

I ALUMNUS:
UNDERSTANDING EARLY ALUMNI IDENTITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation sought to provide a better understanding of early alumnus identity at a public Midwestern university. Unlike a majority of alumni studies, this study used a qualitative case study methodology to examine alumni identity among participants through the use of personal interviews. Participants were 10-11 years post graduation from the same large Midwestern public university. Interview questions examined their identity as an alumna or alumnus through discussion of their level of engagement at their alma mater during their undergraduate years, their level of engagement with formal and informal alumni activities since, and their overall satisfaction with their professional and social experiences since graduation. The qualitative methodology allowed for deeper examination of the significant factors contributing to a salient alumni identity while still allowing for other themes and factors to emerge from the data. The theoretical frame for analysis was based in the Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing Success proposed by (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). Based on their conclusions, those who exhibit higher identity salience as an alumnus (as a function of participation, prestige and satisfaction) are more likely to donate to and promote the institution. Given their findings, the results of this dissertation on early alumni identity have implications for fundraising.

The key findings of this dissertation are as follows: 1) PMU alumni describe their experience as alumni primarily in terms of informal peer-social groups (i.e. close friends); 2) Alumni perceptions of academic and work preparation appear to play an important role in how

they understand their college experience and frame their experience since graduation; 3) Other's perceptions of PMU appear to influence alumni perceptions of institutional quality and value.

Implications of the findings and recommendations for practitioners can be found at the conclusion of the study.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife Melissa Milton-Pung. I could never have done this without you. I also dedicate this to my children, Oliver and Charlotte, who understood that sometimes Daddy needed to work on his dissertation for a while before playing ball in the hallway. This is really for you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	xi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose	3
Significance of the Study	3
Conceptual Framework	5
Research Questions	7
Key Definitions	7
Data Collection and Limitations	8
Organization of the Study	10
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
Introduction	11
Review of Literature: Alumni Studies	12
The Alumni Group	12
Alumni Giving	13
Public Good Theory	14
Social Exchange Theory	15
Expectancy Theory	15
The Life Cycle Hypothesis	16
The Investment Model	17
Organizational Theory	17
Systems Theory	17
Resource Dependency	19
Literature Review: Identity Theory	20
Identity Theory Introduction	20
Psychology	21
Social Psychology	21
Sociology	24
Identity Theory	26
Identity Salience	29
Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing	32
Introduction	32
Prestige	35
Participation	36
Reciprocity	38
Satisfaction	39
Non-Relationship Variables	40

Income	40
Perceived Need	41
Conclusion	42
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	43
Research and Design	43
Population and Background	43
Institutional Background	43
Population Background	45
Conceptual Framework	46
Introduction	46
Conceptual Framework	46
Qualitative Procedures	49
Identifying Participants	49
Interview Protocol	50
Data Collection	51
Data Analysis and Role of the Researcher	51
Summary	53
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS	54
Introduction	54
Organization of Analysis	54
Descriptive Characteristics of Participants	55
Analysis of Data by Research Question	64
Undergraduate Experience	64
Activities and Defining Moment	65
Satisfaction	68
Alumni Experience	70
Informal Social	71
Formal Social	76
Feelings	77
Making Meaning of Other's Perceptions	80
Prestige versus Reputation	80
Managing the Party School Reputation	85
Preparation	87
Felt Prepared	88
Not Prepared	91
Neutral	99
Good Enough	103
Summary	103
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	105
Introduction	105
Summary of the Study	105
Purpose and Overview	105
Conceptual Frame	106

Methods and Analysis	107
Revisiting the Research Questions	108
Research Findings	108
Introduction	108
Summary of Findings	109
Informal Social Connections	109
Perceived Preparation	110
Good Value	111
Conclusions and Discussion	112
Discussion of Limitations	117
Implications for Practice	121
Enhancing Development	123
Recommendations for Future Research	124
Conclusion	127
APPENDIX	129
WORKS CITED	131

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 The Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing Success	33
FIGURE 2 The Identity Salience Model of Nonprofit Relationship Marketing Success	34

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Why do some people wear clothing sporting their alma mater every chance they get while others wouldn't buy a shirt from the dollar bin? What types of college experiences cause some alumni to talk about their alma mater at the drop of a hat, while others are reluctant to name their institution? Do alumni feel they got what they expected from their alma mater? During a job interview, what are the chances that one's role as an alumnus of their specific institution will play a role in the hiring decision? These are some of the questions motivating the study presented here. One of the most important resources that universities and colleges have is their alumni. Universities are constantly communicating with many audiences for a variety of reasons, but one of the most important, and possibly misunderstood, audiences is their alumni (Levine, 2008).

How much does it really matter to an individual that they had their college experience at a specific institution? The admission brochures at most institutions sell the institutional experience over the college experience. They are not in the business of encouraging students to attend college. They are in the business of selling why students' should attend their institution. Why should a prospective student choose one institution over another? Once a student makes a choice and becomes a part of the institution, they further self select into other groups such as their academic major, formal social and professional activities, and informal social and academic groups. As they progress through their college experience and integrate into academic and social groups they develop a new sense of self that determines their trajectory toward graduation, and presumably their success afterward.

Much of the literature in the area of student development places a strong focus on individual development during college (Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009), but fails to address how development of identity, specifically as it relates to the institution and graduates' role identity as an alumnus, continues to develop after graduation. Much like current student development literature seeks to understand student identity development with an end toward improving the student experience and enhancing student learning, this dissertation uses identity theory and relationship marketing in an effort to better understand early alumni identity.

Statement of Problem

Alumni are often viewed as members of a single group that share traits through virtue of having attended the same university (Baade, 1996; Clotfelter 2003). However, many practicing alumni relations professionals and recent alumni literature demonstrate that this is not the case (Simone, 2009; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao and Coll, 2005; Von Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010; Weerts and Ronca, 2007). Alumni are a varied and unique group of individuals connected through a common or shared sense of place or nostalgia (Putnam, 2000). The challenge then is how to reach individual alumni on a personal level that respects the larger group membership yet ties in closely to the personal and role identities associated with their experience within that shared place.

The problem of better understanding alumni has been most often the purview of development offices. The relationship primarily consists of solicitations for donations, satisfaction surveys, and event invites (Levine, 2008). These efforts address the symptoms of alumni engagement and avoid trying to fully understand who these people are as individuals as well as a group. The challenge is that it is believed to be much easier to profile donors and work backwards to identify alumni who meet that specific profile, than it is to thoroughly investigate

other avenues. A very small segment of literature has indicated that identity as an alumnus is a significant factor in defining the nature of graduates' relationships with their alma mater (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). This dissertation seeks to better understand early alumni identity. Research in this area will have implications for alumni associations, development offices, and student affairs practitioners.

Purpose

As public universities become more dependent upon outside resources due to reduced state and federal funds, dependence upon alumni fiscal contributions increases (Johnstone, 2011). The challenge for the institution then becomes the act of keeping alumni involved and engaged as a means to increase the likelihood of giving. However, as Mael and Ashforth (1992, p.106) state, "surprisingly little is known about the factors which affect alumni attachment and involvement." The consideration of alumni as simultaneously a financial resource and as a promotional agent calls for a lens that can help one understand the multiple layers of the relationship more clearly (Johnson, 1995). This dissertation adds depth to the understanding of early alumni identity and has implications for development work, enrollment, and student affairs. The specifics of these implications are discussed in Chapter 5. Individual interviews with alumni who graduated from the same institution in 2001 or 2002 will be analyzed using the theoretical frame of Arnett et al (2003). The conceptual frame is specific enough to adequately guide analysis, yet open enough to allow for other factors to emerge.

