the community, connections with other program staff, and knowledge of program requirements provided him with unique institutional knowledge that could help students in ways other employees could not. And while Joe's job description did not explicitly state student recruitment as a responsibility, he believed his personal and professional knowledge as a support staff member had real potential for student recruitment efforts. Many participants who worked within academic units also believed student support, recruitment, and retention efforts were also responsibilities tacitly linked to their roles as OAS staff, though those beliefs are related to separate subthemes of the current study and discussed more in chapter six.

While Joe discussed his institutional knowledge as a way of providing value to potential students, other participants discussed how they applied their unique institutional knowledge to help supervisors, faculty, or coworkers. Beth, an Executive Assistant to a college dean, discussed how she used meeting minutes to support the work of her dean, but also to make sure "things get done" within the college. Beth explained since she was the only person responsible for taking, storing, and disseminating meeting minutes, she was able to provide clarification around organizational goals or mediate potential conflict as needed. For example, in the following excerpt from Beth's interview, she discusses how there is often disagreement among faculty and staff within the college regarding what was agreed upon within college-level meetings:

> Oh, that happens all the time. People will say, "That is not true, we did not do that," and I'll be like, "I'll send you the minutes. Actually, it is right there." That helps the dean. People, believe it or not, will come in here and try to say something negative about something going on and you have got to nip it in the bud.

In this example, Beth used her institutional knowledge both as a way to support her supervisor, the dean, but also as a way to keep peace within the college and keep things on track. Her role is both as a support person for her supervisor, but also a neutral third party within the college who uses her institutional knowledge to help avoid conflict and move everyone towards collective goals. At the time of her interview, Beth also worked in the college for nearly 10 years and was a student of SRU immediately prior to her employment. In 10 years, Beth served as assistant to three deans. While only 30 years old, Beth had rare knowledge of the college she worked within, how it operated, and personal histories between employees that could not be replaced. She often talked about how this institutional knowledge helped her perform her duties more effectively, and she believed it provided added value to her position and the college. Other participants, however, reported difficulty using their institutional knowledge to the advantage of their departments or coworkers, often because they believed it was inappropriate to do so.

Kim, an Office Manager working within a department of criminal justice, was nearly twice Beth's age and worked for public and private organizations before taking a job in higher education at SRU. Similar to other participants, Kim described herself as an expert in process management, citing a six sigma blackbelt certification and degree in office management, but had only been working in higher education for a few years and even less within her current position. Like Beth, she believed her position provided her institutional knowledge and perspective that others could not access. However, because of how she perceived her role, Kim found disseminating that knowledge to those who might find it valuable, specifically faculty within her department, difficult. In the following example, Kim described the struggle between her perceived responsibilities as office manager and the institutional knowledge she wanted to share during faculty meetings:

> It's funny, because at first the position [office manager] is looked at as somebody who just attends or sets up the meeting, finds the room, and takes the minutes. But, over time, I've become a little more involved…Sometimes it's really hard to be quiet because I'm not a voting member of the faculty and they're discussing things. But I have information that I could share and it's really hard to sit there and not say anything. I'm like, "Wait a minute. I have updates! I have announcements! I have a need to communicate to you people who are all here!"

On several occasions during our interview, Kim clearly expressed conflict between the type of information and support she believed she could provide and what was traditionally expected from the person in her position. Kim attributed her ability to occasionally share information at faculty meetings to a supportive department chair but always kept her position in mind when doing so:

> I'm there, taking notes, because somebody has to. I'm doing the administrative things that people have to do and I'm fine with that. But he [the department chair] is very encouraging for me to speak up. And I also try to respect boundaries too. I know it is a faculty meeting.

Kim knew her position provided her with unique institutional knowledge and perspective that could help department faculty more easily meet their goals. She was hesitant, however, to convey that information because she did not fully understand the environment in which she worked or the boundaries of her role. Kim attributed much of her hesitation to working outside of academia for most of her career:

> I mean, it took me probably several years to really understand the workings of the academic arena, because I came from a private sector, so I had a big learning curve there. I mean, it just took me a long time to get my head wrapped around it. And still I learn.

Kim noted that time and experience, however, made her feel more comfortable sharing the institutional knowledge she has acquired with others.

The institutional knowledge discussed by participants was almost always described as unique to the individual. Again, participants believed their knowledge was not necessarily transferable, but something gleaned from their unique personalities, experiences, or positions. Institutional knowledge among participants was distinct from the previously discussed process management expertise participants described. While a valuable skill to all, process management expertise was a skill learned on the job, through trial and error, and often tied to specific institutional processes. Process management took time to develop but could potentially be learned. Institutional knowledge, however, was unique to the individual and far less transferable. Knowledge was gained via personal perspective, experiences, or even ideologies, the latter of which was tied to ideas that OAS staff knowledge could be applied to more than administrative support.

Process management expertise, blended with institutional knowledge expertise, clearly led participants to believe they held unique roles within the university. However, participants also noted while they often held similar titles to other OAS staff within their institution, that did not mean their roles were comparable to other employees. Instead, as discussed in the following section, participants regularly reported how they viewed themselves as specialized employees who provided value in ways no other staff member could, regardless of title.

Staff Specialization Among Office and Administrative Support Staff

Nearly every participant indicated, in one way or another, a concern that office and administrative support staff were viewed as being all the same, no matter their title or position location within the university. This concern was often couched in the belief that other institutional constituents, for example faculty, management, or even other forms of administrative staff, perceived OAS staff to be easily replaceable because their roles and responsibilities were clearly defined and easily learned. From the perspective of the current study participants, however, OAS work was far from easily replaceable.

As previously discussed, OAS staff believe themselves to be experts in process management and holders of unique institutional knowledge. In addition, a third type of expertise emerged during interview analysis. This expertise presented itself as the idea that each participant was a subject matter expert in their own right, with specialized skills among other OAS staff. From the perspectives of participants, OAS staff were not just office managers, administrative assistants, or program coordinators, but highly specialized employees with incomparable skills. Moreover, this idea did not seem to come from a place of personal promotion. In other words, support staff did not believe they were the only OAS staff with specialized skills. Instead, support staff promoted their individual specializations but also acknowledged the specializations of their fellow support staff.

Lily, an Office Manager for a teacher preparation program, discussed the general sense of specialization among staff in her office by stating, “I think, like the rest of the classified staff here, each of us specialize in something, so there's not so much of an overlap.” Lily also explained how the specialized skills of OAS staff are often interdependent. While support staff work as a team, Lily believed OAS staff members often have considerable control over the way

support services are developed that control helps staff provide effective support. These specialized services are not easily learned and could prove difficult for other staff to adopt, should the need arise. In the following example, Lily explains why having autonomy over how she provides support is important:

> I understand my organization. And although we work together as a team, we do a lot of independent things. So, for example, I understand the filing system I've set up. I understand the communication I'm having with other departments and our adjuncts. I guess it's control [that's important], but it's also that I've set up the system and I'm adhering to it.

From Lily's perspective, the tasks she was responsible for were not tasks that could simply be taken over by another OAS staff member at a moment's notice. The systems she developed to carry out her work were unique to her organization and role, and ones she personally developed over time, in great detail. She explained how her ability to carry out her work efficiently was honed over 13 years of service in the department. She believed if someone new were to take over her job, the transition would not be smooth and would likely require entirely new systems be developed by her replacement. She worried, however, her specialization was not recognized by anyone other than herself and the support staff with whom she works:

> I mean, we [support staff] have talked about it amongst ourselves. I think faculty and above, which is our administrators, sometimes think that we're interchangeable. Like when we do lose somebody, because they've left their job or they're out with an illness, I think they think we're all cross-trained, and they should know better. We're not really interchangeable. Someone has a better skill with finance. Someone knows HR better. Someone knows purchasing better.

Other participants discussed how their specialized skills were related to interests they developed in their work but not necessarily tied to their official work profile. These OAS staff actively sought out ways to specialize their work and often were quick to explain how that specialization provided value to the organization. Mary, the Program Support Manager from earlier, provided the following example:

> I enjoy learning about trends in the program, of students time to completion and things like that. And reporting…There's a software at the university called SRU Advising and it's related to retention. Some of those things [student success metrics] are hard to track for PhD students because there's non-course requirements not necessarily in the university system. I do that myself in a database.

For Mary, the university system was not sufficient for tracking all the factors related to student retention within her program, so she took on the responsibility of creating a database that could complement the existing university system. Mary discussed multiple times throughout her interview how much she enjoyed helping students navigate varying aspects of the degree program and felt especially well-suited to help the department with student retention and institutional reporting. Mary discussed these duties, however, as ones she took on independently and so was not often able to spend as much time working on those duties as she would like because of other administrative tasks. Ideally, Mary wanted to spend more time learning about university software related to institutional reporting to become even more specialized in that area, and the "more mundane tasks" such as "paperwork" or "registration issues" kept her from pursuing other work for which she saw more value.

Like Mary, many participants reported difficulty in being able to utilize their specialized skills on the job. While Mary attributed this to the constant "mundane" tasks she was responsible

for, others saw it as a reflection of how the university simply was not aware of the skills OAS staff held or the contributions they provided. For example, Deborah, an executive assistant to the dean of a social sciences college, believed staff capabilities were often overlooked because OAS staff work was viewed via incorrect perceptions of their responsibilities as noted in the following statement:

> There's a lot of staff on campus that feel like upper-level administration sees all staff the same way, and that we are all replaceable and we can do each other's jobs, and you don't really need all this expertise and experience that we bring to our positions, which is really frustrating."

Deborah attributed this frustration to a lack of being able to showcase her skills within her current position. Before taking on her current role as executive assistant to the dean, Deborah worked as a professional in her field. She held a master's degree in experimental psychology and worked for several years within a large non-profit association related to her field. Due to some personal issues with her employer, and an affinity for higher education, Deborah decided to leave her previous position to pursue opportunities working for a higher education institution. When making the transition into her OAS role, however, Deborah found many of the skills she developed as a professional were either overlooked or deemed unnecessary within her support role. For example, Deborah had experience with survey design and analysis from working in experimental psychology and was proficient with SPSS statistical software but struggled to apply those skills within her current role. Moreover, most of her coworkers were not aware of her previous employment. So, if Deborah wanted to utilize her specialized skills as a way to provide added value, she discussed how she had to seek out opportunities for which her skills might be applicable. On one occasion, she noted using her background in survey design to help distribute

and analyze information obtained from an adjunct faculty survey. She acknowledged these skills were not necessarily related to her job description but felt a desire to offer them whenever she saw an opportunity. However, when she found an opportunity, she struggled with how to effectively offer her skills without overstepping perceived role boundaries. As she mentioned, "There's not a great way to say, 'I have all of these skills. Please utilize me.' You kind of bring them up when they're applicable."

Like Deborah, many support staff reported a desire to showcase their specialized skills but also voiced frustrations related to their inability to do so within their OAS roles. For some, organizational perceptions of support staff role placed them in a box. Piper, an administrative assistant for a game design program, felt her specialized skills were completely overshadowed by her role as an administrative assistant. Piper also believed the longer she stayed in her role, the further away she would get from being able to develop her existing skillset and utilize it professionally. Unlike Deborah, who could offer up her skills when an opportunity presented itself, Piper did not feel as though she could even offer her skills because she lacked professional credibility among her coworkers:

> I'm really smart and I don't have the credentials on paper to do the things that I know I can already do, like instructional design or project management, or those kinds of things. You know, like being a project manager on a game. I already know how to do that, but I don't have any credentials.

While Piper believe she could do the specialized work of her coworkers, her lack of formal training and credentials were a barrier no amount of experience could overcome. Because of this perceived barrier, Piper told me she was on her third attempt to get a master's degree while working at SRU. Her previous attempts fell short due to personal life events (e.g., having

children) and a realization she was in a field she did not enjoy. However, Piper kept striving for an advanced degree because without it, she felt she would never be able to develop beyond her support role:

> All the [work] experience that I have is admin work. So, if I were to even leave, I could only go to another admin job. I'm pretty stuck. How I feel is I'm pretty stuck.

Piper believed organizational perceptions of OAS staff work, and the lack of an advanced degree, effectively prohibited her from even attempting to utilize her specialized skills in ways that could contribute to the success of her department. Contributing beyond basic, administrative support responsibilities was simply not possible. As she stated during her interview "I don't think that's an option. Not in this position, no."

Hector, an Office Manager for a department of health studies, echoed Piper's views that staff specialization or expertise were not valued and believed that even with an advanced degree, OAS staff skills would likely not be acknowledged in the workplace. Hector worked in the same department for over 15 years, earned a bachelor's degree from the department in which he worked, and was also pursuing an MBA from Striving Research University. Hector certainly had institutional knowledge and expertise, both through his education and tenure in the department, other staff within his department could not replicate. However, Hector believed neither his experience, nor his education, could provide him any sort of credibility or upward mobility within his OAS position. He believed opportunities to develop were limited by common perceptions of OAS roles, as illustrated by the following statement:

> You weren't hired here to have a master's, or to implement your master's, or to use your master's. You were hired to do X, Y, and Z, and that's all we [the university] want you to do. We don't care if you have an idea, thought, campaign, initiative, or fundraiser. Stay in

your lane. That's how staff are viewed, and that's how staff are perceived, and that's how staff are utilized. Or underutilized, I would say.

Despite reports of how specialized credentials or experience were overlooked, a majority of participants still conveyed how they would like more opportunities to develop their skills. Moreover, participants also expressed a need for professional development around areas in which they already felt specialized, because they believed further honing of their skills would benefit their place of work. They viewed their role and value through these specializations, even though those responsibilities were not always a large part of their job or valued in the workplace. While participants felt development might help them advance professionally, most framed their motivation to develop or utilize their specialized skills as a way to contribute to the larger goals of their departments or the university at large. Participants seemingly wanted to use their skills to contribute, not just advance.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined findings largely related to research questions one and two, and presented data related to participant beliefs around OAS staff roles within the current case study. However, this chapter largely focused on overarching themes related to specific performance tasks and responsibilities of OAS staff work. The following chapter continues to discuss OAS staff roles and responsibilities but presents findings that articulate participant beliefs around larger roles tied to university operations as well as interactions with other university employees.

CHAPTER 6: SUPPORT STAFF AS UNIVERSITY GUIDES

This chapter explores the second overarching theme discovered during data analysis. While Chapter 5 discussed how office and administrative support staff believed themselves to be institutional experts, either through their process and institutional knowledge or specialized expertise, OAS staff also viewed themselves as institutional guides, a theme that provided more information on role interactions with other employees. As institutional guides, support staff helped internal and external constituents navigate their institution as advisors or representatives. As with the previous chapter, three subthemes emerged when participants discussed their roles as institutional guides. First, nearly all participants discussed regular interactions with students in which they acted as ad hoc advisors who helped students navigate institutional environments, policies, or programs. Second, staff saw themselves as what was often described as frontline representatives of the university. This description aligns with previous research conducted by Schmidt et al. (2015) in which support staff were described as those who occupied frontline positions within universities, such as receptionists or assistants, and were often the primary points of contact for institutional constituents. Third, participants believed themselves to be internal representatives who advocated for the needs of other university employees or acted as representatives for supervisors or their departments and the faculty and staff with whom they worked.

Support Staff as Student Guides

Providing student support was a constant belief participants reported when discussing their roles. Seventeen of the 24 participants reported having consistent and direct interactions with students and reported that student support, at some level, was directly related to their role as an OAS staff member. Participants who did not report student interactions as a primary part of

their work, however, still believed their role was somehow related, however indirectly, to student success.

Office and administrative support staff reported their interactions with students in different ways, but all believed themselves to be institutional guides who supported student success. Types of interactions with students ranged from supervisory roles (e.g., supervising part-time student workers) to impromptu interactions with students in their departments or within other areas of the SRU campus. Moreover, while participants felt helping students was an integral and often enjoyable part of their work, providing guidance or informal advising for students was only occasionally part of a formal job description. While at times student interactions constituted a formal aspect of participant's roles, such as when they were required to supervise student workers, providing guidance for students was more often an informal role OAS staff took upon themselves. This section begins by providing data that illustrates formal roles between OAS staff and students, such as supervisory roles, and then provides data around more informal roles. Informal roles included responsibilities such as ad hoc student advising, guiding students through the university environment, and providing advice that might be more accurately defined as student counseling.

Several participants in the current study reported supervising student workers, typically undergraduate, hourly workers, was a key part of their work. For some participants, student interactions were limited to supervisory roles, with the exception of informal interactions around campus. Ann was one such participant. While Ann regularly interacted with students in previous positions, at the time of her interview, she held an OAS position in which her only interactions with students was as their supervisor. Ann held two titles within her role, Office Manager and Administrative Assistant to the director of a social sciences program. Ann worked in higher

education her entire career and held multiple positions throughout Striving Research University. Before taking her current position as Office Manager, Ann worked at an admissions office, registrar's office, and advising office as a student advisor. Ann discussed how her OAS role required her to wear "many hats," and that restructuring within her department required her to take on the responsibilities of two previously full-time positions, a 40-hour a week office manager and a 40-hour a week director of communications. While Ann spent much of her career helping guide students on academic matters, she acknowledged how her OAS role did not "really have any interaction with students anymore" aside from her student workers. Ann traded her advisor hat for the hat of a student supervisor and summarized her supervisory role in the following example:

> I have four student workers. Because I am doing all of the outreach communications, marketing, alumni, website, promotion of events, all that stuff…I'm not a graphic designer, so what I've done is hire student workers with those skills and have them create beautiful flyers. I advertise for classes, new minors, info sessions, and things like that. I have student workers that answer the phone, make advising appointments, and do some graphics and stuff for me.

Ann started working in higher education as a student worker herself and now relied upon student workers, which she affectionately referred to as "my student workers," to effectively manage the responsibilities of the two previous positions, which her role absorbed. While Ann explained she rarely interacted with students other than her student workers, she clearly still viewed her work as related to student success and sought ways to help guide students from within her current position. She discussed how one of her professional goals as office manager

was to help grow the endowment of her department, which provided scholarships for first generation students. Moreover, she tied this goal to the goals of the university at large:

> We offer three scholarships in our department. I review applicants and select people to give these scholarships…It's 1000 bucks. I wish we could give out 10 of them because that's what we [the university] are all about, is making our university accessible, and affordable.

Ann mentioned how she was currently working with central development offices to try to promote the success stories of students within her department. She directed the efforts of her student workers toward developing marketing materials and improving websites as a way to promote the accomplishments of her department in the hopes of attracting more funding for student scholarships. She also believed the work she assigned to her student workers provided them with professional work experience that would be valuable after college.

Edward, another Office Manager working in an interdisciplinary leadership program, discussed how he also supervised students in his role and believed one of his primary responsibilities was to help those students develop personally and professionally. Edward explained how his role as Office Manager was to support the "day-to-day" operations of the department, which ranged from budgeting and purchasing to coordinating orientation sessions and admission events. However, Edward also believed one of his most important roles was to contribute to student development and success by providing various forms of guidance. While Ann's interactions with students were more based on work delegation, Edward believed he held a mentoring role with his student workers in which he provided guidance on both personal and professional matters, as illustrated by the following example:

> I have two students who report to me directly, and four to five who tend to be general support. For a lot of them, they just sometimes like having someone to soundboard off. We joke sometimes, it's like I'm Papa Edward. I tend to get more of the adult questions like, "How do I start a bank account?