Significance of the Study

In today's university environment, the act of continued nurturing of alumni on the part of the university primarily consists of requests for donation or graduate placement (Cabrera, 2005; Taylor and Martin, 1994; Van Dyke and Williams, 1999; Volkwein, 2002). Most targeted

communications come from the alumni relations office, the specific college or degree program, or in conjunction with some athletic event. Beyond this arm's length relationship, most information received about the alma mater comes from social networks and the media. While there is much written about why alumni donate to their alma mater (Tsao and Coll, 2005; Weerts and Ronca, 2007, Taylor and Martin 1995), little of it examines alumni identity as a factor, and even less examines how early alumni understand their own experience since graduation.

Literature in the area of alumni studies has only begun to recognize the need to consider multiple variables at play in the decision for alumni to donate to their alma mater in the past five years (Simone, 2009; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao and Coll, 2005; Von Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010; Weerts and Ronca, 2007). While these works examine more than one variable in their search to identify alumni donor patterns, potential donors, and to predict who will make donations, they still utilize empirical data analysis to do so. The end goal remains fiscal contributions. The relationships and systems of interaction that coalesce to form alumni who are willing to donate are much more complex than these researchers would suggest. As such, new models have begun to emerge that explore the connections between an alumnus' identity and their decision to contribute to their alma mater (Arnett, German and Hunt, 2003; McDearmon and Bradley, 2010). Even these fail to truly consider what the individual factors that shape an individual's identity look like within individual alumnus and alumnae. Understanding how college graduates understand themselves in the context of their alma mater is an important first step in redefining how institutions approach their alumni. This study seeks to better understand those factors that contribute to early alumni identity so that researchers can refine the measures of identity used in future studies. Fully understanding early alumni identity will enhance an

institution's ability to focus their efforts on nurturing the formation process, resulting in more engaged and connected alumni.

Conceptual Framework

In a unique study, the Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing Success proposed by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) employs a relationship marketing model for understanding contributions to non-profit agencies. They specifically examine alumni contributions in the form of donation to their alma mater and promotion of their alma mater. They use a relationship marketing model in an effort to simplify the understanding of the multiple complex relational and non-relational interactions at play. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) propose that a number of relationship focused factors, when taken together in the form of a salient alumni identity, can help predict likelihood of contribution to alma mater. Their model places the salience of alumnus identity at the heart of the matter and adapts the identity salience instrument used by Callero (1985) to provide their own empirical measures.

While the results of the Arnett et. al. (2003) study is consistent with other alumni studies, Michalski and Helmig (2008) point out a valid concern regarding the measurement instrument. While the instrument appears to provide a valid measure of the presence of an alumnus identity it is not in the purest sense a measure of salience. "...the focus of the research design was not to measure the rank of a given identity in the hierarchy of an individual" (p.55). Michalski and Helmig continue by explaining that the measure as situated within the work of Callero (1985) "did not measure the object of interest satisfactorily because there was no relative component in the methodological approach" (p.56). In other words, one cannot measure relative hierarchy of identities without multiple identities considered or presented in contrast. Michalski and Helmig

recommend a paired comparison scaling as an alternate methodology. While their concerns have merit, they can be mediated by considering that there are two frequently used definitions for identity salience.

The definition used by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) is grounded in identity theory (Burke, 1980; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker, 1968) and posits that people have several identities, and that salient identities are more likely to affect behavior than those that are less important. The modified Callero (1985) instrument provides a measure of identity where salience is shown to be present through the corresponding action of donation or promotion. If a strong identity leads to action it is salient. Given this definition and approach, the measurement instrument allows for a valid measure. The second definition more strongly considers the concept of identities as internalized role expectations that are internally organized within the self in a salience hierarchy. Salience is further defined as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (Stryker and Burke, 2000; p.286). This more refined definition gets at both the hierarchical nature of salience as well as the resulting behavior in the form of invocation. This study will use the second definition to guide its conceptualization of identity salience and will use the model proposed by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) to guide the interview questions and subsequent analysis.

The Arnett et. al. study is important in framing this dissertation. First, this study has the distinction of being the only one to have confirmed empirically “the fact that identity salience is a key mediating construct for (nonprofit) relationship marketing success” (p.59). This means that identity has the potential to impact the ongoing relationship between the individual and the institution in ways that result in taking actions that demonstrate commitment to the institution. It

provides empirical evidence to support the assertion that alumni identity salience is a significant factor (at $p < .01$) in determining alumni contributions. Second, it allows for building beyond current alumni studies situated in more traditional frameworks such as distinctly sociology, psychology or human development. It accomplishes this by taking areas that have been shown to be significant in identifying likelihood to donate such as participation (Monks, 2003), prestige (Holmes, 2009), and satisfaction (Weerts and Ronca, 2003) and demonstrates that those factors are correlated with a salient alumni identity. Participation and prestige demonstrate a positive correlation at $p < .01$ while satisfaction shows a positive correlation that is not statistically significant. Third, the model proposed by Arnett et. al. considers multiple theoretical perspectives in its construction, which is the direction in which alumni studies must head if they are to be relevant in the future.

Research Questions

The current study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater understand their undergraduate experience?
2. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe their experience as alumni?
3. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe others' perceptions of their alma mater?

Key Definitions

Alumna(e): refers to a female college graduate(s).

Alumni: refers to two or more male graduates; may be used when referencing male and female graduates simultaneously.

Alumnus: refers to a male college graduate.

Identity: How people act to protect and verify their conceptions of who they are. (Burke and Stets, 2009 p.5)

Identity Salience: The probability that one of many identities will be invoked across a variety of situations or alternatively across persons in a given situation (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Meaning Making: The process by which individuals interpret signs and symbols in a given situation to determine their response according to existing identity standards (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Participation: Reflects the extent to which alumni were involved in the college culture while they attended.

Perceived Prestige: This is the extent to which alumni want to be associated with their alma mater based on the meaning they give to others' perceptions of their alma mater.

Perceived Reciprocity: When something is given, something of equal value is received in kind. In the case of non-profits (such as education) psychological joy derived from donation. (Perhaps this accounts for participation post graduation?) (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003)

Satisfaction: The extent to which the collegiate experience of alumni reaffirms their identity.

Data Collection and Limitations

This is a developmental study that seeks to add depth to the small body of research that exists around the identity of college alumni by seeking to better understand those factors that contribute to a salient alumnus identity. Personal interviews were conducted with alumni of Public Midwestern University who graduated within a given time period to provide insight on the salience of their alumni identity. As this is a case study with a small sample size, these data are not able to be generalized to the entirety of college alumni or necessarily to all alumni of

PMU. The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the role individual factors appear to play in forming a salient alumnus identity and to identify any patterns that may provide areas of interest for future empirical studies.

The findings presented in this study are based upon open-ended interviews with eleven college graduates who were identified as Public Midwestern University alumni through social networking with primary contacts of the researcher. These participants were a snowball sample (Creswell, 2003) gathered by the principal researcher through Facebook, LinkedIn and email requests for participation and colleague and alumni referral. Facebook and LinkedIn served as a contact point for those interviewed and served as a mediated introduction site through which the primary researcher could directly contact individuals to whom he had been referred. No efforts were made to control for race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, marital status, or any other factors other than alumni status and time of graduation. While the sample size is limited, the purpose of the study is to achieve depth with the results over breadth. A single institution case study of this size will not be generalizable to all alumni populations and will have limited generalizability to alumni at the same institution. However, the themes identified in the study results will be helpful in framing future empirical studies that can test the findings on a larger scale. Interview questions have been framed in such a way that demographic variables can be considered if they emerge during the interview process as a significant trend, but are never directly addressed. Using social networking tools to obtain the convenience sample also provides some limitations in that the sample may be very homogenous, is limited to only those with computer access, and relies upon the size and scope of the researcher's primary and extended networks. As always, research bias can play a role in the study. As an alumnus of the school being studied, the primary researcher is not without bias. While the familiarity with the