In this example, Edward explained how he provided guidance and advice to students they might not otherwise be able to get from friends, faculty, or other university employees. His description of how the students in his office referred to him as "Papa Edward" illustrates, on a small level, an *in loco parentis* role tied to the history of many higher education institutions. During his interview, Edward relayed numerous stories about helping students navigate the university. Sometimes Edward described himself as a literal guide, helping students navigate the physical space of the university:

> It sounds silly, but there'll be things like two students looking for the same building at the same time, and it turns out they're in the same class. We'll [staff] literally be like, "See that person with the backpack, follow them!"

Other times, Edward noted how something as small as helping students find their way around campus had a positive influence that was more closely tied to the psychosocial aspects of student experiences. For Edward, these were the important interactions, though he struggled with how to calculate the benefits of each small, positive interaction he had with students. Nonetheless, he deeply believed those interactions made a difference:

> It's one of those things where there's no metric. We just know from the students who come up and talk to us, and it's so simple…[the student] is going to their first class, and they're completely lost and it's like, "Thank you for telling me where my building was."

When describing these interactions with students, Edward often noted how "silly" it sounded that small interactions like this could make a significant contribution but was adamant they did. At one point during his interview, Edward compared his "silly" interactions with students to the work of a university development officer. While the development officer who "brought in a $3 million gift," was certainly a more tangible accomplishment, he believed his own interactions with students could have positive institutional outcomes directly tied to larger, institutional goals:

> I never know. It could be that what I say to a student, and what our office offers, is the tipping point that makes them choose [SRU], which to me is making a big impact on campus because we're getting another student…which is, on a simplistic level, the whole goal of the university.

While Ann and Edward illustrated instances where office and administrative support staff held formal roles in which they provided student guidance around personal or professional matters, many support staff believed a formal responsibility of their role was to provide student guidance as a *de facto* program advisor who had specific knowledge that could help students effectively navigate program requirements. On many occasions, support staff reported using the specialized skills, institutional knowledge, or process management abilities discussed in Chapter 5 as a way to also help students navigate the requirements of their programs.

Mary, the Program Support Manager from Chapter 5, noted how she enjoyed working with students and helping guide them through program requirements and academic systems. Whereas many support staff helped provide guidance to undergraduate students, Mary was one of the few participants who interacted more regularly with graduate students. In particular, Mary worked largely with doctoral students and graduate research assistants. From Mary's perspective,

part of her role as program support for the PhD program was to help ensure doctoral students hit particular benchmarks when needed, and they understood what university policies doctoral students must adhere to beyond their individual program policies. In the following example, she discussed at a high-level how she helps guide doctoral students through their programs from beginning to end:

> They [doctoral students] need a little bit more support because it's a longer period of time. There are benchmarks throughout their program, portfolios, proposals, dissertations. I help them a lot during the admissions period and at the end of dissertation, because there are definitely deadlines.

The program Mary supported consisted of about 400 students. Mary noted the strongest relationships she had with students were with the graduate research assistants (GRAs), a student body, which she estimated to be about 30% of the program's student population. Her most consistent interactions were with the GRAs mainly because they were on campus more often. In particular, she conveyed a keen sense of responsibility for the women her own age who had a "similar life situation with grown kids." However, Mary did not limit her advisory role to just the students on campus or those who asked her directly for help. She felt a responsibility to track students' progress through the program and follow up with students when she did not hear from them regarding specific deadlines or program requirements. In the following example, Mary talks about her frustrations with more senior doctoral students who do not keep track of program requirements and how she feels responsible for helping guide those students so they avoid potential program delays:

> Students, particularly those working on dissertation requirements, kind of become isolated and don't check their emails. There's always like ten problems. I try to

> communicate all the directions, but people tend not to read and follow directions. And after the registration deadline this year I had like ten late schedule adjustments, so I said if I see another one, I'm gonna scream.

Even though the responsibility of following the program requirements ultimately falls to the student, Mary felt a responsibility to guide students through the program requirements, track their progress, and help them correct their mistakes when necessary. This responsibility harkens back to Mary's interests in student retention discussed in Chapter 5 and her belief she holds specialized skills that can aid the university with student retention and institutional reporting.

While Mary viewed part of her guiding role as helping students navigate program requirements, other participants provided guidance for students via emotional support or informal counseling. Laura was an Office Assistant in a School of Recreation and Tourism. Early in her interview, I asked Laura to tell me about the nature of her work and what she typically does on a daily basis. Like almost every other study participant, Laura rattled off a number of detailed office support activities, ranging from answering phones and ordering books to hiring adjunct faculty and coordinating course evaluations. As detailed as Laura was in her response, she generalized the details of her office support role as simply the "day-to-day stuff" required to run an office. While she took pride in doing these "day-to-day" tasks well, there was one aspect of Laura's job she considered a daily responsibility and much more important than her typical administrative responsibilities. The following excerpt illustrates how Laura viewed her office support role in comparison to what she believed was a more crucial responsibility of her position:

> Right now, for the whole school, I do scheduling, adjunct hiring, travel for faculty, staff and students, course evaluations, book orders, answering phones, all of the day-to-day

> stuff…And I take care of our students. Part of my personal belief is that we have to take care of our students. If they've having a bad day, I wanna make sure they know that we can take care of them.

During her interview, Laura made sure to differentiate between the office support functions she was required to do as part of her position, such as taking meeting minutes, and her student support role, which she felt was ultimately more important to the department. Laura believed one of her primary roles was to support students within her school and administrative tasks were borderline distracting when it came to this responsibility. And while Laura had strong connections to the students within her department, she also saw her student support role as relevant to the greater success of the institution. She was purposeful, informed, and passionate about this role, as illustrated in the following example:

> Any time I walk past a student on campus, I speak to them. I make eye contact with them, because it's been shown in study after study that students who feel like they're included are gonna be more likely to stay in school, and if they're having a problem, they'll come talk to you.

This excerpt from Laura's interview shows three things. First, Laura felt a personal obligation to student support, whether or not it was part of her formal job description. During her interview, when discussing student support, Laura would often tie her beliefs to personal examples or social concerns. Personally, Laura mentioned how her own daughter recently moved away for college and hoped was being well looked after. Socially, Laura cited broader social concerns tied to social support, such as mental health concerns among college students. Laura believed part of her role was to make sure students knew there was someone who could help "fix" whatever problems they might be dealing with or, she said, at the very least, "get that

person to who they need to talk to." Laura also understood it was important to connect this role to the values and goals of the institution. She mentioned how "study after study" showed how important personal interactions were for student success, utilizing academic values such as research to justify her efforts. Moreover, she noted how her efforts had potential to help students become "more likely to stay in school," and how student retention was an important goal of SRU.

Other participants discussed how a responsibility of their OAS position was to provide student mentoring and support. While some support was programmatic (e.g., guiding students through program requirements), providing students with psychosocial support over instrumental support was more commonly reported by participants. In the mentoring literature, instrumental support is often defined as support which is task-related and goal focused while psychosocial support focuses on perceptions of competence and emotional development (Eby et al., 2013) Donna, the psychology department office manager, discussed how often students came to her office crying, and she believed providing psychosocial support for these students was a responsibility of her role. Moreover, she felt responsible for training other OAS staff how to do the same. In the following example, Donna discussed her approach to providing psychosocial support for students when necessary and what she tells other OAS staff:

> They [students] are going to cry. Don't start crying with them. First of all, reassure them there's nothing that can't be fixed. I don't care how bad you think it is. We always have a way to fix things. And once they see that you're in the system looking for the person we need to talk to, or the form we need to fill out, or whatever, you can just see them visually relax. And then they cry again because you helped them!

Donna illustrates in this example how the process management and institutional knowledge discussed in Chapter 5 also help OAS staff guide students through personal issues and times of stress. Donna stated, “We [staff] always have a way to fix things.” In this statement, she acknowledges solutions to problems are not often clear to students because institutional or academic policies may seem inflexible or severe. OAS staff, however, have unique knowledge that can help guide students through what, to them, initially seems like unnavigable waters. Tina, an office manager within a School of Public Health, also mentioned similar scenarios when I asked her about times when she felt successful in her job. In the following example, Tina talks about how she felt successful in her role when students come to her office for guidance:

> They [students] are confused, they don’t know what to do. No one gave them the right answer. Somehow, they’ve turned into this bundle of angst. So, the rest of my job is just doing my job, but some of those special student situations, I feel successful if I’ve handled one appropriately. I’m not an advisor, but I do communicate well with the students.

Tina acknowledged how student advising was not a formal part of her job by simply stating, “I’m not an advisor.” When she talked about interactions with students, she made sure to communicate how she was “cautious about what I will say and what I won’t say” when it came to student advising. On a professional level, she knew programmatic advising or student counseling was not a part of her formal job description. However, she believed taking this role as needed not only helped the student but also faculty and the department as a whole. Tina felt successful when there were “fewer of those [student problems] that affect us as a group.”

This section provided data from the current study to show how OAS staff often viewed themselves as guides for students attending SRU. Whether providing professional guidance via a

supervisory role, academic guidance via their programmatic knowledge, or personal guidance in times of stress, OAS staff clearly felt student guidance and support as an integral, albeit not always formal, aspect of their job. Moreover, staff often had regular interactions with students because of the organizational spaces they occupied within their work environments. As Szekeres (2004) notes, administrative staff working in higher education environments often "live at the frontline," where they must deal with student issues (p. 12). In the following section, I discuss how participants of the current study often echoed the sentiment of living at the frontline of their institutions, and how these positions were more than just dealing with student support concerns. As frontline representatives, OAS staff held much more complicated roles.

Support Staff as Frontline Representatives

Staff similar to the office and administrative support staff discussed in the current study have been described by some researchers as those staff who occupy frontline positions within universities, acting as "the first point of contact for current students, prospective students, parents, legislative officials, and other constituents" (Bauer, 2000, p. 87). This idea parallels the second subtheme found within the overarching theme of OAS staff as institutional guides. While the findings of the current study certainly would agree with the previous definition of frontline staff, this section provides more detailed information about these roles, which the existing literature lacks.

Two-thirds of participants in the current study reported one of their major roles was to be a frontline representative of their university or respective department. Participants reported this in a variety of ways, ranging from the idea they were the "face" of their institution to the idea support staff were the "first point of contact" for internal or external constituents of their departments. Primarily, these staff felt as though their roles inherently placed them in positions

where they were the first to engage with people or activities throughout the university. This section begins by discussing how participants believed their frontline positions gave them the role of representing larger university interests, such as the reputation of SRU. I then provide examples of how participants described work within their roles as frontline representatives, which ranged from customer service to promoting student enrollment.

Abby, a Program Support Specialist in an English department, saw clear ties between her frontline role, as well as similar roles held by OAS staff, and the perceived reputation of the institution. Abby, who had both been a student and employee of the case institution, was quick to acknowledge faculty work, such as research and teaching, was extremely important to the success and reputation of the university. However, she also saw support staff as incredibly important when it came to the perceived reputation of the university:

> I mean we may not be the researchers, but we are the face to the students and to our faculty. How we are perceived, and how effectively we advocate for our communities, does have an impact on whether people come here, whether they want to be here, whether we are an effective institution, and whether we have the best interests of our constituents at heart. All of that stuff is extremely important when you're talking about cumulative reputation.

Abby believed her role, and the role of other support staff, was to embody the best interests of the university and its employees through her support position. For Abby, who had long ties to the institution and, by association, the state, her support role was one of civic responsibility and the quality of her work directly reflected the quality of the university and its members. She was the “face” of the university. Lily also had strong feelings about the representative roles support staff held within the university. While Abby tied her representative

role to feelings of civic and community responsibility, Lily tied them to personal ideologies around work in general:

> I was a waitress all through college. I just really think when you interact with people, it's important. How you present yourself, whether it's a student calling, a university supervisor calling, a mentor teacher calling, or anyone that's worried about a payment or a contract, I try to be helpful.

Abby and Lily both believed OAS staff behavior influenced institutional perceptions. Abby viewed the contributions of her work from a macro-level, in which her work and reputation connected to a higher purpose within the university. Abby's work was an embodiment of the university's interests. Lily, however, consistently discussed her work at a micro-level, stressing the importance of individual interactions and first impressions and orienting her role toward the idea of customer service. For Lily, each interaction with a student, faculty member, or other university constituent had an impact and was important. For example, Lily was very invested in the well-being of specific adjunct faculty members within her department. These adjunct faculty were responsible for observing student teaching interns in the field and given the title of "university supervisors." Lily explained how the university supervisors rarely came to campus and, because they worked remotely, she was often their primary contact within the university. As such, starting these employees "off on the right foot" was extremely important for Lily. She believed fostering positive, personal interactions was an important part of her job. Lily ensured university supervisors knew who she was and how her position represented the college. Helping the adjunct university supervisors "put a name to a face" was important because these employees were, from Lily's perspective, a customer of the university. Without their involvement, the program Lily supported could not function. Her role was to act as a personal representation of

the college for these adjunct faculty, as she illustrated by stating, “When they [university supervisors] do have to reach out to us, it’s just more personal. I feel strongly about customer service.”

Lily’s “customer service” orientation was commonly reported among participants. Perceptions of customers, however, varied by participant and could overlap. Some viewed customers as students while others viewed faculty or other staff as internal customers. Mindy, who provided event support for a central administration office, believed through providing “great customer service,” she could contribute to improved perceptions of the university as well as introduce university offerings to those outside the university. She explains this simply in the following excerpt:

> What I really do is uphold SRU’s missions and who they want to be seen as an employee of SRU. I'm following the rules, giving great customer service and doing things that are just keeping people flowing through our door.

Because Mindy did not work in an academic department, she reported she did not necessarily feel like she contributed to student or academic goals, even though she previously worked in departments more focused on student activities and was even a student at SRU prior to becoming a staff member. Instead, she felt her role was more about representing the university to external constituents who might attend the events she helped arrange. By providing good “customer service” to those outside the university, she could directly increase the prestige and perception of the university as a whole. When participants described their frontline representative roles within the university, good customer service skills were typically described as a point of pride. Sometimes, however, the perceived customer service responsibilities that

came with a frontline position were perceived as a point of distress. For Mila, an Office Manager for an academic affairs office, this was the case.

Mila worked within higher education institutions for over 15 years, 12 of which were at SRU. At the time of her interview, Mila recently had her OAS work responsibilities redefined by her supervisor. For most of her time as an office manager, Mila was largely responsible for behind-the-scenes work ranging from faculty support services (e.g., travel arrangements, reimbursement, etc.) to office purchasing or managing student scholarships. She also was the primary assistant to two associate deans and a director of student success within her college. Mila described her responsibilities within her department as "not limited" to anything specific and "too many" to describe but, nonetheless, expressed how she generally enjoyed her job, particularly when she was able to help students succeed. The recent changes, however, moved her from a behind-the-scenes role to a much more public role. Now, Mila explained, 45% of her time was assigned to front desk support. Many of the previous responsibilities she enjoyed, such as processing student scholarships, were taken away so she could occupy a frontline position. While Mila had experience with front desk work, she previously supervised part-time student workers who were responsible for covering the front desk. For reasons Mila did not make clear during her interview, supervising student workers was no longer her responsibility, and she alone was now responsible for covering the front desk. What was clear, however, was how uncomfortable Mila was with this new role because of how important she perceived the responsibility:

> What has changed, I absolutely dislike. I won't say I cannot multitask, I can. But working with student records and everything else, and then being responsible for the front desk…it's just…I don't like the front desk. I want it to be perfect and I'm far from it.

> Customer service is really important. Basically, we are the face of the student academic affairs [office] right now, up front.

Mila went on to explain how she was "forced" into this new position and did not feel confident in her current ability to effectively represent the department. Her lack of confidence was not due to a general lack of confidence around providing support services but rather because Mila felt her skillset was specialized, as discussed in Chapter 5, and her specific skills were not well suited to the responsibilities of a front desk representative. She also believed a coworker who occupied the front desk previously, and since left the department, was much more experienced in that position. She explained, "the person who did it before, I can attest she did it a lot better than I would ever do because she was totally with it." While Mila was uncomfortable in her new customer service position, she still believed it was very important and she strived to develop her skillset around what she believed was required of a frontline position:

> I registered myself for customer service certificates that are offered through HR. I have registered for a couple of trainings and workshops to get better at it. I have all the good intentions to make it work, but that [front desk work] is my least favorite.

For other participants, being a frontline representative was more specifically about student service than customer service. Unlike the student support mentioned in the previous section, which may have focused on personal counseling or advice, frontline positions held by OAS participants also viewed student interactions as customer support interactions. Joe, the office manager in the department of philosophy, discussed how fielding random questions from faculty or students passing by was often a part of his role, primarily because his desk occupied a frontline position within the office. He talked about how he often had interactions with students

that had nothing to do with his department or job, yet he still felt a responsibility to help students who happened to wander by his desk with a question, as illustrated in the following example:

> A lot of the times they [students] will come and ask a question and it has nothing to do with even our college. It's engineering or something. So then you call around, make some calls, and you've helped that person. Now, they have a good image. To them it's the whole university. You're a representative of the university to that person.

Joe's example here illustrates how office and administrative support staff see themselves as the first point of contact for any institutional constituent who may come their way. Participants reported how these chance encounters could positively impact university outcomes, from increasing university reputation to recruitment and admissions. For example, Sue noted, "a good portion of what I do is answer parent questions. I'm the first point of contact for anybody who's looking to get information about our particular program." Mary echoed this sentiment when discussing university admissions. "When it comes to admissions, we [support staff] are kind of the face of the university. We're the person who answers their questions and, in a timely manner, tries to provide them with the right information."

While this section explained how staff view themselves as frontline representatives for the university who interact with students and external stakeholders, participants also identified as internal representatives within the university. Participants described their roles as internal representatives to be distinctly different from their frontline positions. As internal representatives, participants reported how they served as an internal network of information within the university, passing along communications integral to university operations. Whether as liaisons between departments, mediators between faculty and staff, or extensions of their

supervisors, staff also described themselves as internal representatives who helped preserve relationships and operational communications within the university.

Support Staff as Internal Representatives

While subthemes one and two within this chapter talked largely about how participants viewed themselves as institutional representatives for non-employees of the university (e.g., students or external constituents), OAS staff in the current study also talked about how their roles and work required them to represent the interests of other employees within the university. Whether representing the needs of their supervisors, faculty, or other support staff, participants consistently discussed how their work required them to effectively represent the needs of individuals or, in some cases, larger organizational systems (e.g., colleges or departments). As discussed in Chapter 2, support staff may often be responsible for working between professional and academic areas, often in ambiguous roles. Concomitantly, participants in the current study often described their roles as integral links between organizational systems. If we view higher education organizations as loosely coupled systems, in which departments are autonomous but loosely linked to each other (Weick, 1976), OAS staff may serve as the physical links between organizational systems.

In the current study, participants regularly described the ways in which their roles required them to either network with other staff within the university, or act as institutional liaisons between departments, in order to ensure the operations and missions of their organizations were correctly represented. As loosely coupled systems, higher education institutions are said to hold together "not through managerial control, but through the interactions and sentiments that organizational members construct" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 224). In line with this idea, participants described how regular interactions or communications with other

university employees often represented the needs of the institution. Study findings revealed these interactions occurred in one of two ways. First, participants often were required to communicate the interests of their supervisors throughout the university or provide valuable information to faculty. Second, participants networked with other staff and acted as liaisons between various university departments.

Many participants believed their role as an OAS staff member was to act as a formal representative of their college or department throughout the university. Many participants believed their work reflected the needs or reputation of their supervisors and faculty. Tracey saw herself as a representative of her department and the faculty she supported. Tracey's primary title was Office Manager, though she also held the title of assistant to the chair of her department. From her perspective, much of her job was to make her chair's "life easy" by ensuring the department was well represented in every way. Properly formatted adjunct offer letters, or successful department luncheons, were "little things" Tracey could do to increase the reputation of her chair and department. She also believed her role as office manager and assistant to the chair was to represent, and relate to, diverse groups of people, which she tied to the larger missions of the university. A veteran and military spouse, Tracey worked and lived in in many different areas before arriving at SRU and she believed her life experience allowed her to work well with many different people.

While she was at work, Tracey believed her actions indirectly represented the effectiveness of her chair and the varying needs of those working in her department. Other participants, however, described the direct ways in which they represented their employers. Mark, for example, saw himself as a direct representation of his office and supervisor, as he explains in the following excerpt:

> My immediate supervisor reports to the head of this campus, who reports to the senior VP [of SRU]. The way I look at my job is I try to support him as much as I can. Make him look good. Then, I'm just dealing with my little part of the campus. I'm like, okay, sure. I care about what happens to the university, but if I do my part here at this campus, then that will flow, knock on wood, up to everything else that the university does.

Mark believed by doing his job effectively, in his niche area of the university, he could make his boss look good which, in turn, would make the university look good. Mark saw his work as the beginnings of something that would ultimately represent the effectiveness of his department and the branch campus in which he worked. Beth, a dean's assistant, had similar feelings about her position. Beth believed a significant part of her job was making sure the dean was well represented within the college. As mentioned earlier, Beth had unique access to specific institutional knowledge within her college, including meeting minutes, university initiatives, or relationships within her college. She used this knowledge to make sure the actions of her dean were well informed. As she explained, "A lot of my job is making sure she [the dean] looks good and making sure she's following through [on tasks]." From Beth's perspective, poor performance in her role as a support staff member had a direct impact on the reputation of the dean and, by association, the college. Ann voiced similar feelings during her interview, recalling the old adage, "you're only as good as the people who work for you," to describe how important support staff were to the internal reputation of faculty and management.

While the participants mentioned above described themselves as internal representatives for specific university employees, others did so via a market-oriented approach. For these participants, part of their role was not to represent people, but the unique programs or offerings of their departments. Donna was one such participant. Donna worked in higher education for

over 12 years but spent the majority of her professional career working in private industry. Before coming to Striving Research University, Donna worked primarily as a financial analyst and held dual degrees in economics and business. She also mentioned she previously worked for a major telecommunications company in a middle management position, though she decided to leave the company when it moved its headquarters to a different state. Between her last industry job and entering higher education, Donna took three years off before deciding to come back to work. She was 58 at the time of our interview and said she took a job in higher education because she wanted to work in an environment "more interesting" than industry and personally gratifying. Donna described the decision to move to higher education as a "feed your soul kind of thing." Like many participants, Donna's title was Office Manager. Also like many participants, Donna believed her work was very different from other staff with the same title.

Donna viewed herself as an operational manager but also as someone whose work represented the stature of her department. She made a point to tell me she had a staff of six working with her, which was unusual within the university, and how her academic department was one of the largest in the university, supporting approximately 300 graduate students and 1100 undergraduates. She also had many stories about how she helped faculty market or develop new programs to students within the university as a way to increase enrollment. At the time of her interview, Donna was particularly focused on work related to faculty promotion and tenure. Much like the participants who believed part of their job was to make their bosses look good, Donna took promotion and tenure very seriously and felt it was her job to make faculty promotion and tenure packets look as good as possible. In the following example, Donna described one instance in which a term faculty member was going up for promotion. A new

process was being used to review term faculty members on this occasion, and Donna was concerned about the materials the faculty member provided for review:

> [The term faculty member] had to do a case book just like people going for tenure. So, the woman's amazing. She's an absolute rock star. She does all of these things and her case book materials would not have filled that [points to small envelope]. I didn't want to upset her so I contacted the chair of her committee and I said, "Hey, [faculty member's] case book looks like doo doo. Are you guys focused on that?"

Donna went on to describe how she talked with the faculty member to explain what she believed could improve the content of the faculty member's promotion materials. She then showed me a letter from the faculty member, which thanked Donna for her efforts. Whether or not reviewing promotion case books, like the one described here, was a formal responsibility of Donna's was unclear. If not, some might view her actions as inappropriate, since faculty promotion and tenure matters are typically the sole purview of the faculty. What was clear, however, was Donna did not care whether providing input on the faculty member's promotion materials was a formal responsibility or if her actions might be viewed as stepping over a line. In this example, Donna felt a responsibility to help the faculty member represent herself, and her work, as accurately as possible. When asked why she felt it was her responsibility to help the faculty member in this way, Donna provided a simple explanation: "I didn't want to see her fail. She's a rock star. She just didn't know how to package the fact that she was a rock star."

During her interview, Donna explained how representing the needs of her department often required direct interactions with faculty or management. She provided suggestions to curriculum committees about how programs were being advertised or sent direct emails to the president's chief-of-staff voicing concerns around organizational processes. And while Donna's

main focus was representing her department, she also understood the importance of tying her work to the larger missions of the university, as shown in the following statement:

> I would say that in the twelve years that I've been here, we have had at least four different directions published for us, and three of those have been in the past six years. So, I look at all of those and the first thing I do is I say, “Where does our department fit in that picture?” If I don't see us in that picture, I go into whoever's the chair, I'm on my fourth chair now and I love all of the chairs, and I go, "Hey, did you notice our college isn't even in any of this? What are we gonna do about that?"

Donna was not shy about ensuring the department and its employees were well represented within the university and felt this was an integral part of her work. Perhaps because of her previous work background, Donna saw her department as a business and the reputation of her business was extremely important. Moreover, one of her primary roles was to help effectively represent the quality of the people and programs within her department.

While Donna often described her role as someone who represents the larger-scale reputation of a department, other participants described themselves as representatives for the needs of their department and the people with whom they worked. Words like “liaison” or “middleman” were used by participants to reflect how a portion of their role was to act as a kind of ambassador between people or other departments within the university. Joe believed being a liaison between university departments was actually his primary role as office manager. Joe stated he did not “work as much on the academic side of things” but instead was the channel through which most administrative tasks passed through the department and then out to other areas of the university. He describes that role in the following example:

> For the most part, I'm like a liaison between the academic departments and basically the rest of the university. If HR needs something done, then I will work with the department chairs to make sure that they [HR] have the stuff that they need.

The work described by Joe in this example required him to have a certain level of institutional expertise, often related to the roles of expertise described in Chapter 5, though his role as an institutional expert was separate from his role as an internal representative of the university, or "liaison" as he referred to it. While his role as an institutional expert required knowledge of specific processes and policies, his role as liaison required social skills and an understanding of how to effectively communicate information between individuals or departments that may have disparate goals.

Edward also described himself as an institutional liaison between departments. He mentioned he was the only person in his office who received specific information from throughout the university regarding organizational updates or goals. During his interview, Edward mentioned how he was the primary contact for departments ranging from IT support to the President's Office. When Edward received information from a representative of the university working outside his department, he believed his job was to process that information and understand how it related to the operations of his office and to whom it should be communicated:

> I'm on email lists from HR, explaining what's happening in HR. The same thing with telecom and any purchasing things. On those things, I'm the liaison for the office and so it's my role to distribute it out to the office. We also happen to be in a student center building, there's three of them, and a couple times a year the university will do student

center meetings. They'll be like, here's all the updates that are going on. I go to those and it's my responsibility to come back and disseminate that information out.

At times Joe and Edward described themselves as liaisons, and other times as "middlemen," but in either case they were describing a role that required them to represent the needs of their department and the needs of other departments within the university. Like organizational diplomats, participants often described how their roles required them to travel in and out of their home departments to convey or receive information and work closely alongside university employees who others within their home departments might never interact with. For participants working alongside high-level leadership within the university, the role of internal representative was extremely important, and carrying out that role poorly could have negative outcomes for the support staff member as well as those whom they were charged to represent. In the following example, Beth, an executive assistant to a college dean, discussed how she sometimes was placed in uncomfortable situations wherein she had to represent the interests of the dean, or the dean's office, to other university employees:

> Occasionally there are tough issues that come up where someone feels very passionately about something and the dean disagrees. I'm not exactly in the middle of the argument, but sort of in the middle being her guard. Yeah, that can be tough, especially if someone in a leadership role in the college disagrees with the dean, or the dean's office, and they want to blame the dean's office, not just the dean. That can be challenging. I have had people yell at me before because they're in the heat of the moment.

In this scenario, Beth's role was to act as a symbolic representative of the dean as well as the dean's office. Again, like a political diplomat, Beth viewed her role as representing the interests of her office as well as acting as an organizational buffer between her dean and other

university employees. Beth mentioned how she represented four different deans in her career, despite being one of the youngest participants at only 30 years old. In that time, Beth came to understand herself as an extension of the dean and, in that role, she was required to represent the dean in uncomfortable situations. However, she also cited those situations were not the norm, and her role as liaison more often required her to represent the dean when the dean was not able to be physically present:

> I make sure information that she needs is gathered from the department chairs or associate deans, all those kind of people. I'm also kind of the liaison between us and the provost's office. I have to sit in on certain meetings, like administrative council, which is all the leadership in the college, and advisory board meetings.

Beth often discussed having to quite literally represent the dean in a number of different scenarios and, while doing so, make sure she accurately reflected the needs or wishes of the dean. If she did not accurately represent the dean in those scenarios, the potential for negative outcomes, such as organizational conflict, was almost certain.

Deborah, another executive assistant to a dean, reported similar concerns around representing the needs of her dean, but also discussed her role as representing the needs of all employees within her college. Deborah mentioned how the promotion and tenure processes took up much of her time in the late fall and early spring semesters, and often had her interacting with high-level employees within the university. She mentioned she was "liaison for the college to the provost's office" when it came to the promotion and tenure process and was responsible for working with all departments within the college to gather faculty dossiers and letters of recommendation. She discussed how ensuring all documents were uniform and up-to-date with current promotion and tenure policies was her responsibility. She also described herself as a

project manager who was required to work with many individuals outside the college. In short, she interacted with these individuals on behalf of her faculty and dean so they did not have to.

A common theme among participants who described themselves as internal representatives of their departments was their dependence on other support staff to carry out their daily tasks. Each participant explained how when they were required to interact with others outside of their respective work environments, having a network of staff throughout the university to rely on was crucial. Perhaps because of this, participants also discussed a need to represent or advocate for the work of office and administrative support staff. Participants reported OAS staff were often their own best representatives. Linda, an administrative coordinator for a central marketing department, held various responsibilities, one of which was to manage and monitor university-level information that went out to faculty and staff. Linda did not see her role as a disseminator of information, however, but rather a community builder. Since her position was centralized within the university, she believed an important role within her job was to ensure that staff were both well connected and well represented within the university. She also tied this role to the larger mission of the university, as she explains in the following excerpt:

> I try to help support the mission and goals [of the university] by getting the word out about what they [staff] need to do. Working at the different campuses I feel like I've gotten to build relationships with people and try to be a voice for them too. Because we are a university who's divided among different campuses, there's no 'main campus,' but I want to make sure that the people at the other locations are heard and have a voice and representation too.

While Linda was one of the youngest participants in the current study, she worked at the institution for long enough to know staff relied on each other for a number of different tasks, and

if OAS staff were to continue to do their jobs effectively, there was also a need to effectively represent their work and needs. In contrast to Linda's shorter tenure at SRU, Abby worked at the university for over 20 years but shared Linda's belief that OAS staff should be well represented within the university community. In fact, she believed the more well represented support staff were in the workplace, the more effective they could be at supporting other employees such as faculty. In the following example, Abby explained how it took her years to build her credibility throughout the university but, once she did, she was able to do her work better:

> I work with such a diverse group of faculty. Their personalities vary so much, but they've known me for a long time. I've developed credibility with them. They know that I'm not doing something because I'm trying to get a promotion, or that I'm trying to be bigger than my position is. They understand that what I'm doing is important for them, and when I say something needs to be done, the vast majority of them do understand that.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Abby also understood staff held unique institutional knowledge that could be beneficial for the larger university community. Because of this belief, Abby also believed her role as an OAS staff member carried an informal representation requirement. Abby believed her duty was to travel outside of her department and regularly interact with various university employees as a way of representing the larger support staff community. In her 22 years at the university, Abby helped establish a formal support staff organization, sat on search committees for institutional leadership positions, and even served on a president's strategic planning committee. Many participants knew who Abby was but, despite being incredibly well known and respected throughout the university, Abby never considered moving beyond the role of her OAS staff position, though she likely could have. Instead, she talked about her role as support staff with great pride. In addition to more tangible responsibilities like purchasing or

program support, she often talked about the “unspoken” responsibilities of support staff, one of the most important being to “advocate for faculty and students” as well as for other support staff. Abby was the consummate example of how OAS staff represented the needs of those working within the university and believed while many of the contributions of support staff went unnoticed, they were an integral part of university operations.

Chapter Summary

For many participants of the current study, the roles of OAS staff could not be effectively defined via their daily tasks, titles, or work profiles, but rather through the roles they held that went unseen. In this and previous chapters, I discussed findings that largely focused on specific work tasks or roles of OAS staff as reported by participants. In the following chapter, I provide findings around the most common theme found within this study. This theme focused on how participants believed the work and roles of OAS staff remain largely unseen.

CHAPTER 7: SUPPORT STAFF AS UNSUNG HEROES

The little research written on the roles of office and administrative support staff working in higher education institutions has often focused on the marginalization of staff within the workplace. These studies often discussed social interactions or burnout of OAS staff within the workplace. Many studies have not, however, tied their findings to broader contexts of organizational development or university missions. While Bauer (2000) argued support staff satisfaction was critical to institutional productivity, few studies have followed suit and employee classifications at the time of the Bauer study still suffered from overgeneralization. While reports of marginalization of support staff certainly appeared within the current case study, understanding issues of marginalization as they related to OAS staff roles, tasks, and larger organizational missions paints a new picture of how support staff believe they contribute to university operations.

The focus on role, missions, and theory utilized by this case study found when staff discussed instances of marginalization, they often referred to the work they conducted within the university that was either unseen or unacknowledged. This finding aligns with work conducted by Szekeres (2004), which described the roles and contributions of support staff within higher education institutions as invisible. Szekeres' work, however, struggled with definition among support staff and used broad strokes to paint the picture of the "invisible" administrative staff member. Moreover, the study relied on literature analysis from various fields and lacked empirical grounding of its own. While the work of Szekeres (2004) laid the foundation for the idea of the invisible support staff worker, this study adds to the invisible narrative by providing detailed information about individual work and contributions as reported by OAS staff themselves. In doing so, the current case study brings to light specifics around the work

conducted by office and administrative support staff. This chapter also illustrates that while support staff may often feel marginalized in their positions, they also believe themselves to be irreplaceable and integral contributors to university operations. In short, this chapter discusses how participants believed themselves to be the unsung heroes of their institutions.

As with the previous two chapters, the overarching theme of staff as unsung heroes is discussed in this chapter via three distinct subthemes. The first theme appeared as a phrase used by nearly every participant of the study. While slightly unrefined, this phrase accurately described the ways in which support staff believed their jobs were misunderstood. “People don’t know what I do” became a mantra for many staff and illustrated how participants believed their titles, employee work profiles, and everyday contributions were hidden from other university employees. This belief was important to staff because they often reported people did not understand their jobs in large part because a primary role of their job was to keep problems or activities from ever reaching other staff, such as faculty or supervisors.

The belief other university employees did not know what defined OAS staff work led to the second theme discussed in this chapter and centers on another common phrase often found within employee OAS staff work profiles or job postings. All participants described one of their primary roles was to handle “other duties as assigned,” or jobs that fell to OAS staff simply because there was no one else within their work environment who would be willing or able to do them.

The final subtheme of this chapter illustrates how participants believed OAS staff served as foundational pillars for university environments, a role which often went unrecognized. This theme discusses the various analogies and metaphors support staff used to describe the integral nature of their work within the university.

People Don't Know What I Do: The Hidden Work of OAS Staff

One theme that appeared in every interview, in one way or another, was the belief the work of Office and Administrative Support staff was either hidden from or misunderstood by other employees within Striving Research University. The phrase "people don't know what I do" was repeated, often verbatim, throughout participant interviews. The phrase was often used as a way of conveying how other employees, often faculty or management though sometimes other types of staff, either did not have any real idea about what office support staff did on a daily basis or grossly misunderstood OAS staff responsibilities. Moreover, participants often noted their employee work profiles (EWP), which formally listed their job responsibilities at the time of hire, either did not accurately reflect their work or was highly reductive. Inaccurate EWPs were often described as a source of frustration or anxiety among participants. In this section I discuss the subtheme of "people don't know what I do" by providing instances of general frustration around role ambiguity and then move on to discuss more specific data points in which participants discuss frustrations around employee work profiles and performance reviews.

Many participants noted general frustrations around how their supervisors or other employees they worked with often appeared to have no idea of the types of contributions OAS staff made on a daily basis. These observations by participants were often described via informal interactions with supervisors, or passing comments made by other employees. For example, Mila, the Office Manager for academic affairs, described a time when the disconnect between her actual work effort, and how her faculty supervisor perceived her workload, was a point of concern:

> One day, I was like up to here [holds hand above head]. I'm trying to hold my head above water. She [faculty supervisor] came to me and said, "Hi Mila, just checking to see if you

have enough to do. I just don't want you to get bored." I swear to god, that's exactly what she said. I didn't know what to say.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Mila was already frustrated with a change in her work responsibilities that "forced" her into a frontline position in which she felt uncomfortable and used this example to show how her skills and contributions appeared to be lost on her supervisor. When I asked Mila why she believed her supervisor did not understand her work, she framed the problem as one between professionalized work and administrative support work. More specifically, she viewed the disconnect as one between organizational leaders, namely faculty or management, and staff:

> If you went to school all your life, and you became the dean at the end of it, you wouldn't know what office managers do, right? You just think all these ideas [administrative efforts] are from you, and magic happens as soon as it comes out of your mouth.

Mila made an effort to understand why there was a disconnect between her actual work and her perceived work by attempting to see things from the perspective of her faculty supervisor. She believed faculty and management were too busy with meetings and other responsibilities to fully understand her work, but this did not ease her concerns. She believed support staff were viewed as just "helpers," which existed to help faculty and management despite the other hidden work they might be responsible for. For Mila, this perception created a personal struggle since she did not mind the idea of being a helper but did mind the idea of her work going unnoticed:

> I'm actually good at helping others. I like to. It makes me feel good that I know a lot of things. But when they want it right away, they think you have nothing else to do but what they ask you to do, so it gets old after a while.