institution can provide bias, it also allows for a deeper rapport with subjects during the interview and an increased ability to understand answers and probe for more information in meaningful ways.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 has framed the study for readers by focusing on establishing the problem and research questions in a context and providing definitions and limitations to guide the reading of the rest of the document. Chapter 2 provides a focused review of pertinent literature in the areas of alumni studies, identity theory, and relationship marketing to build a case for using a relationship marketing approach to better understand early alumni identity. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology used in this qualitative study. Institutional background, sampling, data collection and frame for analysis are addressed in this chapter as well as any limitations related to the study methodology. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the qualitative data analysis and discusses the findings through the voices of the study participants. Participation, prestige and satisfaction as factors present in the theoretical frame will be used to frame the analysis. Any additional themes or patterns will also be identified and discussed in this chapter. While the study does not provide the hierarchical ranking necessary to assess specific level of identity salience, open ended participant responses will be used to demonstrate the extent to which factors that contribute to a salient identity are present. Chapter 5 will present the key findings and place them into the context of the larger body of work in the field. Recommendations for future research and practice based on the findings will also be presented.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study seeks to better understand those factors that contribute to a salient alumni identity. While there is a large amount of literature on alumni in the context of philanthropy and engagement (Bekkers, 2007; Simone, 2009; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007), there is very little research surrounding alumni identity (Mael and Ashforth, 1992) and even less that considers the identity salience of alumni. The literature surrounding identity provides a wealth of information grounded in sociology (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2000), psychology (Erickson, 1959/1994), and social psychology (Burke and Stets, 2009; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). There is also a significant body of identity research represented in the humanities and social sciences in the form of multidisciplinary studies that consider the multiple facets of self (Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009) as they co-exist. The concept of identity salience is well represented throughout this body of literature, but has been less prominent in the field of higher education in recent years as multiple identity theories (Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009) taking a more intersectional approach (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005) have become more dominant. Intersectionality has taken the idea of a hierarchical ranking of identities and turned it on its head by focusing on the complicated relationships that exist between and within any number of given identities (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005). While this is a valid frame for consideration in future analysis of alumni identity, the multiple identity research focused specifically on intersectionality does not inform this study as the singular identity focus of this study results in a lack of the intercategorical complexity necessary for such literature to apply (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005).

Understanding that these identities are highly dependent upon social relationships and how the individual makes meaning of the social relationships in the context of their own

perceptions of self and their role within a given number of groups, a model that considers an individual's response to relationships in terms of a specific identity is helpful. For this reason a relationship marketing model is useful in adding depth to the understanding of the relationship based factors that factor into the development of an alumnus identity. Taking this into consideration, the current study focused on better understanding the elements of an alumnus identity that are most impactful in determining the prominence of an alumnus identity as defined within a relationship marketing model for non-profit engagement. The following review of the literature will provide a review of pertinent literature in the areas of alumni studies, identity theory, and relationship marketing to build a case for using a relationship marketing frame to better understanding the factors that influence an alumnus' likelihood of invoking their alumni identity.

Review of Literature: Alumni Studies

The Alumni "Group"

All college graduates hold the title of "alumni." At the most general level, this is a non-group with little defining features until one starts breaking it into smaller elements. Start with institution, then divide by degree type, then by college, then by school or program within the college and presumably one ends up with something that resembles a group with similar characteristics. This statement alone illustrates one of the challenges in studying alumni, as the "group" is manifest purely around earning a degree and typical group dynamics are often assumed not to hold true. The current usage of the term "alumni" applies to any graduate of a college or university in a mixed gender group containing at least one male. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the English word "alumnus" comes from the Latin noun "alumnus" meaning 'nursling' or 'ward'. The word alumnus comes from pre-literary Old Latin *alomenos*,

meaning “one who is being nurtured.” With understanding of the root of the word comes the question, what exactly is meant by nurturing? The etymology of the word implies ongoing nurturing, a continued relationship, even after the student is no longer in the student role.

Alumni Giving

In his 2009 dissertation, *Examining the Influence of Selectivity on Alumni Giving at Public Universities: a Dynamic Panel Model Approach*, Sean Simone identifies seven broad theoretical perspectives that make up the bulk of previous alumni studies. As stated earlier, the bulk of the literature in alumni studies is focused on alumni giving or is generated with the expressed purpose of relating the information back to donations, volunteerism, and engagement. Thus, an understanding of the breakdown of the literature on alumni giving is paramount to moving forward in any studies on alumni that may have implications for engagement in any form, which includes this study.

The seven theories dominating alumni giving literature as broken down by Simone are as follows: (1) public good theory, (2) social exchange theory, (3) expectancy theory, (4) the life cycle hypothesis, (5) the investment model, (6) organization theory, and (7) Neoclassical economics (Simone, 2009, p. 19). While this breakdown is representative of the literature another way to categorize these is by disciplinary approach: 1) Sociological 2) Psychological 3) Organizational and 4) Economic. When the literature is examined in this fashion it highlights the diverse theoretical lenses that have been utilized in approaching the problem of understanding alumni philanthropy. The next few sections of this paper will briefly define each theoretical approach in terms of the literature and its relevance to alumni giving, ultimately leading to identifying the need for new approaches in this area.

Public Good Theory

The public good theory essentially assumes that the best needs for society as a whole are being considered as the primary motivation for donations (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002). In the case of alumni literature the good of the institution is considered as the collective good. This concept of “public good” assumes a high level of altruism. In short, alumni give to their alma mater because it makes them feel good to help others. This highlights one of the criticisms of the public good theory. There is little, if any, predictive power in this theory and it does not adequately consider the individual in the equation as a consumer. Kotzebue and Wigger (2010) highlight the work of Andreoni (1990) about ‘warm glow’ as a means of positing an expansion on the public good theory around the idea that altruism is at its best impure and as such public good is not a truly valid motivator for contribution.

In reaction to the lack of predictive power the standard approach displays, Andreoni (1989, 1990) extends the model by a component he addresses as warm glow. Warm glow describes an abstract feeling of personal gratification arising from the act of giving itself. This sentiment is not altruistic in character, even though it might seem so from its definition. In fact, the donation is driven by the (essentially egoistic) wish to consume a purely private good, namely warm glow. The fact that an individual’s donation also benefits others is due to the non-rivalry property of collective goods, and not to her inner propulsion, which remains strictly utility-maximizing (Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010, p 372).

The public good model is important to understand as it highlights that even apparently altruistic actions such as donations have warm glow effects that benefit the individual through recognition or improved self-concept. The inherent flaw combined with the difficulty of measuring altruism has caused most alumni studies to shy away from this approach. The individual benefit as deeper motivator supports a need to more closely examine the aspects of the individual that drive the warm glow effect. This paper examines alumni identity and the verification of that identity (Burke and Stets, 2009) as more likely motivators than altruism or public good.

Social Exchange Theory

Though this theory has its roots in economics as a transactional theory, it is currently rooted in the field of sociology (Emerson, 1976) and is commonly applied to alumni studies. Social exchange, not unlike its economic counterpart, requires at least two parties. In the case of alumni giving the two parties are the institution and the alumni. The typical economic lens is that one party provides money in exchange for goods or services. The sociological lens as presented by Kotler (1972) takes a broader view and defines the transaction as one where values are exchanged. In many cases consumers derive benefits from transactions that have little to do with economic gain and everything to do with social status or self-concept.

Using this lens, alumni donors fall into one of four categories identified by Cermak, File, and Prince (1994). The first category is affiliators. These individuals are motivated by social ties and human factors. They really want to be part of a certain group or at least appear that way. The pragmatists consider the tax advantages as primary. If there is no tax benefit then there is no donation. Next, dynasts donate purely out of a sense of family tradition. Grandfather went here, so grandson goes here, and therefore, donates as an alumnus because grandpa does. Lastly are the re-payers who donate out of a sense of having benefited from charity in the past. This alumni group often contributes directly to scholarship funds of specific offices and is more likely to donate than those who did not receive non-loan assistance (Monks, 2003). The re-payer is very much a participant in the pay it forward model of fiscal support. In all cases the donor receives something of value to them while the school receives some sort of fiscal benefit.