Mila believed if her supervisor could observe her directly for one day, much of the frustration and conflict she felt within her support role might be resolved. Among faculty and management, Mila noted there was often a disconnect between the perceived work of OAS staff and the actual effort and time needed to complete that work. Mila attributed this disconnect to changing responsibilities among OAS staff, as she had recently experienced, as well as complex policies and systems OAS staff must navigate. As she explained, presumably menial tasks often took as much time as larger ones. She wished her supervisor could see "How many steps and filings and recordings I have to do for one five-dollar transaction."

Other participants also noted frustrations about supervisors not having the time or information necessary to understand OAS staff work. As discussed earlier, Piper, the administrative assistant for the game design program, felt particularly frustrated in her job. Piper reported much of her frustration stemmed from an inability to move forward in her career but also from a feeling that her contributions went unknown on most occasions. At one point during our interview, Piper specifically stated her department as a whole did not "realize on an everyday basis how valuable I am." When asked why her department did not realize her value, Piper provided the following insight:

> They don't bother to check in with me. I'm responsible for checking in for everything. I'm responsible for remembering everything that we're supposed to be doing. I'm responsible for all the little details about organizing everything so they can forget about it. They don't value me until they think I'm gone.

Piper's comments about being required to "check in" for everything in order to help her supervisors and coworkers understand her work extended to her annual work reviews. Piper believed annual reviews were the only time in which work responsibilities could be discussed.

More often, however, Piper felt these reviews just perpetuated existing misperceptions around her work:

> [The annual review] is where I tell everybody what I've done all year which is pretty much the same year to year, right? I've tried to do things that are more outside the scope of what I'm supposed to be doing but it doesn't really make a difference. I hate them [reviews] because I have to write them. And then they [supervisors] review it and either agree or disagree with me and then we sign it. Nobody actually reviews me. I review me.

This sentiment of reviewing oneself, or being misrepresented during annual reviews, was reported by many participants when discussing their employee work profiles or annual evaluations. While one would think a supervisor could simply look to an employee's work profile to understand their daily work, these documents became yet another representation of the "people don't know what I do" refrain. Many participants reported their work profiles or annual reviews either provided a too high-level explanation of their daily responsibilities or were outright inaccurate. This idea aligns with the theory of action, articulated by Argyris and Schon (1978), who note formal organizational documents, such as job descriptions, "often reflect a theory of action (the espoused theory), which conflicts with the organization's theory-in-use (the theory of action constructed from observation of actual behavior)" (p. 15). The theory-in-use often remains tacit within the organization because "individual members of the organization know more than they can say" (p. 15). The idea of organizational members knowing more than they can say rang true for the participants in this study, who consistently stated their work profiles or reviews did not help them convey their actual work since their daily responsibilities were ever changing or expanding, making work difficult to describe.

Issues with employee work profiles expanded beyond concerns around the "people don't know what I do" mantra to issues of identity. Many participants noted the title on their employee work profile was different from their working title. Other participants also stated their EWP title was different from what they could publicly look up within the state's employee system, SRU being a public university. Abby, who worked at the university for 20 years, stated her title, "is a generic title. It's program coordinator, but I'm listed in the state system as educational support II…Something like that." Between her profile posted on her department page, the university directory, and the state listing of employees, Abby held three disparate titles. While Abby was not too concerned with the differences between her title on paper, this was a point of stress for many participants.

One participant noted the working title of office manager, given to her by her department, was not the same title of office coordinator, which was printed on the employee work profile she was given when hired. At the time of data collection, many participants had either just completed an annual review or were about to complete one. For example, Tina recently reviewed her work profile for her annual review and provided a short, wry synopsis of that review: "I looked at my EWP for my annual review. It was overwhelming, so I quit looking at it. It's very long."

Tina went on to say she felt so overwhelmed by her work profile when interviewing for her job and continues to feel overwhelmed by it several years into the position. While she could make light of the overwhelming nature of her work profile, she also noted how it affected her perception of the position when interviewing and continues to be a point of concern:

> I may have seen it [the work profile] when I started. I think it scared me then, and I was afraid to even take the job. It made me feel a little overwhelmed. It's got everything from

> advising incoming calls and coordinating…which you do every day, but that doesn't even hit my radar of things I really do. If I had to list everything I do, you go into the minutia.

Several participants believed their annual review process was driven more by institutional policy than the institution's desire to improve operational effectiveness or understand OAS staff responsibilities. Lily, who worked in the university for over 13 years, had the following to say about her annual review:

> I've had different supervisors over the years. Some of them sit down and really go over everything and ask you about it. The past few years, I feel like we've been a little bit more rushed. It's like, "Here's your evaluation. You wanna read it and sign it?" I just think it's a little bit more perfunctory.

While all participants felt some level of frustration related to the disconnects between their titles, work profiles, and actual responsibilities, some saw it as a humorous part of the job or even a point of pride. As Edward noted, "I've had people joke, because of the extra things I'm involved in, they actually will say, 'Oh, I thought you were the Assistant Director,' which is fine." Participants even noted confusion among OAS staff, since many held similar titles but did not seem to hold similar responsibilities. While titles were similar, participants reported role variation across departments. As Mary mentioned, "We [support staff] all have different roles and responsibilities and each program is different, so we might not understand other people's jobs." And while participants noted job ambiguity often created personal stress, it also had potential to produce organizational strain.

Mark, like other participants, noted most people did not understand what he did on a daily basis. Unlike other participants though, Mark felt empowered to tell his supervisor during annual evaluations his work had changed over time and he would need to update his employee

work profile. In fact, he noted he would often point out errors listed in his work profile during his annual review. And while Mark did this to keep his supervisors informed about the changing nature of his work, he also believed no one was able to provide him feedback on how he could do his job more effectively because nobody knew what his job entailed:

> 95% of what I do, I'm the only one that knows how to do it, so no one else can tell me, "Well, have you thought about doing it this way?" because they don't know how to do it. I would love to get more feedback. I'm kind of in this role that is fine for me, but there's not a lot of people that can give me feedback.

For Mark, having no one understand the responsibilities or intricacies of his job fit well with his personality. He took pride in being a hard worker who believed in going above and beyond what was expected. Mark believed a lack of understanding around his work also provided him a level of freedom to conduct tasks in ways he felt were most effective. He joked a lack of knowledge around his position required other people to rely on him, which he saw as "job security," but seemed conflicted by the idea. At one point during the interview, Mark lamented how support staff get stuck in their roles. He worried a lack of understanding around his work might eventually create obstacles for his department, should he ever need to leave, putting the organization at risk:

> "I have no backup for anything. If something were to happen to me...I'll be 55 in two weeks. My mom's almost 80, and my dad's 81 now. If something happens to them, I'm gone. I'm out of here. I don't care what time of month it is."

Mark felt a sense of loyalty to the institution, and pride in his work, but was keenly aware of the strain his absence could put on his fellow coworkers simply because no one wanted to take

the time to better understand his work. He noted, “It kind of puts a lot of pressure on me to not be sick and to not take vacations strategically, when I really shouldn't need to worry about that.”

While a lack of knowledge around office and administrative support work, and an inability to effectively review work, was a clear frustration for all staff within the current case study, participants often viewed it as a fixable problem. If supervisors could effectively review their work, or staff themselves could better understand each other’s work, then that might improve operations and, in turn, the university.

While this section provided examples of how participants believed their roles and work was largely misunderstood, the following section provides examples of what participants felt was a greater concern and contributed to misperceptions of their roles. Like the phrase, “People don’t know what I do,” this belief emerged as another mantra participants used to describe creeping workloads and responsibilities. While presented as a simple phrase, this belief focused on the idea that every participant was not only responsible for a litany of nameable tasks, but also tasks that were unnamable. Staff referred to these tasks as “Other Duties as Assigned.”

Other Duties as Assigned: The Creeping Workload of OAS Staff

As discussed in the introduction of this study, mission creep has been a topic of discussion in higher education for some time and has affected a number of employees working in colleges and universities as well as institutional operations themselves. Research has noted how changing trends in organizational missions, market orientation, and institutional competition have created ambiguity around the roles and work of many university employees, students, and institutions themselves, particularly public institutions (Cantwell & Taylor, 2013; Gonzales, 2013; Henderson, 2009; Morphew, 2000; Saunders, 2014). However, existing research has not addressed how changing trends impact many other employees working in public higher

education institutions. During data collection of the current study, every participant discussed how their positions as OAS staff required them to take on tasks they believed were not part of their formal job descriptions or, in some cases, had become a part of their job description due to the fact there was no one else willing or able to take on new tasks within their work environments. Participants often labeled these tasks under the phrase, "other duties as assigned," a phrase which guides the findings of this section.

By their nature, tasks or roles related to "other duties as assigned," could not be specifically defined and typically could not be anticipated. Instead, these tasks presented themselves as ad hoc responsibilities that changed on a daily basis. In some cases, these responsibilities were either spontaneously assigned by supervisors, faculty, or other administrative staff within the university. Participants often reported other duties as assigned either "trickled down" to the level of OAS staff from higher-level employees or were voluntarily taken on by participants who felt as though they were the only employees willing and able to take on these responsibilities. As several participants stated, OAS staff often viewed themselves as "worker bees" responsible for taking on any task that others refused to claim. Some participants viewed this role in a positive light, describing themselves as "problem solvers" or "helpers" responsible for protecting faculty and management from unpleasant distractions. More often, however, participants saw this role as something that interrupted more important work or was necessary due to regular organizational changes, such as unexpected staff turnover or new department initiatives.

For participants who saw their "other duties as assigned" duties in a positive light, they spoke about their work in an almost stoic fashion. Participants used words such as "helper" or "caretaker" to try to illustrate how they believed a role of their position was to take on, and

protect other employees, from unexpected tasks. Laura, an Office Assistant, was one participant who embodied this idea. When asked what she felt constituted success in her work, she offered the following definition:

> My work? I am successful when things go well. If the students and faculty don't see the craziness that's going on behind the scenes, then I am successful. When the person [another support staff member] left, I took over scheduling and HR stuff for adjuncts and all of that stuff. If the faculty and students don't see any changes in how it [organizational change] affects them, then I've been successful.

At the time of her interview, Laura was responsible for the duties of another office and administrative support person who recently left her department. While the departure of the other support staff member gave Laura "a lot more responsibility," she spoke proudly about her ability to handle all the "craziness" that came from that change, largely because she felt her primary role as an OAS staff member was to support faculty and students whenever possible. Moreover, there were some personal conflicts between Laura and the other staff member, who she felt was a negative influence on the department. Through absorbing the additional responsibilities of the other staff member, she described how she was able to protect students and faculty and provide a much-needed positive influence within the office. She was happy to take on additional responsibilities if it meant contributing to the greater good of the office.

Laura also explained, however, how taking on new responsibilities could negatively affect perceptions of her work. In addition to taking on "other duties as assigned," Laura was one of the many participants who expressed concerns over the "people don't know what I do" mantra previously discussed. Faculty and staff within her department were spread between two campuses and her formal supervisor spent most of his time at a campus that was miles away.

Because of this distance, Laura's daily work was often hidden from her supervisor and those she supported. While she told me she felt appreciated by her supervisor, other staff, and the majority of faculty, she did convey how her unseen contributions, and willingness to take on extra work, was not fully acknowledged or appreciated. In the following excerpt, Laura talks about an uncomfortable situation, which occurred shortly after adopting the work of another OAS staff member who had left the department:

> I had a faculty member say to me twice recently, since this other person left, "Now you have a job where you actually have to work." And I went to my director and said, "This is not right and this does not make me feel good about myself, my job, or the things that I've been doing for the past five years." And he was shocked that the faculty member said that to me.

After telling me about this encounter, Laura went on to explain how the support of her faculty supervisor, and other faculty, helped her deal with the misperception and criticisms of her work. However, she felt no matter how much extra work she took on, there was a stigma around being an OAS staff member. Laura made a point of telling me how she had a master's degree and experience as an educator before becoming an OAS staff member but felt those credentials did not help her in her current position. "It doesn't matter what your background is. People only see you as that position."

Zoey, a support specialist working for an assistant dean of operations, also enjoyed her job but lamented how she often had to take on unexpected tasks in addition to her normal work load. Zoey believed these types of tasks kept her from developing in her job and being able to move forward with supporting other initiatives within her college:

> I get more stuff put on me, but not the stuff that I want to move on to do. And sometimes I don't mind. I'll offer to do things too. But then we've had staff leave, and this one person that I'm doing this stuff for left four or five months ago, and I don't know if there's plans to replace them, but someone has to do the work.

Like Laura, Zoey enjoyed her job and stated she had a supportive supervisor with whom she enjoyed working. However, she felt like her position as a support staff member made her the *de facto* choice for taking on unwanted tasks within the college. Aligning with previous findings, she noted how her official work profile did not reflect her actual work because of "all the stuff that's been added on" over the years but never officially acknowledged. Also, because Zoey's position supported the work of administrative leaders within the college, Zoey often saw what she believed was inequitable treatment when it came to handling "other duties as assigned" type of work. She discussed how some support staff took on more of a burden around "other duties as assigned," simply because of the department they worked within or the supervisor to which they were assigned. Zoey also discussed the differences between how faculty and staff are assigned additional work within the college. In the following example, Zoey talks about the responsibility of processing stipends for college faculty who take on extra work. In this excerpt, Zoey struggles with how extra duties are assigned to faculty in relation to OAS staff and what type of recognition is given to both:

> I process a lot of these stipends. So, say someone's filling in as an interim chair or someone's filling in as the summer program coordinator. These faculty members get $5,000-$10,000 stipends to cover this work. How many jobs have I covered? Over how many times? We don't get stipends for filling in or taking on a second job for a temporary

basis. I know I'm not equal to a faculty member, because they have a higher education and they're professors. But still, I don't know. Makes you feel not as valued.

This example was particularly frustrating for Zoey, primarily because she felt her support role was plagued with "interruptions" and "never ending little tasks" she could not plan for and which took time away from aspects of her job she enjoyed. While "other duties as assigned" was a single line on her work profile, tasks related to that job requirement took up many hours of her day. What was ultimately frustrating for Zoey was how these additional responsibilities kept her from advancing in her position and contributing to her college in a more significant way. For a select few participants, however, the "other duties as assigned" was exactly what made them feel valued and integral within their work environment.

Emma, an Office Manager and Administrative Assistant in a School of Nursing, saw handling unexpected tasks as one of the primary roles of her position. A nurse herself for many years, Emma worked in office and administrative support positions in higher education institutions for nearly 25 years after leaving the health professions. She noted by leaving her professional field, and taking an administrative support position, she took a "tremendous" cut in pay but the change helped balance her personal and professional life. At the time of our interview, Emma was in her current position for almost 10 years and took great pride in her work. More than any other participant, Emma seemed to embrace her "other duties as assigned" responsibilities. In fact, she saw them as her most valuable role. When I asked Emma to explain her primary responsibilities, she provided a simple answer, "On a day-to-day basis, I do anything. My job is oversight of smooth operation of the office." Like participants who identified as process managers in Chapter 5, ensuring smooth operations within the office was important to Emma. However, Emma's interest in helping the office run smoothly was less about

understanding processes and more about helping her coworkers, as she explains in the following example:

> I am a caretaker. And many of us in nursing are. Not all, but many of us. So, that's probably one of my biggest things. Providing a work environment that allows the nursing faculty to do their job on an easier basis, kind of knowing what they have to do because I've kind of been there. I didn't teach, but you have a general idea having gone through a nursing program.

Perhaps due to her training as a health professional, or simply her personal ideologies, Emma saw herself as a caretaker and a problem solver. While most participants lamented the constant interruptions of their other duties as assigned, Emma viewed them as both stimulating and an opportunity to contribute. In fact, when asked what aspect of her job she enjoyed the most, Emma provided the following response:

> The people contact and the fact that it's not the same thing. It's different every day I walk in here. It's the same principle, but it's different. Different people. I love helping people when they call, and I love solving problems. I am like a dog with an old bone. I like solving problems. I do a lot of that.

During my interview with Emma, I was required to pause the recorder on three separate occasions so Emma could answer a call or field a question from someone knocking at her office door. On one occasion, she helped a delivery person find a faculty member's office so they could deliver a medical supply order. As a support staff member, Emma felt one of her primary responsibilities was to take care of unwanted tasks or problems. She stated, "You could ask me to do anything. I just feel like it's my job." And while she personally enjoyed this aspect of her

job, she believed it had an important effect on organizational operations, employees, and contributed to the larger missions of the university:

> We [support staff] do all the things that the faculty above us don't have time to do. We take that burden away so that they can spend more of their time on the things that are, if you want to call it, more important. They can get to the work and move on.

The role of supporting faculty was a common belief reported among study participants and often connected to the greater missions of the university. For example, Tina understood one of the primary missions of the university to be increasing the number of graduates over time. While she understood the importance of that mission, she stated how it was "not entirely my mission" because, for her, faculty support came first. Tina believed her job was "to keep faculty happy and keep them moving." Through supporting faculty, she believed she could also indirectly support SRU's mission of increasing graduation rates. Joan echoed this response in her own interview. Joan believed the primary role of support staff was to help faculty do their work more effectively. Specifically, in her words, the way support staff helped faculty was to simply, "Keep 'em organized, keep 'em on track, and keep 'em focused."

While the examples above illustrate how the "other duties as assigned" of support staff often consisted of taking on unexpected workloads that would keep processes running smoothly or support faculty work, this was not always the case. Some participants believed their OAS roles required them to act as the de facto contact for any and all issues that might arise in the workplace, no matter their focus. In the following example, Lily mentioned how she was often called upon to handle office situations that were in no way related to her work description because she believed other employees "wouldn't ask any other coworker:"

> I get told when the bathroom smells like sewage. I get told that the soda machine in the hallway is leaking, or there's a dead bird outside. I'm like, "Okay, I guess you want me to call somebody," but I would just think, pick up the phone and call somebody. I guess it's a trickle-down thing. I guess I'm the logical person. So, it's a little weird. And I'm a mom, too, so sometimes you just get insulted. You handle everything that other people don't want to handle.

In this example, Lily provided extreme examples of work she was asked to do on a daily basis to illustrate how her role as an OAS staff member required her to address issues other workers found unpleasant or distracting. Lily was conflicted over taking on these tasks and struggled with understanding how they became her responsibility. She hypothesized these unpleasant tasks were simply a "trickle down thing." Lily believed the lower your position was in the organizational hierarchy, the more ambiguous your work became. Other participants echoed this belief by explaining how OAS staff held formal and informal roles. The formal roles required them to handle explicit job responsibilities (e.g., financial reconciliation, purchasing, etc.) while the informal roles consisted of taking on work those above them would rather not handle. Lily expressed a problem with these roles and made it personal, juxtaposing her role at work with her role as a mother. From her perspective, her professional role and role as a mother each held formal duties as well as "other duties as assigned," the latter being a greater point of frustration. Donna was more explicit about her other duties as assigned role, as she stated in the following example:

> My work here is very diverse. I have a staff of six. We have a significant number of grants. We have working labs. We have animals. We have between 200 and 300 graduate students and about 1100 undergrads. So actually, my work is other duties as assigned.