Expectancy Theory

This theory works under the premise that alumni are motivated to give for much the same reasons that employees are motivated to contribute at work. Weerts and Ronca (2006) indicate

that this functions similar to a work group seeking to meet a goal. In this theory, alumni contribute because they want to see a specific goal met be it the creation of a new scholarship or the construction of a new lab. Typically, this theory is used in conjunction with another framework such as public good or the investment model. The drawback in this theory when working with alumni is that there is not always a tangible outcome. Donations made from this frame also tend to result in restricted funds that are limited to the expected use of the donor. Institutions prefer unrestricted funds as they are more flexible to meet a variety of institutional needs.

The Life Cycle Hypothesis

The life cycle hypothesis regarding alumni giving posits that the older alumni are, the more they give (Olsen, Smith, and Wunnava, 1989). This is consistent with findings in consumer literature that indicates that people in general spend more as they age. Many empirical studies have been done on this to demonstrate a simple correlation. This theory is important to understand as it means that either 1) age plays a role in the identity of alumni as donor or 2) that those who are older, or further away from graduation, may have more income to donate. Those studies that have a life cycle hypothesis as their theoretical root (Lindahl and Winship, 1992; McDearmon and Shirley, 2009) tend to look at alumni from the perspective of young alumni, or older alumni often referred to in terms of presumed place in career or associated by generation. The work of Dan McAdams (1992, 2001) considers the life cycle hypothesis from a slightly different conceptualization of generativity. This concept essentially relates that beyond only age, life roles and identity roles play a part in determining the extent to which an individual has concern about the future and their life legacy. This theory is pertinent to the understanding of alumni giving as it provides a link to the theoretical frame for this study in its consideration of a

fluid salience of identity. For the purpose of the current study, alumni were selected based on time since graduation so that differences in age would not be a factor that would influence the findings to either extreme. The choice to interview alumni ten years after graduation places the subjects in a middle age group that is highlighted in the life cycle literature (McAdams, 1993) and has little presence in the alumni literature.

The Investment Model

Weerts and Ronca (2007) view the relationship between the institution and alumni as an investment with donations as an ultimate return. Logging the time upfront, while individuals are still students, pays off in the long run in this model. The cultivation of this relationship works in tandem with the literature about alumni engagement. It is important to note that the investment in question is relationship based not fiscal. The theoretical frame being used for this study places a strong focus on these relational factors, with particular focus on the existing relationships, or lack thereof, between the individual and the institution and the individual and other alumni. These relationships can be formal or informal. The key point in the investment model is that the relationships are the determining factor, whereas in the relationship marketing model applied in this study the relationships are treated as a contributing factor of identity.

Organization Theory

Organization theory with regard to the alumni giving literature focuses on resource dependency and systems theory, which are discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

Systems Theory

Alumni giving is an example of an open system where all of the elements are embedded in complex relationships (Scott, 2003). Monge (1977) focuses on Laszlo's thoughts on a natural systems approach to communication and provides Laszlo's four organizing principles.

First, the system must be a whole with irreducible parts. The whole is not just the sum of the parts. In fact, the sum of the parts creates a unique entity that has qualities that do not exist in any of the individual parts. Monge uses the example of friends and lovers not having all of the qualities that are present in the relationship. When one element is removed it does not merely affect the system it destroys it.

Second, the system must be able to maintain itself in a changing environment. The system will have a desirable state that it seeks to maintain. The system is in effect self-regulating in response to external environmental properties.

Third, systems create themselves in response to challenges of the environment. This is where the concept of the emergent phenomenon comes into play. Systems can grow, change and adapt to the environment. Systems may also give rise to new systems should the environment demand it. The mechanisms that allow for this regulation to occur must be clear and hold some amount of structural permanence (Monge, 1977).

Lastly, hierarchical imbeddedness is necessary to hold all of the parts together. Complex systems have many parts with different hierarchical levels that interact. The properties that allow these systems to operate on different levels are necessary to facilitate the other organizing principles.

While systems theory is arguably the strongest theoretical perspective to use to approach alumni giving, it is in fact the least used. This is in part due to its complex nature and difficulty to represent in a linear fashion. Relationships are not proportional because of the non-additive nature of systems models. If a researcher can get past these concerns though, systems models have the best likelihood of explaining phenomenon as they exist in the “real” world as opposed to the statistically neat ones empirical research tend toward. The theoretical frame for this paper

is a systems approach to the problem of alumni giving. Specifically, the emergent phenomenon of identity salience as it relates to readiness to donate is explained in a systems based adaptation of a relationship marketing model (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003).

Resource Dependency

The power dynamic created by frequent requests by universities for donations and employment of graduates creates a resource flow where alumni provide resources for a variety of often less than tangible rewards (Johnson, 1995). As public universities become more dependent upon outside resource due to reduced state and federal funds, dependency upon alumni fiscal contributions increases (Cabrera, Weerts, and Zulick, 2005). The challenge for the institution then becomes keeping alumni involved and engaged to increase the likelihood of giving. However, as Mael and Ashforth (1992, p.106) state, “surprisingly little is known about the factors which affect alumni attachment and involvement.” While there is more information available regarding these factors today than in 1992, there remains less information available regarding alumni involvement than compared to other external factors.

The consideration of alumni as simultaneously a financial resource and as a political change agent, calls for a lens that can help one understand the multiple layers of the relationship more clearly (Johnson, 1995). Resource dependence looks at power differentials resulting from the flow of externally based resources into the organization. This theory provides a base way of understanding the relationships that form around resource allocation and the impact on decision making resulting from the contextual power dynamics (Johnson, 1995).

There are several ways in which institutions tend to think of alumni when considering them as generators of, or manifestations of, externally based resources. An early scan of the literature about alumni research provided three main categories of data and data collection:

outcomes based, alumni engagement focused, and alumni gifts (Cabrera, Weerts, and Zulick, 2005; Fisher, 1988; Melchiori, 1988). Most institutions utilize these areas of focus in a variety of ways that benefit the institution or department, but do little for the alumni (Cabrera, 2003). The benefits appear very one sided in a majority of cases, thus the resource dependency model may not be the best lens for viewing alumni giving. The power dynamic is such that the institutions depend on the alumni more than the alumni depend on the institution. In this sense the burden falls to the institution to convince the alumni that the value of their degree depends upon the prestige of the program or institution as a whole. Thus the alumni perceive a need to continue the economic relationship. This lens is particularly useful when considering that the power in the giving relationship is really in the hands of the alumni. This dissertation will serve to enhance the usefulness of this approach, as better understanding of alumni identity will provide insight into how best to connect to the alumni resource.

Literature Review: Identity Theory

Identity Theory Introduction

There is a vast amount of literature on the subject of identity and identity theory. To truly do the subject justice would require a much more thorough approach than what can reasonably be covered in this literature review. As such, this section of the literature review takes a truncated look at identity theory with the goal of better situating the theoretical frame within the context of this study area. All of the literature is consistent in noting that identity theory draws most significantly from psychology (Erikson, 1950), and then takes up residence in sociology (Mead, 1934), social psychology (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and human ecology (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Torres, Jones and Renn, 2009). This

section of the literature review will examine the literature in terms of these categories and highlight key concepts throughout that contributed to the formation of identity theory.

Psychology

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2001), the word psychology quite literally means “study of the soul.” The term itself demonstrates a desire to know the inner workings of individuals. The eternal questions of what makes one tick, why do people behave as they do, why do they think as they do, and other questions drive studies in the area of psychology. While there are a number of early psychologists in distinct areas of study, Erik Erikson had one of the most significant influences in areas of psychology that concern identity. Erikson’s (1959/1994) work on identity, rooted in Freud’s concept of the ego identity, really introduces the concept of a psychosocial identity that develops in stages. Rather than focus on the psychosexual elements as did Freud, Erikson (1950) proposed a psychosocial approach where the impact of socialization on sense of self is the central construct. Each of Erikson’s eight stages places an emphasis on the physical age of the individual, the social context and interactions, and the psychological development within the larger context of the lifespan. Erikson’s work on the impact of social interactions on the development of the individual provided much of the ground work for developmental and social psychiatric studies. This work also set the stage for the development of a psychological approach to identity that considers society.