The subthemes presented here, as well as in the previous section, described how participants believed their jobs were not only misunderstood, but also difficult to define, due to a lack of definition or consistently changing tasks. While participants found the misperceptions of their roles, and "trickle-down" tasks frustrating, interview data also showed how important participants viewed these roles. While not glamorous, participants also reported how integral their roles were in maintaining the operational integrity of their institution. In the following section, I provide data focused on the third subtheme of this chapter, OAS staff as organizational foundations.

Office and Administrative Support Staff as Organizational Foundations

Research questions one and two sought to explore how office and administrative support staff viewed their roles and described their work in relation to larger university operations. Research question three then asked how staff believed other employees viewed the work of office and administrative support staff. During participant interviews, whether participants talked about what they believed their roles to be, the specifics of their daily work, or how they were perceived by others, a common theme occurred across nearly every interview. This theme was defined by how participants viewed OAS staff as a foundational employee base within the university. Like the foundation of a building being the structure that keeps it intact, participants viewed themselves as employees who kept organizational operations intact.

Participant descriptions around OAS roles, or perceived roles, were often described using various metaphors, each of which pointed to the belief OAS staff provided structural support for operations within the institution. Whether participants described their positions as the base of a proverbial "totem pole," or the "infrastructure" of a greater operational system, participants believed without OAS staff the university, as well as its employees, would lack stability. Some

viewed this role in a matter-of-fact way, seeing it as an important and natural order of the organization. Others used metaphors or imagery to attempt to convey how extremely important, and unrecognized, this foundational role was.

Lily was matter-of-fact when discussing her foundational role in the university. She described herself as introverted as well as someone who struggled to ask for help, despite working in the same department for 13 years. Despite her espoused introversion, however, she was not shy about describing the importance of her work as an OAS staff member. In the following example, Lily responds to the question of whether or not she believes her work directly contributes to the greater goals or missions of the university:

> I do. The functions and the responsibilities I have, they are things that are vital. Helping someone get paid. Helping events happen. Helping meetings happen. Yeah, I'm sorry I can't be more eloquent about it, except it's just…There are jobs that have to be done, and I make sure they get done. And I make sure they get done correctly.

In this excerpt, Lily struggled with how to convey the value she brought to her department and, in turn, the university at large. At first, she tried to quantify her contributions by listing tasks but then wondered if those tasks accurately reflected the important role she was trying to convey. Ultimately, she abandoned the list for a simple, matter-of-fact statement that strongly, and accurately, conveyed the beliefs many participants held about their work and its foundational necessity within the university. Lily summarized that belief well in her statement about how there are nondescript but important jobs that need to be done within the university. The responsibility of OAS staff was to make sure these jobs got done and got done correctly.

Like Lily, many staff felt passionately about the role support staff played in ensuring the university, and people working within it, were successful. Moreover, participants also sometimes

had trouble labelling their contributions. Participants could quickly define how faculty contributions revolved around teaching, research, and service. Participants could also catalogue the contributions of other employees, such as Edward's acknowledgment of development officers, who raised money for the university. Participants struggled, however, to place their own contributions into a specific category, perhaps because OAS work was often described as ever changing or included too many responsibilities to count. Whatever the reason, when participants could not provide specifics, they had no trouble using metaphors or analogies to describe the unspoken contributions of their work. Whether described as the "backbones" of the university or the "infrastructure," staff believed their roles were integral. They also tended to discuss their contributions in relation to what they felt was a gross misperception of support staff roles among other employees. Whether the misperceptions came from faculty, management, or other types of staff, participants often felt OAS staff were viewed as replaceable. Of course, participants themselves were confused, but not surprised, by these misperceptions. At some level, OAS staff understood the specialized skills and institutional knowledge they possessed, as discussed in Chapter 5, were often hidden to others. The confusion from participants around the misperception of their work came from wondering how their efforts to provide support seemed to consistently be undervalued and their positions viewed as replaceable. Emma discussed this misperception in the following example. She begins by referring to the litany of administrative tasks, purposefully situates her comments in relation to faculty work, and posits what would happen if her position did not exist:

> If they [faculty] are bogged down with all this little stuff…It [staff support] just frees them up to do the work that they need to be doing to move us forward. That's what I feel.

> If I quit tomorrow, so to speak, would the place fall down? No. But it would be a nightmare for a while until they [faculty] figure the pieces out. You know?

Emma admitted in this example that while her absence might not have as significant of an effect on organizational operations as she would like to think, she believed the work of administrative support staff was not easily replaceable. Emma was the oldest participant within the current study, past the traditional retirement age, and worked in some form of higher education institution for over 25 years. In comparison, Abby, who had the longest tenure working within Striving Research University of any participant, echoed Emma's comments. While Emma discussed what would happen if she left her department, Abby provided a larger-scale hypothetical about what would happen if support staff in general left the university, and then explained, both metaphorically and literally, why support staff are so important:

> We all know that if we all walked of the job one day the university couldn't operate. Chaos sets in. It's really that simple. We are the infrastructure. We're the undergirding for that big building we know as higher education. There has to be somebody who makes sure that we have people who can administer and manage the classrooms, who can make sure our computing systems are working, who manage the budgets that make it possible for us to have events. All these things have to be in place, and if those things aren't in place, and you don't have anybody managing any of it, what do you got?

Emma and Abby used words like "nightmare" and "chaos" to describe what the environment of their departments, or the university at large, would feel like without the help of office and administrative support staff. As Abby stated, support staff are the "infrastructure" that keeps university operations from falling apart.

While all participants reported similar feelings to those expressed by Emma and Abby, the previous examples attempted to describe the importance of support staff via their hypothetical absence. In contrast, many participants chose instead to describe the importance of OAS roles via the services they provide while on the job. When Beth, assistant to a dean, was asked to discuss what enabled her to perform well in her position as a support staff member, she had a simple answer:

> I think you have to understand what your role is, and I think I understand what my role is in supporting the dean. I think you just have to be supportive. Kind of like a backbone.

Instead of describing what would happen to the dean if she were to leave her job, Beth chose to describe the value her role and presence brought to the dean. Beth saw herself as a strong backbone that enabled the dean to carry a larger burden than the dean would otherwise be able to carry alone. The role of burden carrier was an important role for many participants. Emma explained the role of burden carrier by describing support staff as "spokes in the wheel" that was university operations and discussed what would happen in the absence of her position: "You take those spokes out, I don't think that wheel's going to support the weight of the wagon very well."

Hector preferred to discuss the contributions of OAS staff via their presence, instead of hypothetical absence. Like Beth, he also described support staff as the "backbone that keeps [the university] running" and took Emma's wheel metaphor to the automobile manufacturing line. For Hector, support staff were like "blue-collar workers" on the assembly line, "putting the tires on the car and making sure we [the university] have a window, horn, and steering wheel." Beyond the assembly line metaphor though, Hector saw additional potential for support staff who worked on the proverbial factory floor:

> But, more importantly than that, I think staff as a whole have so many ideas, initiatives, thoughts. We have ways to improve efficiency, quality, and so forth, because we're doing the work on the ground level. We're able to provide that insight when you're looking at things from the top down.

From Hector's perspective, OAS staff were not only providing the foundation for university operations, but also were inherently in positions that could help build upon that foundation, improving the structure from the ground up. Similarly, Mark used a theatre metaphor during our interview to remind me there are "no small parts, just small actors."

Participants reported nearly a dozen metaphors to describe the work of staff. Foundational metaphors ranged from bricks and mortar to the bases of totem poles, each attempting to illustrate OAS staff's low standing within the university but, nonetheless, integral role. Meanwhile, metaphors used to describe participant daily work ranged from "worker bees" to "valuable cogs," again illustrating a perceived lack of gravitas among support staff positions but integral components, nonetheless. However, participants believed their roles were not viewed as integral outside of their own ranks. Participants often reported how they believed support staff were viewed as replaceable and used more negative metaphors such as "pond scum," as reported by one participant, to illustrate their low standing within the university. This replaceable perception was a real concern for participants, who often tried to explain why this common misconception existed. Deborah, who organizationally held a high-level support staff position as assistant to a college dean, believed the perception OAS staff work was menial and replaceable was common throughout the university, as she explains here:

> There's a lot of staff on campus that feel like upper-level administration sees all staff the same way, and that we are all replaceable and we can do each other's jobs and you don't

really need all this expertise and experience that we bring to our positions, which is really frustrating.

Deborah went on to explain how this misperception was a dangerous one for the university to have, mainly because it could lead to support staff turnover. She mentioned viewing staff as replaceable, instead of foundational, was bound to lead to organizational strain throughout the university, as the work carried by staff would inevitably need to be passed on to others while the organization attempted to find replacements. She also discussed how viewing staff as replaceable could lead to institutions losing irreplaceable knowledge from staff who had long histories within the university or brought unique skillsets from outside the university, as she had done herself. Deborah's experience working as a professional outside of higher education, and as a staff member supporting professionals within higher education, helped her see the value of support staff roles. While she believed many employees viewed support staff as worker bees, Deborah saw great importance and potential among her OAS coworkers.

At the end of her interview, Deborah told me about an electronic sign near the entrance of SRU. On the first day of classes she noticed the sign always read, "Welcome back students and staff." She smiled at the sentiment and said, "We've been here."

Summary of Findings

Chapters five through seven provided findings around three major themes that occurred during data analysis of the current case study. Overarching themes included office and administrative support staff as institutional experts and guides within Striving Research University, as was well as unsung heroes who contributed to institutional operations in ways that were unseen or undervalued. Each overarching theme was broken into subthemes to provide detailed insight into how OAS staff viewed their roles and work in relation to the operations and

missions of Striving Research University. The findings also described common obstacles OAS staff faced and how they believed their positions were perceived by others within their institution.

The following chapter will utilize the findings of the previous chapters in order to answer the research questions provided in chapter one. Moreover, I will provide additional implications of the case study findings on topics related to future research and implications for policy, theory, and organizational success.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to broaden understanding of the work of Office and Administrative Support (OAS) staff across public research universities as well as understand how OAS staff work relates to the organizational goals of their institutions. Using data from 24 interviews with office and administrative support staff, findings showed how study participants understood their roles, work, and how their positions were perceived by other employees. These findings produced three thematic categories; OAS staff as institutional experts, OAS staff as university guides, and OAS staff as the unsung heroes.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I discuss the findings of the current study in relation to the primary research questions and compare the findings of the research questions to existing literature on office and administrative support staff. Second, I use findings highlighted in the previous chapters to provide implications for theory, practice, and policy, as well as future research. Finally, I conclude this study by providing a summary of key findings, outline potential limitations, and offer concluding remarks related to the importance of this study in relation to the roles of office and administrative support staff working in public higher education institutions.

Research Question 1

The primary research question of this study, "How do Office and Administrative Support Staff view their roles within their institutions?" contributes to the study of public university personnel by providing much needed definition to the contributions and beliefs of a large, but understudied, population of staff as well as providing insight into the relationships these staff have with the employees and organizational values of their institutions.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) human resources categories provide little guidance for understanding the roles and responsibilities of OAS staff working in higher education institutions. The IPEDS system also ties OAS work to employee classifications across industries, which does not help researchers or practitioners understand the unique environments within which these employees work or the factors that motivate their work. Moreover, what little research exists on this group of employees often focuses on social dynamics, such as the devaluation of support staff (Bauer, 2000; Smerek & Peterson, 2007; Szekeres, 2004; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015) or discusses multiple employee categories of support staff from perspectives that may blur boundaries between employee classifications, countries, or types of higher education institutions (Rothmann & Essenko, 2007; Whitchurch, 2009). While these topics are valuable contributions to the small body of literature exploring higher education support staff, the current study provides a focused analysis on one specific category of support staff and analyzes their roles within the specific context of support staff working within public, R1 institutions within the United States.

Defining OAS staff via the standard occupational classification (SOC) codes issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) creates confusion for anyone interested in understanding the roles of OAS staff working in higher education institutions. Viewing the work of OAS staff via BLS classification codes reduces office and administrative support staff work to simple working titles such as secretary or file clerk. The BLS classifications also include multiple subcategories of office staff who have no relation to the field of higher education, such as gambling cage workers or utility meter readers (BLS, 2018). Attempting to define the roles and work of OAS staff working in higher education via the definitions provided by the BLS inherently assumes that roles and work are comparable across all sectors and industries. Many

participants in the current study, however, who had actually worked in industries outside of education, believed their roles did not compare well to workers in similarly named positions outside of higher education. Moreover, while the BLS SOC classification system breaks office and administrative support staff into specific categories of work, all participants reported how their roles required them to bridge boundaries between types of work, such as financial support or communications, and required the development of specialized skills unique to the higher education arena.

While participants talked at length about their specialized skills during interviews, they did not view their roles as tied to a specific responsibility, but rather viewed their positions as a blend of roles that required specialized skills. These reports align with previous research comparing staff within the United States, the UK, and Australia that characterizes administrative staff as blended professionals. Blended professionals are defined as staff who must work within and between academic areas, navigate a variety of responsibilities, and may hold advanced credentials or industry experience (Whitchurch, 2009). Within this study, participants described themselves as institutional experts, guides, and the unsung heroes of their respective institutions. As experts, support staff believed they had unique knowledge of systems or processes within the university and, over time, developed institutional knowledge that made their work less transferable or replaceable. As guides, they interacted with or represented the needs of a vast number of institutional constituents, ranging from faculty and students to those outside of the university. As unsung heroes, participants believed the nature of their work was nearly incomprehensible to those who did not hold similar positions, largely due to the unpredictable nature of their work and changing goals of institutions and employees they were tasked to support.

Participants also viewed their support roles as what researchers might identify as boundary spanners, though participants did not use this term explicitly. Boundary spanners are often described as individuals within organizations who "cross boundaries to enact their roles in the surrounding environment" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 95). These individuals play an important role in "maintaining the flow of energy in and out of the institution and in establishing and maintaining a clear image of the institution for the outside public" (2008, p. 95). These boundaries are not just physical boundaries. In higher education institutions, boundaries can be spatial (e.g., buildings or campuses) but they can also be functional boundaries (e.g., student recruitment markets or disciplines) or analytical boundaries tied to employee identities (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Participants of this study clearly crossed all three boundaries on a regular basis. Spatially, OAS staff traveled outside their individual offices or departments to gain information and materials from other departments across SRU's campus. Functionally, participants discussed how they worked to recruit students from different areas, within and outside the institution, or worked with other departments to market program offerings. Participants even crossed analytical boundaries tied to identity. As frontline representatives, participants felt their role was to maintain the reputation of the institution for external stakeholders. As internal representatives, participants crossed analytical boundaries by representing supervises, as discussed in Chapter 6 when Beth represented her dean, or more broadly representing the goals of their departments when interacting with other university offices.

The role of boundary spanner for participants of this study was an implicit but important role, especially when considering the potential influence boundary spanners have on organizations. As participants of this study illustrated, boundary spanners have unique

institutional knowledge and represent personnel who organizations rely heavily upon when considering strategic activities (Bess & Dee, 2008). Boundary spanners use their information to shape how other organizational members view organizational goals or environments, which in turn may "yield organizational strategies that reflect a particular interpretation of that environment" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 480). Because some boundary spanners have more influence or organizational knowledge than others, questions arise around what authority OAS staff hold over institutional decision-making or communication, an implication for future research which I discuss later in this chapter.

When examined theoretically, using Argyris and Schon's theory of action (1978), an organization's theory-in-use, or its decisions and actions, are constructed through "individual images of self and others" (p. 17) as well as how organizational members view their work in relation to collective work. Using this understanding of organizational operations, participants often discussed their work in relation to interactions with other university employees, primarily faculty, students, or administrative staff. Moreover, Argyris and Schon note that within large organizations, such as the public research university of the current study, organizational members must also have some form of external reference, or "organizational map" (p. 17) to help construct their theories-in-use, which might include compensation charts or statements of procedures. Participants often discussed employee work profiles or university policies during interviews and attempted to relate their work to these organizational maps. However, they also consistently reported how their work conflicted with organizational maps or how their work was perceived by the collective employees of the university. As such, participants discussed their interactions with other employees and pointed out work misalignments between formal organizational documents to attempt to explain how their work was potentially misunderstood.

Participants then provided their own definitions of their theory-in-use to correct misperceptions and tie their work to the organizational maps provided by their institution. This process produced the three themes identified in the current study as well as an answer to the first research question. Attempting to explain their work (i.e., the theory-in-use) also prompted participants to try to understand and redefine their work in relation to larger organizational contexts, which guides the discussion around the second research question of the study.

Research Question 2

As discussed in Chapter 1, expanding missions, competition, and greater demand for institutional efficiency have led public universities to an expansion of services and administrative tasks that have caused many employees working in higher education to feel overburdened and under resourced (Gonzales, 2013; Jaquette, 2013; Morphew, 2000). While this problem is not new, understanding this trend from the perspectives of OAS staff poses questions around what activities are supported and provides implications for employees responsible for supporting the changing or expanding missions of higher education institutions. The second research question of this study sought to explore how OAS staff described their work in relation to university operation and missions. This question also explored how OAS staff felt they could contribute to organizational missions and what, if any, obstacles hindered their contributions.

Two decades before the findings of the current study, Smewing and Coxx (1998), conducting research in the United Kingdom, noted that similar pressures on universities had forced many academic or senior staff to pass duties on to secretarial and administrative employees. As Smewing and Cox (1998) noted, this required office and administrative support staff to, “take on more duties and work for a greater number of people” (p. 2), which, in turn, created organizational problems for support staff who found themselves having difficulty

controlling new workflows, meeting deadlines, or navigating conflicting work. Expanding work also required many staff to learn new technologies and created scenarios in which "the people they worked for did not understand the complexities of the tasks involved in their demands" (Smewing & Cox, 1998, p. 2). Despite this research being conducted two decades ago, participants in the current study reported remarkably similar concerns, which directly relate to the second research question, "How do Office and Administrative Support staff describe their work in relation to university operations and goals?" as well as the sub-questions of how office and administrative support staff feel they could better contribute to the goals of their institutions and what obstacles support staff face when attempting to contribute to institutional goals.

While some previous research has explored organizational stress related to support staff and its potentially negative impacts (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Rothman & Essenko, 2007; Smewing & Cox, 1998), the current study contributes to this small body of literature by providing definition surrounding the work support staff believe they are required to take on and who support staff believe they are required to support. Moreover, this study provides first-hand reports from participants about the sources of additional work and how OAS staff currently handle additional workloads or see potential for organizational improvement. Through providing definition for additional workloads and their cause, this study offers insight into how expanding missions and organizational goals impact organizational operations and the needs of both faculty and staff.

In relation to the research question, how do office and administrative support staff describe their work in relation to university operations and goals, Chapters 5 through 7 illustrated how OAS staff described themselves as everything from institutional process managers to ad hoc student advisors. They also mentioned how much of this work could not be identified in their

formal employee work profiles, but consisted of "other duties as assigned," that consistently allowed new tasks to creep into their formal responsibilities. Participants reported how these other duties often became part of their job description because there were no other employees willing or able to take on these new responsibilities. Moreover, in the case of interactions with faculty, these other duties were motivated by perceived needs to lighten the workload of faculty whom staff often agreed should be primarily focused on teaching or research. As one participant noted, "There are jobs that have to be done, and I make sure they get done. And I make sure they get done correctly." This simple statement is a perfect illustration of how support staff believed themselves to be all-purpose employees, taking on new or additional tasks whenever necessary because they believed there was simply no one else willing or able to do the work.