Social Psychology

Social psychology is defined as “the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behavior in social situations” (Baron, Byrne & Suls, 1989 p. 6). This definition is of particular interest to the current study, given that identity is a function of behavior

in a specific situation in relation to the perceived self. The theoretical frame (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003) provides evidence to better understand how identity plays a role in individual graduate's decision to donate money to their alma mater. The individual is the alumnus and the behavior is donation or engagement of alma mater in social situations where those behaviors are options. McLeod (2007) indicates that while there was little social psychology research in the early 20th century, it wasn't until after World War II that much of the key research in social psychology developed. During this time period, government researchers became much more interested in the behavior of individuals when grouped together and in social situations. This research trend makes sense when the formal and informal social structures of the time are taken into consideration. In the aftermath of WWII the scientific community was determined to figure out how the atrocities of the Nazi party could have come to pass. The expansion of housing into the first suburbs in the 1950's (Putnam, 2000) also lead to greater interest in understanding the intersection of group social behavior and psychology.

The years immediately following World War II saw an increase in formal and informal social engagement that was unprecedented in American history (Putnam, 2000). This increase held steady until the 1980's when it began to taper off before crashing in the late 1990s. Putnam offers no convincing conclusions as to why this occurred. Although his historical data on involvement and perceptions surrounding involvement and community are sound, his efforts at prescribing causality are too vague to provide any answers with scholarly value. What his work does well is create a sense of how engagement in social groups is a fluid part of society that changes. His challenge in understanding these changes and discussing them is that he never really considers the social psychology literature available to him to better measure the nature of the individual in the context of social situations. When the nation is engaged in group social

activities like never before, it makes sense that social psychologists would be curious about the phenomenon and want to find ways to explain and understand it. Thus the social historical context supports the increased interest in social psychology post World War II.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is a direct result of the research produced in social psychology in the 1960s and early 1970s. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) work takes the vast amount of research that is associated with identity formation and development from that time period and distills it down to a single theory of the self as driver of social activity and mediator of the social environment. They propose that group membership is in fact a part of the individual not an external construct. An individual truly IS black, white, male, Jewish, an athlete, etc. It is not a role as often conceptualized in early sociological studies in role identity (Stryker, 1968). Their work is important in establishing the concept of an internal locus of identity as it is most commonly used in current literature (Burke and Stets, 2009). An identity is developed and reaffirmed through categorization, identification and comparison. Individuals place all things in categories including the self. Once an individual has categorized the "other" and the self, identification occurs when the self is categorized. This categorization takes place by comparing groups to each other and the self and determining if individuals are part of the "in-group" or "out-group". It is important to remember that the social group itself is a situational context that is an expression of the self in psychological terms. Thus the self creates an "us" and "them" dichotomy.

This concept is at work in alumni relations and fundraising today. Whenever fundraisers engage in competitive fundraising efforts they are invoking social identity approach. Weerts and Ronca's (2006) work in expectancy theory with alumni identifies a similar us versus them dynamic that can come into play in organizational identification. The quality of school as

perceived by students has been found to correlate with alumni giving (Baade and Sundberg, 1996). This reinforces the inherent competition between in-group and out-group that is a key aspect of identity as first explored by Tajfel and Turner (1979). A dynamic where perceived excellence has to be maintained in the face of a close competitor can encourage donations and promotion. There are examples of this found everywhere from blood drives where one school competes with another for most blood given to ticket sales and game attendance at sporting events. It can also be seen in academic realms when job placement numbers and U.S. News & World Report rankings are invoked. Headlines such as “Big State University outranks University of State for third consecutive year” invoke pride related to quality that engages the in-group identity and makes donation and participation more likely. However, the ranking and pride are not enough. What is it that makes one even care about their alma mater in the first place? Social psychology in particular is of importance in understanding this as it provides a means of looking at the bridge between the internal processes and the group social environment. It also establishes the idea that the social identity is integral to the concept of self and identity, and that a better understanding of sociology can guide research to find ways of better understanding those factors that establish the identity base on which future actions build.

Sociology

It is important to take a brief look at some of the pertinent literature in sociology of identity before moving from social psychology into identity theory. Perhaps two of the most important individuals in the area of identity studies in sociology are George Herbert Mead and Sheldon Stryker. One of Mead’s (1934) many contributions to sociology is the concept of “symbolic interaction”. Although the concept is Mead’s, the term itself comes out of the work of Herbert Blumer (Snow, 2001). A significant portion of Blummer’s work is in fact a presentation

of his understanding of Mead's unpublished teachings (Snow, 2001). In remaining consistent with citing this literature in the area of sociology, this paper will discuss Mead's work as presented in his posthumous book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934).

Mead considered the mind/self as embedded in society and developed through interaction with the environment and other individuals within the environment. It is important to note that in this field there is an assumption that the mind is able to reflexively recognize the self and treat the self as an object much like any other object in the situation (Burke and Stets, 2009). This distinction is important because it allows for the mind/self to think about itself the same way it thinks about others. This implies that the mind has the ability to process the self both objectively in the context of the environment and subjectively with full consideration of personal bias. Mead frames this as the "I" and the "Me". The "I" is what drives action to achieve a desired result. The "me" is the social self that takes into consideration knowledge beyond individual perception. The process is not ordinal in that actions ("I" driven) are taken based on perceptions ("me" driven) in a continuous process of interaction between the two similar yet distinct aspects of self.

Stryker (1968, 1980 [2002]) expands on the work of Mead and others and develops a concept of symbolic interactionism based in social structural context. Lynn Smith-Lovin (2003) provides one of the best summaries of the importance of Stryker's work:

He reasserted the ability of the basic symbolic interactionist principle—that society shapes self which then shapes social behavior—to inform a powerful theoretical view of how social structure and the individuals that exist within it effect and constitute one another. Following role theory in concentrating on the stable, reoccurring interactions in our social system, Stryker once again made social psychology relevant to the mainstream concerns of our discipline. By linking the role patterns with the internalized meanings that roles had for individuals, he provided the connection between social structure, meaning and action that drives structural symbolic interaction today (p. 167).

Stryker's work in this area leads to his formation of identity theory as it is conceptualized in modern literature. It is not only the role identities within a social construct, but the meaning given those roles and actions taken based on that meaning, that contribute to a full understanding of individual identity. Stryker's theory accounts for both the sociological and psychological aspects of identity. Within this model is consideration for multiple agencies or identities that may exist within a single individual. The "self" or "person" serves to mediate and link the various identities. Once a frame with multiple identities is accepted there needs to be a means for understanding how these distinct identities interact and manifest in different situations or contexts. The salience of a given identity then becomes a more important consideration in understanding how identity plays a role in the actions that one takes to verify their concept of who they are. Stryker's work in symbolic interactionism provided the base for his future studies on identity and in turn laid the empirical ground work necessary for identity theory to become a unique area of study in its own right.

Identity Theory

The influence of Mead and Stryker's work on identity can be seen across research on identity theory including the theoretical frame for this study. The interaction between the "I" and the "me" as explained by Mead can be seen in the Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) model in the manifestation of participation as a factor in identity salience. Participation is the involvement of the individual in the activities and groups that define the "college experience". What kind of person am I? This question drives the individual to seek out groups that reinforce the answer to that question. The social cues given by group members inform the individual's decision to act by affiliating with a given group. Acceptance by the group validates the choice and thus the identity becomes more prominent and has an increased chance of becoming more salient. Arnett

et. al. argue that there are certain areas where this process results in a salient alumnus identity. Meaning that the individual identifies as an alumnus to the extent they invoke that across unique situational contexts. These areas are participation, prestige, satisfaction and reciprocity. These will be discussed in more depth in later chapters.