Whether as "worker bees" or "foundations," participants fielded additional workloads for other employees and had the process management and institutional knowledge necessary to quickly execute those tasks, get them off the list, and ready themselves for the next wave of unexpected duties. Office and administrative support staff believed one of their primary goals was to handle unexpected tasks so others within the university could concentrate on the larger, organizational goals of the institution and, in doing so, felt they were indirectly contributing to those goals of their institution. However, while most participants believed handling unexpected tasks was a common work responsibility, they were often frustrated with the ways in which these responsibilities were assigned and did not lack suggestions for how their work could be done more effectively. Data surrounding these frustrations helped answer the subquestion of research question two: how do office and administrative support staff feel they could better contribute to the goals of their institutions and what are commonly cited obstacles that keep staff from contributing?

Ways in which participants felt they could better contribute focused primarily on professional development opportunities as well as having opportunities to provide feedback, which could be used to improve organizational operations. Not surprisingly, the primary obstacle participants cited that kept them from improving organizational effectiveness was a feeling they had no real outlet to voice their concerns, suggestions, or insights. Because participants felt unable to elicit change, they often described how their work required them to be "problem solvers" who were forced to work within organizational boundaries that were relatively unchanging. This description aligns with the description provided by Argyris and Schon (1978) of single-loop learning. A process of single-loop learning illustrates a "single feed-back loop which connects detected outcomes of action to organizational strategies and assumptions which are modified so as to keep organizational performance within the range set by organizational norms" (p. 18-19). In a single-loop process, individual members of the organization learn new strategies for conducting their theory-in-use, but the organizational norms themselves remain unchanged. In short, as proposed by Argyris and Schon, single-loop learning occurs when "individuals will have learned, but the organization will not have done so" (1978. p. 19). Because participants felt as though they were not able to provide suggestions for organizational improvement, they were required to continue to operate under existing organizational norms and regularly encountered conflict in their work. While the implications for Argyris and Schon's theories of action will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, participant reports regarding organizational norms set the stage for a discussion of findings around the third research question; how do OAS staff believe their work is viewed by other university employees?

Research Question 3

The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 of the current study largely focused on how participants viewed their roles and described their work within the university. The third research question of this study asked, "how do office and administrative support staff believe their work is viewed by other employees within the university?" Regarding this question, the findings of Chapter 7 are especially helpful in illustrating how participants believed their work and roles were viewed by other university employees. While many participants believed their work was, to some extent, appreciated by faculty, management, students, or even other support staff, the findings also revealed consistent feelings of marginalization and conflict produced by misconceptions of participant work. While the metaphorical beliefs reported by participants, which painted staff as "foundations" of the university were positive, they implicitly contained a feeling that support staff were viewed as less-than other employees. This finding was supported by other commonly used metaphors that described support staff as "worker bees" or employees who occupy the bottom of the proverbial totem pole. More literally, participants reported beliefs that a primary role of their position was to serve as helpers or problem solvers who handled work nobody else wanted to take care of. These findings align with historical literature on the transformation of office and administrative support work.

Over 30 years ago, Glenn and Feldberg (1977) warned against the potential dangers of the "proletarianization" of clerical work among organizations. These researchers discussed how clerical work in office settings was, at one point, perceived as more skilled, specialized and valued within organizations. Clerical positions held "extended responsibilities" that would more likely be viewed as managerial by modern standards (Glenn & Feldberg, 1977, p. 53). With changes in work environments during the 20th century, however, and the rise of national

companies, the demand for clerical services increased and companies sought approaches to clerical work that were more mechanical (Glenn & Feldberg, 1977). This change led to decreased perceptions of support staff as well as negative psychological and economic effects among this employee base. While participants in this study certainly voiced concerns around the perceptions of their jobs that aligned with the change predicted by Glenn and Feldberg, they did not view their roles and work as standardized as Glenn and Feldberg might have expected at the time of their study. Instead, participants believed while other employees might view their work as standardized, OAS staff still viewed themselves as the "master craftsmen" clerical workers once viewed themselves as (Glenn & Feldberg, 1977, p. 60) and lamented how other employees did not see their work as such.

While some participants took pride in being viewed as support, such as Emma who believed her job was to relieve the administrative burden of her department faculty, participants more often reported frustration or resentment around being viewed as the "help" or a "worker bee." Lily's example of having to take care of a dead bird outside her office provided an extreme example of participant's feelings around their unsung hero roles, but one that poignantly illustrates how participants believed OAS staff were often viewed as employees to whom other personnel could give unwanted work. If researchers view higher education organizations as professional bureaucracies, as discussed in Chapter 2, this finding is not especially surprising. As Mintzberg (1979) noted, support staff in the professional bureaucracy are often charged with any tasks that do not fall into the perceived category of professional work. In the university, professional work would be largely tied to academic work, such as teaching or research. Moreover, for support staff working in professional bureaucracies, there is no democracy around work tasks, only the "oligarchy of the professionals" under which support units act as "machine

bureaucratic constellations" to which non-professional work is disseminated (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 57).

The role of support staff as viewed through the professional bureaucracy corresponds with the findings of the current study. However, the findings of the current study suggest support staff may have more power within their support roles than expected. Participants often noted that when assigned work from those above them within the organization, they at some level had autonomy over how work was carried out. This autonomy was often found in participants' unique knowledge of university systems and operations as well as their institutional knowledge. Moreover, in cases where participants took on the role of professional representative, say for a dean or faculty member, participants were consistently placed in impromptu positions that required them to interpret how the professional would want to be represented. Furthermore, the professional bureaucracy described by Mintzberg only provides insight into how support staff roles are utilized by professionals or higher-level administrators. The current study provides additional insight into the ways in which work is carried out and disseminated to support staff at all levels and how the work of OAS staff represents the reputation of the professionals and the professional organization at large. The findings of this study reveal how participants believed themselves to be internal representatives for the university when interacting with other university employees and external representatives when interacting with a variety of institutional constituents, such as prospective students or businesses.

Summary of the Research Questions

The previous sections discussed the findings of the current study in relation to the three research questions and one subquestion. The first research question sought to understand how OAS staff viewed their roles within the institution. Findings were consistently similar across

participants. OAS staff believed themselves to be institutional experts when it came to university processes and systems, as well as holders of institutional knowledge gleaned from the specific roles and spaces they occupied within the institution.

The second research question explored how participants believed their work was related to the larger goals of their respective institutions and illustrated how OAS staff believed they could better contribute to institutional goals and what obstacles they commonly faced. These findings discussed how OAS staff believed themselves to be foundational employees of the university who consistently took on tasks that kept the operations of the university running smoothly. The findings also produced stories of how participants believed they were problem solvers when it came to organizational stressors but were ultimately unable to fully contribute to solving organizational problems due to their inability to influence organizational decision making.

Finally, the third research question sought to understand how OAS staff believed their roles were viewed by others within the institution. Primarily, these findings framed OAS staff as institutional employees who were viewed as those on whom unwanted tasks could be assigned. These tasks appeared when organizational goals changed or institutional leaders, such as faculty, felt overburdened by creeping workloads. The findings of the current study in relation to the research questions bring up several implications for theory, policy, and future research, as I discuss in the following sections.

Implications for the Study of Office and Administrative Support Staff

Findings of the current study raise a number of important considerations for how to study the work of office and administrative support staff working within public higher education institutions and why studying these employees is important. In large part, the study of employees

working within higher education has focused on faculty or high-level management. There is little research, however, on a large number of employees who provide support work that has potential to considerably impact university operations or public perceptions of university environments. Here, I discuss the implications for theory, practice, and policy provided by the current study as well as future research considerations around the work of support staff working in higher education.

Implications for Theory

The present study relied heavily on Argyris and Schon's theory of action (1978) during interview protocol development and data analysis. As a theory used to understand the processes of organizational learning, Argyris and Schon's theory of action attempts to identify the ways in which organizational goals may differ or be disconnected with everyday actions of the members operating within the organization. The theory of action posits formal organizational documents, such as organizational charts, policy statements, or job descriptions, represent an organization's espoused theory. This espoused theory often conflicts with the everyday actions of those working within the organization, actions which represent the organization's theory-in-use. The theory-in-use, moreover, is something that commonly remains tacit because it is difficult to discuss and constructed by individual members of the organization. As Argyris and Schon (1978) note, the theory-in-use of an organization "may remain tacit because individual members of the organization know more than they can say – because the theory-in-use is inaccessible to them" (p. 15). While the theory-in-use remains tacit within most organizations, it nevertheless "accounts for organizational identity and continuity" (Argyris & Schon, 1978, p. 15). The findings of this study strongly support the ideas posited by Argyris and Schon's theory of action

as study participants regularly identified inconsistencies between university goals or documents and participant's everyday roles, responsibilities, and beliefs.

Whether participants discussed how their official job descriptions did not align with their everyday work, or how the goals of their work environment often felt misaligned with what they perceived to be the goals of the university, there was a thematic disconnect between organizational goals and individual participant work. Moreover, Argyris and Schon argue individual members within an organization struggle to construct their theory-in-use because it often remains incomplete. Individuals attempt to describe their theory-in-use in two ways via the context of the organization at large as well as their interaction with others (Argyris & Schon, 1978). This aligns with the reports of participants within the current study. Whether participants discussed their work in relation to the context of university goals, or in relation to the goals of other institutional constituents, such as faculty or staff, participants believed the work of office and administrative support staff represented a specific organizational perspective within the institution. Argyris and Schon (1978) metaphorically describe an organization as an organism for which each cell, "contains a particular, partial, changing image of itself in relation to the whole" (p. 16). In line with this metaphor, participants described their roles within the organization using their own metaphors to relay their perspectives.

Metaphors such as "foundation" or "infrastructure" or even "worker bees" were used to describe the roles OAS staff held within the institution, how their work related to the operations of the university as well as how they were perceived by others. Moreover, as noted when discussing the findings of research question one, participants regularly reported how they had no ability to provide feedback regarding organizational processes for which they were largely responsible. Instead, participants problem solved or improvised task performance in order to

complete objectives within the organizational structures and expectations they believed to be ineffective or unreasonable. While participants took pride in their problem-solving skills, many were frustrated with being unable to apply what they found to their task performance as a way to improve the greater efficiency of the organization.

Effectively, participant frustrations described a continual process of single-loop learning, as defined by Argyris and Schon (1978). If organizations operate under a framework where operations and organizational norms are fairly predictable, then single-loop learning can be sufficient. However, higher education institutions often have varied and regularly changing goals and operations, as illustrated by concerns around academic drift. When organizations have changing norms, individual learning among organizational members is not enough to promote organizational learning and development. Instead, organizational members must participate in lines of inquiry that challenge organizational norms and help identify new strategies for improvement. For Argyris and Schon (1978), the responsibility for inquiry was delegated to an organizational manager or some form of higher-level administrator. The findings of this study suggest that, within higher education organizations, management may not always have the necessary information about organizational norms and theories-in-use to challenge existing operational norms. Participants regularly reported many of their supervisors or organizational leaders did not have any direct knowledge of the systems, processes, or tasks OAS staff conducted on a daily basis. Conversely, OAS staff were not able to effectively communicate those tasks to their supervisors. Inability to communicate knowledge places the organization in a position where double-loop learning is difficult. Higher education institutions should consider ways in which task performance is communicated from individual workers to organizational leadership. Management procedures such as kaizen, discussed briefly in Chapter 1, have some

potential to address this problem, though researchers should be cognizant of the differences between the types of organizations that developed kaizen (e.g., auto manufacturing) and those of higher education institutions, particularly public research universities that have varied missions and tied to public interests.

Finally, as a brief addition to the theoretical implications of the current study, acknowledging a lack of development theory around support staff in higher education is important. While higher education researchers have considerably advanced theory around the development and success of faculty and students (e.g., Astin, 1984; Austin, 2002; Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Kuh, 1995; Renn & Reason, 2013; Tinto, 2006; Wawrzynski & Baldwin, 2014) there is a dearth of research on higher education employee development. A lack of theoretical development regarding higher education employee development forces labor or organizational researchers to rely upon general employee development concepts that may have developed within organizations that operate very differently from public, higher education organizations. Moving from theory to practice, the next section addresses implications for practice and organizational policy around the study of office and administrative support staff.

Implications for Practice and Organizational Policy

Perhaps the strongest contribution produced by the findings of the current study is the potential implications for change related to the practice and policy of higher education institutions. This section provides three recommendations for organizational practice and policy based on the findings in Chapters 5 through 7. The first recommendation focuses on internal development and evaluation of office and administrative support staff. The second recommendation discusses the potential for organizational conflict that a lack of understanding around the roles of OAS staff may lead to. Potentially negative outcomes range from increased

turnover among support staff or poor campus climate to problematic power dynamics related to the work staff are regularly asked to carry out. Finally, I provide implications for how an increased understanding of the work of office and administrative support staff can help public higher education institutions improve their ability to meet organizational goals.

Implications for the development and evaluation of OAS staff. As discussed in the findings of the current study, office and administrative support staff believed they held unique skill sets that were either developed over time within their current positions or were gained via previous academic or work experience. The findings made clear, however, that most support staff believe these skills, as well as their daily work, was not fully understood by others working within their institution. Moreover, staff reported an inability to effectively convey their contributions and were often dissatisfied with the formal work evaluation policies of their institution. Using these findings, I provide implications for organizational policy change focused on three specific areas; professional development, evaluation practices, and cross-training of office and administrative support staff.

Professional Development. Staff often reported a need for additional opportunities and time to pursue professional development opportunities within their positions. Participants commonly reported that, when hired, they were responsible for learning the responsibilities of their new positions on the job with little or no guidance. This lack of training produced scenarios wherein staff were forced to take considerable time learning institutional processes or systems and relied heavily on an informal network of peers to understand how to effectively conduct their work. Moreover, professional development is needed in areas that may not be directly related to an employee's formal work profile but, nonetheless, were common responsibilities reported by research participants. For example, study participants stated they regularly interacted with

students who came to them with academic or personal problems. These interactions placed participants in scenarios where they felt obligated to serve as an ad hoc academic advisor or, in more personal cases, were required to handle potentially sensitive situations in which students required professional help. Staff also discussed how, if given the option, they could better contribute to the needs of their department or faculty supervisors if given additional training in certain areas.

Employee Evaluations. Regarding evaluation processes, all research participants reported dissatisfaction with their annual review processes or believed these processes were largely ineffective. Indeed, there is a lack of research related to employee evaluation processes in higher education. What little research that exists tends to focus on academic employees, takes place in contexts outside the U.S. public education sector, or tests high-level performance management systems used by institutions but not at the employee level (Chen, Yang, &Shiau, 2006; Decramer, Smolders, & Vanderstraeten, 2013). Implications gleaned from the current study suggest higher education institutions should review employee evaluation processes not just at the institutional level, but how these processes are conducted at the individual level. As the participants of this study reported, many employee work profiles did not reflect the day-to-day work of office and administrative support staff, and OAS staff also reported being the only employees able to carry out the responsibilities of their jobs. This finding implies OAS staff may be reviewed using performance standards that do not accurately reflect their responsibilities. Ineffective evaluation processes have potential to not only minimize support staff contributions but also overlook resources needed to successfully provide support or anticipate future organizational needs.

Employee Cross-Training. A common worry among participants discussed in Chapter 7 was the idea many office and administrative support staff felt as though the organization viewed them as replaceable. Naturally, being viewed as replaceable concerned participants on a personal level, but participants also believed this perception should be an organizational concern. Despite having similar titles, such as office manager or administrative assistant, participants regularly cited how their job differed from similar positions throughout the institution or even within their own departments. Indeed, almost every participant believed their departments would experience considerable strain should they leave their positions, and some provided first-hand examples of such strain when describing turnover among coworkers.

Organizational strain caused by employee turnover is certainly a concern of any organization and one a select few studies have argued should be a concern when considering the work of OAS staff (Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015; Rothmann & Essenko, 2007). However, turnover among OAS staff is not the only way organizational strain around support work could occur. If support staff hold specialized knowledge and skills, organizational disruptions could occur during unscheduled leaves of absence or even scheduled leave (e.g., vacation time) among OAS staff. Organizations should consider which support staff members are cross-trained and responsible to handle specific responsibilities when their OAS coworkers are out of the office. While cross-training can benefit organizations, it can also benefit OAS staff. Participants often understood why it was occasionally necessary to cover additional responsibilities within their departments, but many reported stress and frustration over having no way to anticipate or prepare for increased workloads. Some also reported wanting to know the responsibilities of other staff because they felt it would make their jobs easier.

Implications for organizational conflict. Findings of the current study present implications for potential organizational conflict that could arise from a lack of understanding around the work of OAS staff. As with the previous section, I provide three areas in which conflict or negative organizational outcomes may occur. First, misunderstanding of OAS staff responsibilities, or misalignment with organizational goals, could have a negative impact on the overall environment of higher education institutions. Second, institutions that do not consider the needs of this employee base can expect to face increased turnover and lowered productivity among OAS staff. Third, because of the variety of positions held by OAS staff, and their often close proximity to institutional leadership, the work of OAS staff could potentially be abused or misdirected towards efforts that are not aligned with the goals of the institution.

Decreased Campus Climate. Campus climate can be defined and interpreted in many ways, but is generally viewed as "the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution" (Bauer, 1998, p. 2). This definition frames campus climate as relatively malleable and so is often identified by institutions as an "easy target" for institutional change (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015, p. 21). The problem with efforts to change campus climate, however, is efforts are often short-lived or focus on small portions of the campus population (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). In order to foster long-term campus climate change, higher education institutions need to enact policies that can positively affect large and diverse populations. As OAS staff occupy various roles and interact with employees within and outside the institution, OAS staff can influence perceptions of campus climate. Moreover, discussions of campus climate have traditionally focused on faculty and student perceptions with other staff often left out of the conversation (Mayhem, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006). Some researchers have argued by linking staff work to core institutional missions, institutions can utilize unique staff skills and

create consistent standards that could increase morale and perceptions of campus climate for many university employees (Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015; Somers et al., 1998). OAS staff interactions may also influence student perceptions of campus climate. Some studies have found students who have positive interactions with staff may also experience an increased sense of belonging and reduced feelings of discrimination or bias on campus (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015). Participants of the current study commonly reported the belief that a tacit responsibility of their position was to help faculty and students meet their goals and feel supported. Due to the high level of interaction OAS staff have with faculty and students, increased morale and productivity of OAS staff may produce a domino effect that contributes to a more positive campus culture across the institution. Marginalization or misunderstanding of the work of OAS staff, however, could lead to decreased perceptions of campus environments.

Employee Turnover and Decreased Productivity. Generalizing or failing to consider the perspectives of OAS staff can negatively affect institutions by reducing job satisfaction and increasing turnover among these employees (Bauer, 2000; Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015). Some studies have found support staff in university settings face considerable occupational stress, marginalization, and have one of the lowest feelings of belonging among other categories of employees, implying that turnover rates, lack of institutional commitment, and poor job productivity for these employees is high (Henning, et al., 2017; Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015; Rothmann & Essenko, 2007). Participants within the current study all reported feelings of marginalization as well as concerns over misperceptions of their work. Moreover, many participants discussed how they felt other employees within the university viewed their positions as replaceable. However, I argue the findings of the current study show OAS staff hold important knowledge and positions within university environments and should not be viewed as easily

replaceable. Much of the work conducted by OAS staff is learned on the job, over time, and many hold advanced degrees or industry experience. These are not easily replaceable traits and turnover among these employees is likely to lead to loss of productivity throughout the university. Faculty and management also rely on OAS staff to operate university systems or processes that require formal, on-the-job training. Examples of these responsibilities reported by participants range from processing hiring paperwork for adjunct faculty and other support staff or supporting faculty research operations. These are not responsibilities that the organization can afford to let slide, so any loss of productivity or turnover among OAS staff will inherently require others within the organization to pick up additional tasks for which they might not be adequately trained, placing strain on the organization and its members.

Decision-Making Dynamics. The participants of the current study consistently noted how their roles placed them in positions that required them to make important organizational decisions, represent the decisions of high-level leadership, or act as de facto advisors for current or prospective students. Whether communicating the decisions of a department chair to employees within the university or interacting with students looking for professional advice (e.g., academic advising, counseling, etc.), OAS staff occupy roles that allow them some level of influence over important organizational decisions. For example, participants in the current study noted indirect influence over organizational decisions such as promotion and tenure for faculty, such as keeping up to date on the current promotion and tenure policies of the university, or directly, such as when one participant provided advice to a faculty member on how to present their promotion materials. Moreover, many participants discussed how they were solely responsible for keeping records of institutional communication (e.g., meeting minutes) or advising students about what academic support systems were available to them. While I believe

these roles provide value to the organization and OAS staff are uniquely suited to help within institutional decision making, potential problems could occur if OAS staff and institutional decision makers are not transparent about their roles in the decision-making process. The information and processes that OAS staff have access to, and how they choose to use that information and those processes, has potential to lead to organizational conflict for both OAS staff and other employees and influence institutional decision-making. If OAS staff are not clear on the boundaries of their roles within their work environments, they may run the risk of misrepresenting their work or the work of others.

Additionally, understanding the authority and decision-making boundaries of those with whom OAS staff work is also important. The participants in this study were often tasked with supporting not one or two employees, but broad employee bases, such as faculty in general, or entire departments. Lack of definition around who OAS staff support can generate considerable role ambiguity among staff and increase opportunities for conflict. Faculty or management, for whom OAS staff are tasked to support, may have conflicting goals or lack knowledge of institutional guidelines that place staff in uncomfortable positions. Many participants reported how they were asked by another university employee to purchase items or complete administrative tasks in ways that were not compliant with the regulations of their public institution. In these cases, OAS staff must be able to understand where within the organization they should go, and to whom, to report misdirected requests.

Implications for organizational success. As the previous section anticipated implications for organizational conflict, this section discusses implications for practice that may improve organizational effectiveness. The findings of the current study imply office and administrative support staff have the potential to considerably improve organizational

effectiveness as well as directly contribute to institutional goals. While the current study explored how OAS staff perceived their roles within the university, and how they believed their work contributed to larger organizational goals, many believed their work had, at best, an indirect effect on institutional effectiveness if any at all. The findings presented in this study, however, imply there are specific ways in which OAS staff can positively affect organizational goals and outcomes. Participants of the current study discussed how they believed they contributed to specific organizational outcomes, such as student retention or even increased institutional prestige, the latter of which comes from supporting the work of university faculty and effectively representing the goals of the university. The following sections provide implications for how OAS staff can contribute to student success, faculty success, and increase institutional prestige.

Implications for Student Success. Higher education institutions expend considerable effort and resources on student recruitment and success and face considerable financial loss from student attrition, in some sectors by as much as a billion dollars a year (Harvey & Luckman, 2014; Slaughter, 2004; Walker, 2016). Yet student enrollment and retention strategies to date have been the purview of faculty, high-ranking administration, or specialized student affairs employees. While faculty and student affairs employees should certainly be the university employees most well-suited to helping guide students academically, the findings of this study, and other emerging research, shows OAS staff have regular interactions with students that may impact success and retention. Whether as an office manager or administrative assistant, OAS staff occupy positions at the forefront of the institution (Bauer, 2000) or may be the last employee students work with when applying for graduation (Schmidt et al., 2015). Positive, regular interactions with institutional representatives play significant roles in student retention

and success, particularly in the first year (Tinto, 2006). A recent study showed classified staff occupying frontline positions, such as receptionists or assistants, provided psychosocial support and heuristic strategies, which helped students succeed (Schmidt et al., 2015). Moreover, the current study showed how OAS staff felt student success was a primary responsibility of their position, whether it was part of their official job description or not. Some participants reported reaching out to local communities to inform potential students of program offerings, while others discussed how they worked to ensure the physical and mental well-being of current students with whom they interacted on a daily basis. Other research showed how different employees within higher education institutions can collaborate to provide varying perspectives, which help improve student success (e.g., Banta & Kuh, 1998), and the findings of this study suggest OAS employees could collaborate with faculty or student affairs professionals to provide additional perspective on the needs and obstacles students face as they navigate program requirements or university environments.

Implications for Faculty Success. As missions change and services expand within higher education institutions, faculty have reported feelings of being overworked with administrative tasks and frustrated with organizational pressures (Gonzales, 2013; Jaquette, 2013; Morphew, 2000). Moreover, some research has argued non-academic positions, such as administrative positions, have expanded at an inordinate rate in relation to academic positions (Bowen & McPherson, 2016). However, expansion of administrative tasks and administrative positions does not necessarily constitute unnecessary expansion or overstaffing. Archibald and Feldman (2017) noted the expansion of administrative staff may reflect positions brought in by new research dollars or staff created to address the expanding services and regulation requirements of public universities. Moreover, some authors have noted administrative staff positions such as

office and administrative support staff have actually declined despite the broadening missions, services, and administrative focus of higher education institutions (Archibald & Feldman, 2017; Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; Hiltonsmith, 2015). Indeed, the percent distribution of office and administrative support staff fell by nearly 1.5% between Fall 2013 and 2017, the first and last year's data available at the time of this study (NCES, 2017). What seems to be clear though, is faculty of all types have reported increased feelings of lost autonomy, stress, and frustration caused by the changing nature of academic work (Altbach, 2015; Gonzales, 2013; Gonzales, Martinez, & Ordu, 2014; Musselin, 2007). This study implies that an investment in, and increased understanding of, the work of office and administrative support staff could improve faculty work and, potentially, satisfaction. As one participant of the current study noted, a tacit role of OAS staff is to "keep faculty happy and keep them moving." Participants believed OAS support helped faculty members focus more on research, teaching, or other operations that fall under the purview of the faculty. As Gonzales (2013) noted, the pressures of faculty work conducted in a neoliberal environment may force faculty to become rugged individuals who work with few resources and feel required to sacrifice personal and professional values for their work (Gonzales, 2013). OAS staff, by the nature of their work, are often tasked to support faculty and their goals. While most participants believed their support roles were misunderstood or underappreciated, many still believed and took pride in supporting what they affectionately called "their faculty." Improved relationships and understanding among faculty and OAS staff have potential to ease some of the professional burdens reported by faculty in the research on academic drift. Moreover, by enabling faculty to more effectively conduct their work, universities stand to gain improved reputation within public and academic communities.

Implications for Institutional Success. The title of "support staff" is an overly ambiguous descriptor for the type of work office and administrative support staff described in the current study. The stereotype of support staff as generalized clerical workers who conduct menial administrative tasks does not align with the work reported by the participants of this study. Unlike the proletarianization of clerical work Glenn and Feldberg (1977) warned would make clerical workers less knowledgeable, committed, or able to adapt, participants in this study reported their unique knowledge, loyalty, and flexibility in their jobs. Participants reported being able to help faculty and management navigate organizational processes, systems, or policies faculty and management did not have prior knowledge of. Participants also described helping departments market programs to students outside or within the university in efforts to increase enrollment or provided research support for faculty who have, or were pursuing, grant funding. Moreover, as frontline or internal representatives of the university, OAS staff have potential to directly affect perceptions of the university. As one participant stated, OAS staff are "the face to the students and to our faculty. How we are perceived, and how effectively we advocate for our communities, does have an impact." As missions of public universities change, and overlap with public concerns, OAS staff roles have potential to provide insight into how organizations attempt to address institutional goals at the ground level.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of the current study provide guidance for future scholarship focused on the study of office and administrative support staff and suggestions for the future study of organizational theory, staffing comparisons between institutional types, and exploration of additional employee classifications. As consistently mentioned throughout this study, higher education institutions across the United States, and the world, have experienced a period of

expanding missions, programs, competition, and services. This expansion has led to increased pressures being placed on faculty, management, and support staff alike (Gonzales, 2013; Rothmann & Essenko, 2007; Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005). Moreover, large, public research universities face a unique challenge as institutions that have been described by some as "multiversities" (Kerr, 1963) or institutions that exhibit high levels of internal differentiation among staff and heterogeneity of purpose. If public research universities are to effectively manage the consistently expanding missions and services of their institutions and avoid overburdening professionals working within their organizations, understanding the roles and responsibilities of their support staff is important.

The topic of the current study, as well as its findings, could provide guidance for dozens of future research projects, ranging from studies of staff marginalization to staff hiring practices across institutional types. Given the focus of this study, however, and its interest in how office and administrative support staff view their roles in relation to larger university goals, I provide four recommendations for future research on this topic. First, research should explore how OAS staff work or satisfaction influences institutional goals. Second, more research should explore communication and collaboration between university professionals, such as faculty or administrative management, and support staff. These studies could also explore how support staff are perceived by other institutional employees. Third, organizations could benefit from research focused on whether office and administrative support staff play a role in institutional decision making. Fourth, additional research is needed that seeks to explore processes surrounding workforce reporting and development among higher education institutions. This research should seek to explore occupational definitions, or lack thereof, within the existing IPEDS HR reporting categories and staffing differences between institutional types.

OAS research and institutional goals. As noted in the previous implications section, OAS staff have potential to influence a number of organizational outcomes, either positively or negatively. Suggestions for future research related to organizational goals and OAS staff are provided here and focus on three areas: student success, university reputation, and more effective internal communication.

As student enrollment grows and diversifies, research focused on the effects OAS staff interactions have on student success should be pursued. As previously discussed, OAS staff occupy various organizational roles and spaces wherein regular interactions with students occur. Educational researchers can test the effect OAS staff have on student enrollment, retention, and success both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative researchers can conduct interviews or focus groups with OAS staff and students within their own institutions. The aim of this research should be to better understand how OAS staff support students and how and when student interactions occur. The findings of this study showed OAS staff often provided academic advising or social support for students, yet more information is needed to understand what drives these interactions. Interview or focus group research can help determine what effects OAS staff interactions have on retention or success and what motivates students to seek help from OAS staff. Qualitative research of OAS staff interactions with students should also be done over time, at regular intervals, since much of the existing research on OAS staff relies on cross-sectional data that limits researchers' understanding of how student support interactions may change over time. A longitudinal approach to interview or focus group research could provide insight on whether OAS staff provide consistent types of support to students over time or whether support fluctuates alongside organizational changes.

Quantitative researchers can also use institutional surveys to analyze the quality and quantity of interactions students have with OAS staff. Surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), include questions related to the quality of interactions students have with academic advisors, faculty, and student services staff (e.g., career services, housing, etc.). The NSSE also includes an option for students to report their interactions with other administrative staff within their institution (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2019). This other category could potentially include student interactions with OAS staff. However, the administrative staff category within the NSEE lacks definition, making student responses related to these interactions difficult to interpret. Researchers could create and utilize employee interaction surveys that provide more definition regarding the specific types of employees with whom students interact. Suggestions for future research questions on this topic include the following: How often, where, and when do students interact with OAS staff? Are particular OAS staff positions more likely to interact with students than others? What role do OAS staff play in student enrollment or retention? If advising students on programmatic requirements, where do OAS staff obtain their information? In what ways do OAS staff believe they impact student success? These questions provide a few suggestions for future research on OAS staff and student success. While the following recommendations related to campus perception are likely to affect students, they also have potential to affect a broader audience.

As previously discussed, campus climate is generally viewed as "the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution" (Bauer, 1998, p. 2). Over 15 years ago, researchers noted relatively few studies on campus climate issues examined the concerns of staff employees, and since then few studies have emerged (Somers et al., 1998). These researchers noted, however, that institutions can work with higher education staff to improve campus climate

via three key strategies: a) linking staff work to the core missions of the institution, b) identifying potential staff leaders and utilizing their skills, and c) creating standards that are consistent and applied equally to university employees at all levels. These strategies were identified as being able to increase morale and, subsequently, productivity. Utilizing the strategies mentioned in the Somers et al. (1998) study could effectively increase feelings of belonging. As OAS staff are likely to regularly interact with a variety of students and employees, perceptions, attitudes, or expectations among OAS staff have potential to influence other groups within higher education institutions. Beyond research related to campus climate perceptions are questions related to perceptions of institutional prestige. OAS staff are regularly tasked with supporting or representing the work of a variety of institutional leaders ranging from faculty to college deans. Whether through supporting the administrative efforts of faculty grants, or helping convey the organizational missions of institutional leaders, the roles of OAS staff are often directly tied to prestige generating activities within higher education institutions.

Questions surrounding the potential of OAS staff employees to improve campus climate are naturally inclined toward qualitative research. Qualitative researchers can establish a foundation for future quantitative research on this topic by exploring campus climate perceptions of OAS staff at the department or individual unit level. As perceptions may change based on the department or office (Mayhem et al., 2006), this micro-focus will allow researchers to understand the perceptions and needs across the university and propose institutional strategies applicable to all groups. Quantitative researchers can then conduct follow-up survey research to test the effectiveness of these strategies and propose additional research as needed.

Researchers interested in testing the relation between OAS staff roles and institutional success should consider approaching the topic from a talent development perspective. Little

research exists to help understand the experience, education, and industry-specific talents of OAS employees. Institutional researchers can speak with OAS staff to better understand their skillsets and suggest potential labor realignments or recruiting strategies. Researchers can also speak with faculty and administration to identify potential misperceptions about OAS staff contributions, especially around activities that promote organizational success. This research could increase staff productivity around key initiatives and improve working relationships. For example, OAS staff in this study often supported research or program development efforts that produced additional resources for their departments, though these contributions were not always recognized. Potential research questions for exploring or explaining how OAS staff affect perceptions of campus climate or institutional success are as follows: How does OAS staff satisfaction relate to broader perceptions of campus climate? How do OAS staff perceptions of campus climate compare to those of other institutional constituents (e.g., faculty or students)? What organizational missions are OAS staff most commonly asked to support (e.g., student success, research, teaching)?

Organizational communication and collaboration. The suggested research questions focused on campus climate and perception and the findings of this study acknowledge the regular interactions and collaborations OAS staff have with other university employees. These relationships bring to mind potential research related to OAS staff and organizational communication.

As discussed in Chapter 6, OAS staff consistently reported their roles required them to act as representatives or guides to many other institutional constituents. OAS staff seemed to consistently travel within and between work environments throughout the organization, carrying messages to and from other employees. As carriers of information, OAS staff had considerable

authority over how, when, and to whom information was transferred. Participants also reported how they relied on an internal network of other OAS staff to find information or understand university policies. As mentioned in Chapter 2, higher education organizations are often described as loosely coupled systems wherein academic or administrative departments are linked, but operate differently and toward different goals (Bastedo, 2012; Tierney, 2012). Moreover, within loosely coupled organizations, the integrity of the systems within the organization are not held together through managerial control, but rather through the "interactions and sentiments that organizational members construct together" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 224). The methods and networks through which OAS staff carry information have implications for how other university employees understand and approach larger organizational missions.

When viewed through Argyris and Schon's theory of action, and the idea that higher education institutions operate as loosely-coupled systems, the findings of this study indicate OAS staff have potential to considerably shape interpretations of university missions. While organizational leaders such as presidents, board members, or faculty may define organizational missions within institutions, OAS staff may have sway over how work surrounding these missions is interpreted. At the institutional level, the findings of this study showed office and administrative support staff often received information about organizational missions from university leadership. Once that information was received, participants then interpreted those missions in relation to the goals of their departments, faculty, or daily responsibilities. Through this interpretation, participants effectively reconstructed the missions of the university through their own work or the work of their department. This type of reconstruction also occurred at the department level. Participants often acted as informational liaisons between their home offices

and administrative offices within the university (e.g., purchasing, HR, etc.). Understanding how employees within their home offices (e.g., faculty or management) might have differing goals from administrative offices, participants often felt a responsibility to reconstruct and communicate information in various ways. For example, if participants received new policy information from one source, such as a purchasing office, they were likely to interpret how that policy should be carried out via the organizational norms of their home office.

The ways in which OAS staff carry or interpret information between departments is a line for future research. Researchers should explore how OAS staff understand or adapt to new university policies and communicate messages given to them by university leadership. Like a game of telephone, institutional policies or goals given to OAS staff may be represented accurately to one group within the organization but become lost in translation when given to another. Potential research questions should focus on how OAS staff send or receive communications between departments and how support staff interpret institutional messages from leadership.

Employee perceptions of support staff. While research question three of the current study sought to understand how OAS staff believed their roles were perceived by others within the university, additional research should explore the work of OAS staff from varying perspectives. While important research has been written about the experiences and personal perceptions of support staff, there is a need to research perceptions of OAS staff roles from the perspectives of faculty, management, and students. This kind of research could reveal gaps or inconsistencies between the beliefs of OAS staff, as found in this study, and other institutional constituents. This research could shed light on how to approach some of the previously mentioned obstacles OAS staff face, such as misconceptions of work or poorly defined work

evaluations. In an article on collaboration between student affairs professionals and faculty, Banta and Kuh (1998) argued when student affairs and faculty combined their perspectives related to student experiences, both parties gained a more holistic view of student assessment programs. Moreover, they believed this type of collaboration was a "low-cost, high-payoff missing link" for institutional improvement. Future research should explore similar collaborations, beginning with OAS staff who hold unique perspectives and roles when it comes to student experiences.

OAS staff and gendered organizations: Future research on OAS staff should consider the role of gender and gendered organizations when seeking to understand the roles of support staff. While gender did not emerge as a major theme tied to the work of OAS staff in this study, and was not often discussed during interviews, a lack of discussion around gender among participants is likely due to the specific focus of this study and the interview protocol design, which did not include questions around gendered roles. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the vast majority of participants (19) for this study identified as White females. Pivotal research around gender in the workplace has argued work roles within organizations are not gender neutral because gender underlies all "documents and contracts used to construct organizations," making gender a "commonsense ground" for theorizing about organizational operations (Acker, 1990, p. 139). Within higher education, researchers have noted how gender norms influence structures and hierarchy in higher education and perceptions around what makes an ideal worker, particularly among faculty (see Gonzales, 2018; Lester & Sallee, 2017; or Lester, Sallee, & Hart, 2017, for example). Some research has also explored gender in relation to administrative or classified staff roles. Amey (1999) discussed how gender norms among women college administrators, and particularly women of color, produced conflict between professional and

personal values among women administrators. Kersh (2018) noted how women administrators in higher education deal with specific work stressors that have potential to influence their work. Costello (2012) specifically addressed the barriers of women working within classified, higher education support roles. Costello's research, which focused specifically on gender norms and the work of female classified support staff in one public institution, noted how women classified staff voiced many similar frustrations to those in this study. Participant's in Costello's study felt stuck in their support roles, just as Piper indicated in Chapter 5, or that their feedback often went unheard, as many participants of this study reported. Szekeres (2004) also noted how administrative support positions in higher education are predominantly held by women, and the work of support staff is regularly misrepresented as unskilled, despite the reality that support work in higher education is often complex or requires specialized expertise, as this study also argues.