One of the base concepts of identity theory is symbolic interactionism. Stryker suggests that:

When entering interactive situations, persons define situations by applying names to it, to the other participants in the interaction, to themselves, and to particular features within the situation, and use the resulting definition to organize their own behavior accordingly (Burke and Stets, 2009 p. 27)

Given that identity has to do with acting on an identity construct, Stryker's consideration is important in that it brings together the internal process, action, and societal structures in an understandable way. All individuals classify their environment both consciously and subconsciously. This classification process involves identifying, categorizing, and naming. Through the basic act of living in a named social construct called civilization, a bulk of the physical and social aspects have been named for us and carry with them socially defined meanings and behavioral expectations that are cross referenced with individual experiences with those aspects that either verify or conflict the social expectations. The level to which one understands and can verify the social expectations should parallel the level to which this situation supports an aspect of their identity. As a patient there are expectations of self as "patient" and of the health care provider as "doctor." The more the doctor plays the role in a socially accepted manner the more likely the individual is to accept the role of patient.

Structural symbolic interactionism does a fine job of explaining the base way in which individuals interact with the world around them. It lays out a way for understanding how identities are constructed by both social structures and the self through the meaning making process (Burke and Stets, 2009). Although this helps understand how individuals make sense of themselves in the context of social structures it does not necessarily address how two distinct individuals will make sense of the self in the context of another self or in the absence of societal others. McCall and Simmons (1978) sought to address this through their research on how the self influences behavior. The concept of role identity is central to their research. How the self interprets the various role identities of the individual resulting in specific behaviors is the key question driving their research.

McCall and Simmons (1978) define a role identity as ones “imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant” (p. 65). This is an important next step in the development of identity theory. McCall and Simmons uses Stryker’s concepts of how self and society name and create meanings for societal structures and provide a way of understanding how the self operationalizes the meanings through ownership of various roles as identities. McCall and Simmons (1978, 2005) recognize that in enacting role identities through role performance that improvisation is necessary to fill in gaps for which there are no social structures or preconceived symbolic structures in place. This is important in that their work indicates that roles drive action and interactions. The challenge is that individuals have multiple roles in society and therefore must have multiple role identities. This harkens back to work done much

earlier by James (1890) that was the first literature to seriously address the concept of multiple identities.

Identity Salience

Recent Literature almost unilaterally accepts the concept of multiple identities (Bowleg, 2008; Burke and Stets, 2009; McCall, 2005; Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009) and much of the focus is from the perspective of role identities. Even research whose approach is more humanistic, owes its intellectual heritage to an understanding of multiple identities as role identities formed by the complex interaction of internal and social processes. McCall and Simmons (1978) maintain that in the presence of multiple identities there must be a construct that determines which identity is most present, or prominent, in a given situation. McCall and Simmons assume that, much as social structures exist in Stryker's models, there must be an internal hierarchical structure at work with regard to the multiple role identities of the self as well. The measurement of self in role against the ideal in role, and then compared to other roles, determines the prominence of an identity within the internal prominence hierarchy.

Support, commitment and reward are identified as the three factors that influence the prominence hierarchy, or ideal self as it is otherwise known. Support is the level of support for an identity provided by others as well as the self and experience. Commitment refers to the level of investment in a given identity. Rewards, be they intrinsic or extrinsic, reinforce acting out the role behavior and contribute to higher levels of prominence in the rewarded identity. The extent to which each of these factors influences a given identity in an individual is not constant and changes for each individual (McCall, 2005).

Although the place in the hierarchy with regard to ideal self is referred to as prominence hierarchy, there is often need for a situational identity that has more to do with the social context and situational self than the ideal self. McCall and Simmons (1978) refer to this as the salience hierarchy and it is designed to take into account the situational self. Four factors influence the salience of an identity in a given situation: prominence, support, rewards, and perceived opportunity structure. Prominence has already been discussed, but it is important to note that the extent to which an identity reflects the ideal self plays a role in its likelihood of being invoked. Prominence has been found to be the most significant factor in determining salience. This is important in the current study where interview questions seek to understand both the salience of an alumnus identity in part through qualitative indicators of its prominence in their life.

Support plays a role in boosting the hierarchical level of a salient identity in a slightly different way than in prominence hierarchies. In a salient identity individuals will choose to invoke an identity based on prior support in similar situations. If a prior identity has been unsupported in the past, individuals will instead choose another identity that has received greater support in similar situations. For example, a recent college graduate from a working-class family will often downplay their educational based alumnus identity in lieu of other identities that fit better in the social situation of their family.

Much like how support appears different in a salience hierarchy, rewards as a factor also look different. Whereas more rewards increase the prominence of an identity, both more than expected and less than expected rewards influence salience. More rewards support the identity and greater rewards become expected in that context,

however if less rewards than expected are received then the identity is more likely to become salient in the pursuit of those rewards. An alumnus who got exactly what they expected out of their education is less likely to engage that identity because they feel there is nothing outstanding about it and nothing to work for either (Weerts and Ronca, 2007).

The perceived opportunity structure is a factor that is unique to the salience hierarchy. The perceived opportunity cost is in essence the cost benefit analysis of the adoption of a role identity with regard to the rewards and the perceived costs to affecting the role. If the cost of engaging a specific identity is perceived as too high, then an individual will not invoke that identity. Typically this assessment is not done in isolation. McCall and Simmons (1978) stress the importance of noting that a salient identity is always enacted in terms of an interaction with a counter identity. Husband supports wife, teacher instructs student and so on. The challenge with this is that the costs and rewards are highly perceptual and can differ greatly from person to person. There is also the challenge that in interactions with others there are expectations of the self in a role and expectations of the other in that role and that they may not match up. This concept is reminiscent of the challenges highlighted by Stryker (1968) regarding structural symbolic interactionism, and certainly shows its influence on this theoretical concept. Institutions have expectations of their alumni and individuals have expectations of themselves as an alumnus. The extent to which these mutual expectations are expressed, understood, and acted upon influences the actions of both the individual and the institution. The concept of perceived opportunity cost sees some discussion in the alumni literature with regard to social exchange theory (Weerts and Ronca, 2007) and expectancy theory (Monks, 2003)

as discussed earlier, but is not fully examined in terms of how that concept is manifest in the formation and verification of an alumnus identity. One of the only pieces of literature that considers all of these multiple factors within a social context that considers perceived opportunity cost as a relational factor in identity salience is the “The Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing” by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003). This is the only published study that “explicitly measures the impact of identity salience on relationship marketing success” (Michalski and Helmig, 2008). Although future empirical studies would be useful in confirming the findings of this study, the current qualitative study provides insight into better understanding how individuals make meaning of the contributing factors, which will allow for better quantitative measures to be developed in the future.

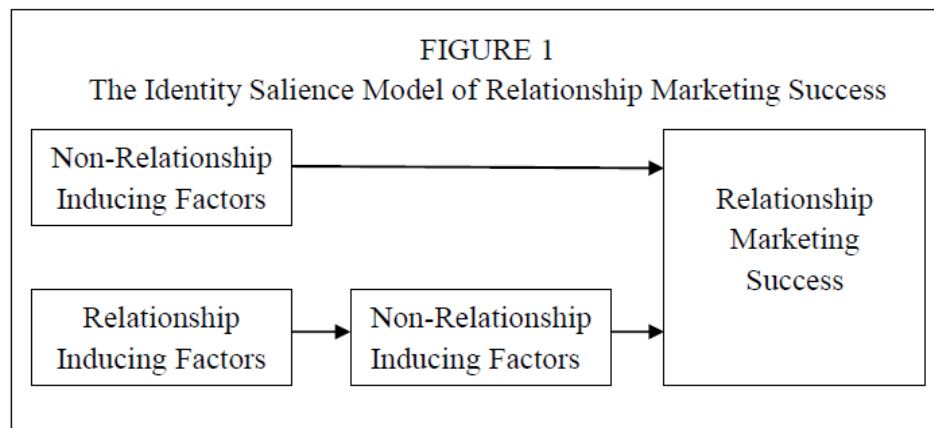
The Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing

Introduction

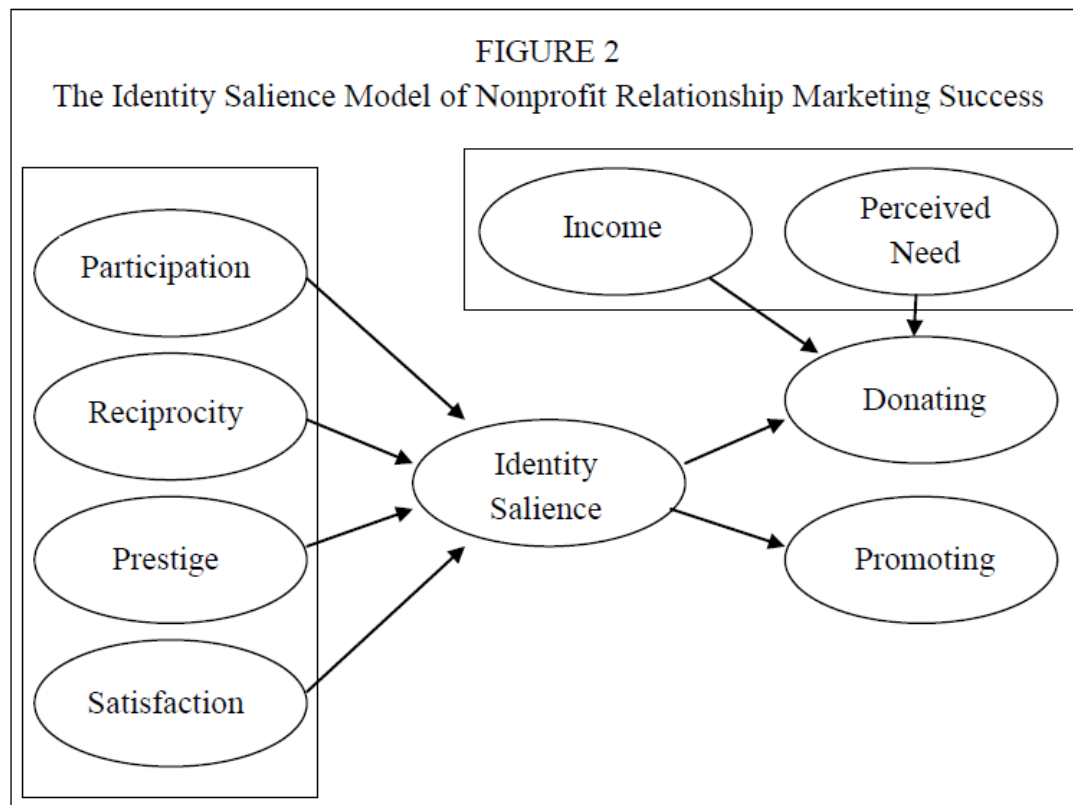
Thus far this dissertation has provided a broad overview of the influences on identity theory that frame the concept of identity salience and on the literature in alumni studies that has a particular focus on alumni giving. This section contains a detailed review/overview of the theoretical frame used in this study in the context of the supporting literature. It is important to note that while the theoretical frame has a focus on identity as a mediating factor in donation and promotion, this dissertation does not focus explicitly on those aspects of the study. The aspect in which the work of Arnett, German, and Hunt,(2003) serves as a guide is in those factors that are shown to contribute to a salient alumni identity. These factors, explained in detail below, have been used to frame the interview protocol and data analysis for this dissertation.

Identity salience can be defined as the extent to which certain facets of one's identity are a part of their overall self concept and definition of self and influences actions and behaviors (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003; McCall and Simmons, 1978). In the framework for this model identity salience is treated as an emergent phenomenon that is made up of four systems or factors: participation, reciprocity, prestige, and satisfaction. Each of these areas is discussed in detail below.

At its core, identity salience is concept within social identity theory that focuses on connections among the self, personalized roles, society, and role performance. Identity theory is a micro-sociological theory that examines people's identity-related behaviors (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). The relationship between the self and social structure is central to furthering the understanding of social behaviors in the context of alumni giving.



As can be seen in Figure 1 (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003), identity salience is a function of relationship inducing factors in this model. Figure 2 from Arnett et. al. (2003) goes into greater detail regarding the relationship inducing factors contributing to identity salience.



While this diagram is still a linear model, it does adequately illustrate the conceptual idea of the four subsystems coming together to create an emergent salient identity. What this diagram is lacking is the emergent state between identity salience and donation. Michalski and Helmig (2008) have suggested that the inclusion of paired comparison scaling into the salience measures as another contributing factor. Another possibility is to add competing hierarchical and situational identity measures as mediating factors between the identity and donating and promoting choice. The central hypothesis of this model is that when the alumni identity is salient, there is a greater likelihood of support actions that result in donation or promotion. The extent of the action is determined by the level of salience of the alumnus identity. This dissertation does not measure the salience of the participants, but instead seeks to better

understand how alumni understand and describe those factors as they see them at work in their life and decisions since graduation.

Prestige

A common argument in the literature is that alumni donate to their alma mater because of the prestige of giving (Volkwein,& Sweitzer, 2006). That being said, Holmes (2009) found that prestige is more influential as a factor in giving for young alumni as compared to older alumni. Thus it was interesting to see this played out in the current study where participants are no longer “young” alumni, but are not yet a generation removed. One indicator of prestige has often been selectivity. However, Simone (2009) found that not to be the case. “The statistically insignificant relationship between selectivity and alumni giving challenges a major paradigm in the literature regarding the influence of this measure of prestige on alumni giving (Simone, 2009).” How does one reconcile numerous empirical studies that show a statistically significant relationship between prestige and giving with a theoretically more methodologically sound dynamic panel model that invalidates those previous findings? This is where the current study comes in. Both can be correct in a more complex model that takes identification and identity salience into consideration. Empirically, prestige has an impact on alumni donations because prestige has an impact on the formation of a strong alumni self concept (identity salience), which in the context of a relationship marketing success model impacts readiness to donate and increases the chance of acting on that readiness via a contribution. Selectivity is not statistically significant because it is only a portion of the prestige system. Thus while selectivity may not have a direct impact on donations, it does have value as it relates to prestige. Selectivity is a key aspect of institutional prestige and a significant factor in determining a more homogenous campus culture (Holmes, 2009), which reinforces institutional identity through peer and institutional values alignment.

The more prestigious the institution, the more likely it is that there will be a stronger campus culture that will reinforce a salient identity as an alumnus.

What is most important in this model is the consideration given to the parts that contribute to a strong self concept as alumni and an alumnus identity that is more likely to be invoked than not. Mael, and Ashforth, (1992) found a positive relationship between organizational identification and institutional prestige. Universities are complex organizations, making this relationship important to keep in mind. Arnett et.al. (2003) also found a significant positive correlation at $p < .01$ between prestige and identity salience, which is in turn positively correlated with donation at the same p value. One example of how an institution can change prestige without touching selectivity is name changes. When Beaver College changed its name to Arcadia University in 2001, perceived prestige was a significant motive (Owston, 2007). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare writes, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet.” In this case the Bard is incorrect. Increased prestige matters. It translates into increased self concept of students which in turn contributes to greater salience of the alumni identity.

Participation

In this model participation refers to participation during attendance at the institution. This is typical for most measures of participation (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). A review of literature shows that if the participation refers to current involvement of alumni it is more often termed engagement (Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao, and Coll, 2005; Weerts, and Ronca, 2007). The challenge with using participation as a factor is that it relies upon memory, and as such is less trustworthy as time passes (Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao, and Coll, 2005; Weerts, and Ronca, 2007). Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, (2007) indicate that “alumni who

were treated more favorably as students, who were satisfied with their academic experiences, and who believe their college education contributed to their career success are more inclined to give as alumni than those with less favorable feelings and beliefs.” Arnett, et al, would argue that this favorable experience contributes to an overall greater positive sense of self and would contribute toward a more salient alumni identity. Although satisfaction is mentioned in the context of participation it will be discussed as an individual factor later.