The structures, norms, and stressors mentioned by the researchers above have potential to influence OAS staff work and perceptions of their roles, especially when considering the most recent IPEDS data indicates female employees make up 85% of the full-time OAS staff employee base within higher education (NCES, 2017). Though participants of this study did not regularly discuss gender in relation to their work, acknowledgments of gender were not completely absent among participant reports. Lily, for example, explicitly paralleled her support role to the role of being a mother when she discussed her other duties as assigned. Several participants mentioned how they sought OAS positions because they believed these positions could help them to balance their work and family life. Others noted how they took OAS positions as a way to reenter the workforce after years of being the full-time caretaker for their family. Future research on OAS staff work should consider how gender may reinforce

misperceptions of support staff work or why support staff positions remain predominately female. Researchers should help to identify assumptions about gender, outside and within higher education institutions, that influence organizational structures and support staff work.

OAS staff and institutional decision-making. As mentioned in the previously discussed implications for practice, OAS staff occupy roles that have potential for direct or indirect influence over leadership decisions, policy decisions, or process decisions. These roles have potential to guide institutional decision-making and should be further researched. Using Argyris and Schon's theories of action (1978) and Mintzberg's idea of the professional bureaucracy (1979), researchers can research decision-making through the lens of the OAS employee. Using a military analogy, Argyris and Schon (1978) argued that an organization's theory-in-use is initially abstract, consisting of "what old soldiers know and new ones learn through a continuing process of socialization" (p. 16).

Many of the participants within this study discussed how they supported multiple organizational leaders over time (e.g., chairs, deans, faculty, etc.). Participants also noted how OAS staff were often responsible for training new leadership on standard university policies because new leaders were previously not required to understand certain policies. These situations provide potential for OAS staff to influence or, as Argyris and Schon argue, socialize new members of an organization through their own understandings. Moreover, via a professional bureaucracy perspective, administrators working within professional bureaucracies have opportunities to take advantage of professionals who may want nothing to do with administrative tasks (Mintzberg, 1979). As such, administrators capitalize on the indifference of professionals to incrementally achieve "changes that the professionals would have rejected out of hand had they been proposed all at once" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 61). The findings of this study suggest OAS

staff could hold similar power around institutional decision-making. Participants often reported being the sole employee who handled many administrative tasks within their office and believed few people, including supervisors, understood their daily responsibilities. If department employees do not understand support staff work, and leadership relies upon support staff for certain knowledge and training, then OAS staff could influence organizational change in the same way as Mintzberg's (1979) administrators. Future research should explore OAS decision-making around certain tasks and what kinds of tasks institutional leaders delegate to OAS staff.

Institutional reporting and workforce research. The context and findings of this study explored one specific category of higher education staff, office and administrative support staff, as well as a specific category of higher education institution, public research universities. While this study provided much needed definition around the work of office and administrative support staff, more work is needed. In Chapter 1 I use Whitchurch's (2009) idea of the bounded professional to begin to describe how perceptions of OAS staff are tied to specific job descriptions even though these staff hold specialized skills. The findings of this study support the idea of OAS as bounded professionals but also illustrate how these employees regularly step outside of their bounded roles to perform tasks that might overlap with the responsibilities of other higher education employees. Study participants described taking on responsibilities ranging from marketing to student advising and their support roles consistently required them to adapt to new organizational missions. Moreover, titles and job descriptions of OAS staff varied by source. Participant work profiles found on department websites might include different titles and responsibilities from those found within organizational employee work profiles. The varied nature of office and administrative support work reported by participants of this study, as well as discrepancies between job descriptions and titles, bring into question how OAS work defined

within the institution reflects external perceptions of the institutional workforce. Future research could explore the process by which staff statistics are provided for external reporting, such as the processes required for reporting workforce statistics used by the IPEDS human resources occupational categories.

Future research should also explore whether the findings of this study align with research conducted in other higher education institutions. The context and missions of public research universities, such as Striving Research University, are greatly different than those of a private, liberal arts college or a two-year community college. Research conducted on support staff work in different higher education institutions could provide insight into what kinds of support work is valued across institutions, who support is provided to, and for what reasons. For example, research on OAS staff within community colleges could reveal how support staff primarily support teaching initiatives while other research conducted in a large, private research university might find support is often directed towards faculty research support. Researchers could also use publicly available information from the IPEDS system to see how support staff numbers differ across university types, regions, or even time, though these researchers acknowledge the potential limitations of using IPEDS staffing definitions.

Document Conclusion and Summary

This study sought to shed light on the work of a group of higher education employees that has long been overlooked, office and administrative support (OAS) staff. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the purpose and significance of this study and an introduction to the work of office and administrative support staff. Chapter 2 provided additional context that informed the study via a review of the literature. Chapter 3 discussed methods for this study and information on participant selection. Chapter 4 provided foundational background knowledge for the study while Chapters 5 through 7 provided findings that helped illustrate the work and beliefs of OAS staff. This final chapter discussed the study findings and their implications for OAS staff and higher education organizations, with specific emphasis on public research institutions.

Despite suffering from ill-defined roles and overgeneralized perceptions of their work, OAS staff are tasked with supporting some of the most important activities and people within higher education institutions. Moreover, as university missions have expanded, the number of office and administrative support staff working within public institutions has decreased (IPEDS, 2017), potentially forcing these employees to take on additional workloads and support new tasks with little to no training. What this study found, however, is OAS staff utilized institutional experience, knowledge, and networks to quickly adapt to changing work environments despite receiving little acknowledgement for their efforts. In fact, when participants of this study experienced changes in their work, they voluntarily attempted to identify how those changes related to the goals of their departments and the university. As institutional experts, guides, or unsung heroes, participants believed the success of the institution depended on their ability to provide effective support.

As public universities continue to experience increased competition for budgetary support and change in institutional focus, researchers and practitioners alike should look to the work of support staff for insight on what work is being done within colleges and universities, why, and if that work best meets the needs of their institutions. As study participant Lily so poignantly stated, the contributions of support staff can almost be distilled into one basic responsibility – to make sure work gets done and gets done correctly. This idea, simply stated, becomes much less simple when considering how the work of support staff relates to the larger organizational goals of higher education institutions. Understanding the contributions and needs of support staff working within public institutions is not only important for maintaining the well-being of these often-misunderstood employees, but also for ensuring the success of the faculty, staff, and students they support each day.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: "White-Collar" Exemption Requirements

	EXECUTIVE	ADMINISTRATIVE	PROFESSIONAL
Salary Basis Test	• Employee must be paid on a salary basis	• Employee must be paid on a salary or fee basis	• Employee must be paid on a salary or fee basis
Standard Salary Level Test	• $913 per week ($47,476 per year for a full-year worker)	• $913 per week ($47,476 per year for a full-year worker) • Special salary level for certain academic administrative personnel	• $913 per week ($47,476 per year for a full-year worker) • Salary level test does **not** apply to doctors, lawyers, or teachers
Standard Duties Test	• The employee's "primary duty" must be managing the enterprise, or managing a customarily recognized department or subdivision of the enterprise (and managing 2 full-time employees as well). • Additional requirements provided in 29 CFR 541 Subpart B	• The employee's "primary duty" must include the exercise of discretion and independent judgment with respect to matters of significance. • Additional requirements provided in 29 CFR 541 Subpart C	• The employee's "primary duty" must be to primarily perform work that either requires advanced knowledge in a field of science or learning or that requires invention, imagination, originality or talent in a recognized field of artistic or creative endeavor. • Additional requirements provided in 29 CFR 541 Subpart D

United States Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division (2016). *Guidance for higher education institutions on paying overtime under the fair labor standards act.* Retrieved from https://www.dol.gov/whd/overtime/final2016/highered-guidance.pdf

APPENDIX B: IPEDS HR Occupational Categories

IPEDS HR Occupational Categories	2018 SOC Occupational Categories (plus SOC code)
• Instruction • Instruction combined with Research and/or Public Service • Research • Public Service	⊞ Postsecondary Teachers (25-1000)
Graduate Assistants - Teaching	⊞ Teaching Assistants, Postsecondary (25-9044)
Graduate Assistants - Research	There is no SOC Code associated with this IPEDS Employment Category.
Graduate Assistants - Other	⊞ Management Occupations (11-0000) ⊞ Business and Financial Operations Occupations (13-0000) ⊞ Computer and Mathematical Occupations (15-0000) ⊞ Architecture and Engineering Occupations (17-0000) ⊞ Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations (19-0000) ⊞ Community and Social Service Occupations (21-0000) ⊞ Legal Occupations (23-0000) ⊞ Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations (27-0000) Librarians, Curators, and Archivists (25-4000) ⊞ Archivists, Curators, and Museum Technicians (25-4010) ⊞ Librarians and Media Collections Specialists (25-4020) ⊞ Library Technicians (25-4030) ⊞ Preschool, Elementary, Middle, Secondary, and Special Education Teachers (25-2000) ⊞ Other Teachers and Instructors (25-3000) ⊞ Other Educational Instruction and Library Occupations (25-9000) ⊞ Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations (29-0000)
Librarians, Curators, and Archivists • Archivists, Curators, and Museum Technicians • Librarians and Media Collections Specialists • Library Technicians	Librarians, Curators, and Archivists (25-4000) ⊞ Archivists, Curators, and Museum Technicians (25-4010) ⊞ Librarians and Media Collections Specialists (25-4020) ⊞ Library Technicians (25-4030)
Student and Academic Affairs and Other Education Services Occupations	⊞ Preschool, Elementary, Middle, Secondary, and Special Education Teachers (25-2000) ⊞ Other Teachers and Instructors (25-3000) ⊞ Other Educational Instruction and Library Occupations (25-9000)
Management Occupations	⊞ Management Occupations (11-0000)
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	⊞ Business and Financial Operations Occupations (13-0000)
Computer, Engineering, and Science Occupations	⊞ Computer and Mathematical Occupations (15-0000) ⊞ Architecture and Engineering Occupations (17-0000) ⊞ Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations (19-0000)
Community Service, Social Service, Legal, Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media Occupations	⊞ Community and Social Service Occupations (21-0000) ⊞ Legal Occupations (23-0000) ⊞ Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations (27-0000)
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	⊞ Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations (29-0000)
Service Occupations	⊞ Healthcare Support Occupations (31-0000) ⊞ Protective Service Occupations (33-0000) ⊞ Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations (35-0000) ⊞ Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations (37-0000) ⊞ Personal Care and Service Occupations (39-0000)
Sales and Related Occupations	⊞ Sales and Related Occupations (41-0000)
Office and Administrative Support Occupations	⊞ Office and Administrative Support Occupations (43-0000)
Natural Resources, Construction, and Maintenance Occupations	⊞ Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations (45-0000) ⊞ Construction and Extraction Occupations (47-0000) ⊞ Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations (49-0000)
Production, Transportation, and Material Moving Occupations	⊞ Production Occupations (51-0000) ⊞ Transportation and Material Moving Occupations (53-0000)

IPEDS HR/SOC Browse Tool (2018). Retrieved from https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisHRSOCBrowse.aspx

APPENDIX C: Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: When All is Said, What's Done? Management and Professional Support (MAPS) Staff Contribute to Public University Missions

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to broaden understanding of the work of management and professional support (MAPS) staff within public research universities as well as understand how these staff support the goals of their institutions. This study is specifically interested in the beliefs and work of office and administrative support staff as defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) HR Occupational Categories. Through fostering a better understanding of the work of MAPS staff, higher education institutions can work towards improving a variety of organizational outcomes ranging from increased employee retention to improved employee engagement and campus climates. Ultimately, this study aims to create a better understanding of how employees contribute to their institutions in ways that benefit both the institution and the individual employee.

2. WHAT YOU WILL DO

Participants in this study will be asked to contribute to the study through sharing their experiences via a semi-structured interview. Interviews will include questions that pertain to administrative staff roles, work, and beliefs in relation to university missions and goals. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and, with participant permission, will be recorded. Interviews will be transcribed by the investigator and returned to the interview participant for review, at which time participants are welcome to provide additional comments. In between the initial interview and transcription review, participants are welcome to contact the investigator at any time to provide additional information or comments.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Each participant will receive a $15-dollar gift card as compensation for participating in this study. Moreover, your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of administrative staff contributions and roles in higher education environments, with the hopes of improving organizational and public understanding of the contributions of administrative staff who work within public research institutions.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Interview data will be stored on a password-protected computer with password protected files. Only the investigators of this study will have access to interview data. The raw data, included recordings and transcripts, will be stored for five years and then destroyed. No reports resulting from the study will mention individuals by name or identifiable characteristics without their

express permission. The responses of individual participants will be kept confidential to the extent permissible by law. Interview participants will have an opportunity to review interview transcripts and approve their accuracy. Interview transcripts will assign pseudonyms for each interview participant. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain protected.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

You will receive a $15-dollar gift card for participating in this study.

8. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about this study you may contact Brett Say, doctoral student researcher at Michigan State University via email (saybrett@msu.edu) or phone (814-229-1619). You may also contact Dr. Matthew Wawrzynski via email (mwawrzyn@msu.edu) or phone (517-355-6617).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

11. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

I agree to allow audiotaping of the interview.

☐ Yes ☐ No Initials_____

APPENDIX D: IRB Approval Letter

August 10, 2018

To: Brett H. Say

Re: **MSU Study ID:** STUDY00001202

Principal Investigator: Matthew R. Wawrzynski

Category: Exempt 2

Exempt Determination Date: 8/10/2018

Title: When All is Said, What's Done? How Management and Professional Support (MAPS) Staff Contribute to Public University Missions.

This project has been determined to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) 2.

Principal Investigator Responsibilities: The Principal Investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project as outlined in Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Manual Section 8-1, Exemptions.

Continuing Review: Exempt projects do not need to be renewed.

APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol

Baseline Questions

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself by telling me your name, job title, and where you work within the university?
2. Tell me a little about your time at the university and what brought you here?
    a. Tell me about your education and work background before you came to the university.
3. Could you please tell me a little about the nature of your work or what you do on a day-to-day basis?
4. What parts of your job take up most of your time on a regular basis?
    a. Probes: Why would you say that takes up the most time?
5. Could you tell me the aspect of your job you enjoy the most?
    a. Probes: Why do you enjoy that the most?
6. Could you tell me the aspect of your job you like the least?
    a. Probes: Why do you like that the least?

Questions Guided by the Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

1. In your own words, what are the major goals of the university?
    a. Potential Probes:
        i. What makes you think those are the goals?
        ii. What do you think drives those goals?
2. How do you believe support staff obtain information about the missions or goals of the university?
3. Think about the work you do within the university, then tell me what you believe constitutes success for that work?
    a. Follow-up: Does that contribute to the success of the university?
        i. Probe: Why or why not?
4. Are you ever asked to provide feedback on how you can do your job better?
    a. If yes, ask two follow ups:
        i. How were you asked to provide that feedback?
        ii. How did that help you improve your work, if at all?
    b. If no, ask why they believe they are not asked.
5. Think about a time when you felt you had the potential to make a significant contribution at work, but were not able to, and tell me about that time.
6. Think about a time when you felt you really contributed to the success of the university and tell me about that time.

Closing, Open-Ended Questions

1. Thinking again about the larger goals of the institution, do you believe your work contributes to those goals?
    a. If Yes: What are some things that help you contribute?
    b. If No: What are some things that keep you from better contributing?
2. In your own words, how do you believe office and administrative support staff are viewed by other employees within the university (e.g., faculty, management, other staff)?
3. How are staff referred to within the university? For example, classified staff? Support staff?
    a. How do you think staff should be referred to within the university?
4. Considering what we discussed today, do you think your work, or the work of staff in similar positions, directly contributes to the goals of the university?
    a. If response is simply yes or no, ask for additional clarification

APPENDIX F: Deductive Codebook

First Phase Deductive Coding

The following table includes *a priori* codes developed using the research questions and theoretical framework and used during the study's first phase of deductive coding.

Deductive Codes	**Abbreviation**
Espoused Theory Codes	
Espoused Theory of the Institution (as determined via document analysis and participant interviews)	ET-Institution
Espoused Theory of OAS Staff Work (as determined via document analysis and participant interviews)	ET-OAS
Theory-in-Use Codes	
Theory-in-Use of OAS Staff (as reported by participants)	TU

Magnitude Coding (to be utilized throughout data analysis)

Magnitude Coding Abbreviations	
-	Negative Belief
+	Positive Belief
++	Integral Belief
?	Neutral/No Opinion

APPENDIX G: Participant Demographics Questionnaire

Name: _____

Age: _____

Job/Position Title _____

Department or Office Title _____

How many years have you worked in higher education?

☐ 0 - 5
☐ 5 - 10
☐ 10 – 15
☐ 15 – 20
☐ 20 +

Other Personal Information

How do you describe yourself?

☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Transgender
☐ Prefer to self-describe _____
☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you consider yourself to be:

☐ Heterosexual or straight
☐ Gay or Lesbian
☐ Bisexual
☐ Prefer to self-describe _____
☐ Prefer not to answer

Race:

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Prefer not to answer

Ethnicity:

☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Not Hispanic or Latino
☐ Other _____
☐ Prefer not to answer

APPENDIX H: Participant Information and Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Job Title	Department/Office	Years Worked in Higher Education	Age	Gender
Abby	Program Support Specialist	English	20+	54	Female
Ann	Office Manager & Administrative Assistant	Social Sciences	10-15	35	Female
Beth	Executive Assistant to the Dean	Dean's Office, College of Health	5-10	30	Female
Deborah	Executive Assistant to the Dean	Dean's Office, Social Sciences	5-10	32	Female
Donna	Office Manager	Psychology	10-15	58	Female
Edward	Office Manager	Interdisciplinary Leadership	15-20	43	Male
Emma	Office Manager & Administrative Assistant	Nursing	20+	72	Female
Gwen	Administrative Specialist	Environmental Policy	10-15	52	Female
Hector	Office Manager	Health Studies	15-20	38	Male
Joan	Administrative Assistant	Mental Health	0-5	62	Female
Joe	Office Manager	Philosophy	10-15	35	Male
Kim	Office Manager	Criminal Justice	0-5	57	Female
Laura	Office Assistant	School of Recreation & Tourism	10-15	49	Female
Lily	Office Manager	Teacher Preparation	10-15	59	Female
Linda	Administrative Coordinator	Marketing	5-10	32	Female
Mark	Business Support Specialist	Fitness Center	5-10	54	Male
Mary	PhD Program Support Manager	College of Education	10-15	56	Female
Mila	Office Manager	Academic Affairs, College of Education	15-20	57	Female
Mindy	Events Coordinator	Central Administration	0-5	28	Female
Piper	Administrative Assistant	Game Design	5-10	31	Non-Binary
Sue	Office Manager	Special Education	0-5	44	Female
Tina	Office Manager	School of Public Health	10-15	53	Female
Tracey	Office Manager	Statistics	0-5	41	Female
Zoey	Support Specialist	Dean's Office, College of Health	5-10	51	Female

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