The belief that one’s education contributed to career success as a function of participation is of specific note. McDearmon (2010) indicates that the concern over career preparedness is very present feedback from young alumni. His qualitative study found that themes related to career services were prevalent among open ended responses to an alumni questionnaire. This study asked specifically about the impact of being an alumnus of a specific institution on professional paths and also identified some trends in this area. Considerations of career achievement and support as valid participation concerns, makes sense when considered in terms of participation in undergraduate experience from the academic perspective. Tinto (1993) found that academic participation and integration are of the utmost importance in remaining engaged in college and persisting through to graduation. Although social integration is indicated as an important factor as well, academic integration is given greater consideration in his approach specifically for its influence on career aspirations and professional integration post graduation..

The self concept is what drives both the prominence hierarchy and salience hierarchy of role identities (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Participation is the root experience leading to the development of the alumni role identity, and serves as the base from where other identity concepts start (Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007).

Reciprocity

Perceived reciprocity has been found to lead to greater volunteerism (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). While this is not directly related to readiness to donate fiscally, it contributes to greater salience of the alumni identity only to the extent that it is a factor supporting satisfaction, which has limited influence on identity. It can be argued that volunteering at the institution brings alumni in closer proximity with the institution. Proximity is another significantly related factor in readiness to donate and the creation of an alumni identity (Von Kotzebue, and Wigger, 2010). If an individual feels that they are “getting something out of the deal” just by being an alumnus they will be more likely to take the next step and become more engaged. Interestingly enough, reciprocity was not shown to have any relationship to identity salience of an alumnus identity in the Arnett et al study.

Perhaps, the nature of reciprocity can explain this in part. Reciprocity is a current state that is not dependent on the past experiences of the alumni, but focuses on the here and now. This is a spot where institutions as environmental factors, have in the past placed much focus in the hopes of influencing their alumni (Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007). Specific rewards such as a key chain or sweatshirt may engage the individual enough to donate one time, but will they build a personal culture of donation? Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) were clear that there was no relationship between reciprocity as measured and identity salience while indicating that this appears to conflict with other donation literature. McDearmon (2010) also identifies this area as one that needs closer examination. He found that young alumni identified incentives for giving as important in encouraging gifts; however he also indicated that there is a possibility of some other psychological factors at work citing Holmes et al (2002) work in that area.

Essentially, what the institution has to offer are good feelings, and good feelings, while they may influence giving, do not appear to influence identity. The end result is a relationship based primarily on social exchange that needs much more study before being considered a viable factor in a salient alumni identity. Given the findings of Arnett et al. and the conflicting literature on reciprocity, as it relates to identity development, this factor was not directly targeted in constructing the measurement instrument.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction is an important factor that leads to organizational identification (Mael, and Ashforth, 1992). It is important to remember that identification is different than identity salience. Identification has to do with the oneness or strength of bond to an object or the extent to which that object defines ones sense of self. This process of linkage to an object, person, organization etc. can lead to identity formation. Where that identity falls in a hierarchy related to other identities is identity salience. Thus, while satisfaction makes people feel good and can reaffirm an identity, it doesn't necessarily influence the hierarchical placement of the identity in a significant fashion.

Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) hypothesized that alumni who are satisfied with their university experiences are more likely to place a university identity higher in their hierarchy of identities. However their findings proved otherwise. In the identity salience model of relationship marketing, satisfaction appears as a low correlation factor that is not significant. They did note that prestige and reciprocity were likely to influence satisfaction. They also note that the satisfaction may be much more complicated and prone to influence by other factors to be accurately measured in this specific context. Nostalgia for the past college experience and cognitive dissonance between the expectations during college and the experience after can

influence perceived satisfaction in difficult to predict ways. Given the literature on giving and relationship marketing it is clear that satisfaction plays a role in social exchanges and donation. However, there is room to explore its role in the salience of the alumni identity. This study does ask specific questions of its respondents regarding their overall satisfaction with their college experience and how that may have changed over time. This study is looking to better understand this factor with conflicting value with regard to the development of early alumni identity.

Non-Relationship Variables

In traditional linear models non-relationship variables are more often than not utilized as controls for other factors. Prior research indicates that there is a positive relationship between donation and perceived need, and donations and income. In short, people who have money tend to be more likely to give and they prefer to give it to those they feel need it (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). This study asked about employment and career, but did not control for income or ask about perceptions of need. The focus of this qualitative study is on the factors contributing to identity salience, not those related specifically to donation. Future studies will need to further examine the role of income and perceived need in this model.

Income

Income is one of two identified non-relationship variables in the model. Why include what is normally a control into a complex systems model? In this model income is more than a control. Income is a non-relationship variable that is impacted by the economic environment external to the system. It is also another factor that can impact self concept and thus mediate the effects of identity salience (Weerts and Ronca, 2006; 2007). A great example is an individual who has a good paying job because, as they perceive it, of their college degree. In this case the income has a positive relationship with identity salience. However, if the opposite were true, and

the individual blamed their low income on their alma mater as a function of poor advising or academic preparation, there would be a negative relationship. Income, like perceived need and identity salience, appears as a dominant factor in decision to contribute to alma mater.

Perceived Need

Perceived need behaves much like income in terms of its role in the model compared to its typical use. Perceived need is related to identity salience in that the alumni reaction is different depending on the personality of the individual. Alums who identify strongly with their small liberal arts school may perceive there to be a greater need than actually exists. Other alumni may see no demonstrated need at all. Although perceived need is less closely related to identity salience, it is closely linked to income. One may perceive a need and not have the income to follow through, but another may have income, but no desire to donate or not perceive the need as valid.

Much how income has a relationship with self concept so can perceived need with regard to perceived worth (Weerts and Ronca, 2006; 2007). An individual who had a negative college experience may perceive a need, but not feel that the institution is worthy of their contribution of time or money. Like Income this area, while categorized as non-relationship inducing, has a relational component with self concept and the environment. In the case of perceived need the media can play a role in impacting this perception. As an environmental factor media messages can elicit responses from alums that reinforce a positive self concept or a negative self concept with regard to the salience of their alumni identity. Positive messages that reinforce a positive self concept such as winning the NCAA college basketball tournament may increase the desire to present the salient alumni identity in more situations, whereas a negative media message may have the opposite effect.

It could be argued that non-relationship inducing variables influence the identity salience of the individual. Given the supporting literature it is a distinct possibility as non-relationship structures still depend highly on perceptions based in social interactions with an organization. For the purpose of this study, only those factors identified as relationship inducing factors of identity salience (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003) will be considered.

Conclusion

There is a wealth of literature that seeks to understand how individuals conceive of themselves, why individuals exhibit the behaviors they do, and what motivates those behaviors. People are complex; and researchers in psychology, sociology, social psychology, and identity theory have been trying for many years to understand these complexities of the individual in a measureable way. Some have had more success than others, but every study provides more insight into better understanding the concepts surrounding ones identity. This literature review provides a historical context for the study of identity and specifically builds a case for better understanding identity salience as the mechanism that mediates which identity will take the front line in any given situational context. The next chapter provides institutional and participant background and explains the methodology that this study employs to add to the body of literature surrounding identity and alumni donations by improving understanding of those factors that contribute to a salient alumni identity which has been shown to lead to increased likelihood of donation to or promotion of alma mater. The Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) article reviewed above provides the theoretical frame that has guided the instrument creation and analysis of data in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research and Design

Alumni studies are stuck in a reactive pattern, housed in fundraising, where those who have given before define those who will be asked to give in the future. By taking a closer look at the experiences alumni had while in college and in their life since, this study seeks to better understand how alumni make meaning of these experiences. Understanding how alumni engage their alma mater in the meaning making process can help researchers and practitioners understand how individuals develop an alumnus identity over time.

Using a case study approach (Creswell, 2003), interviews were conducted with twelve alumni of Public Midwestern University (PMU) who graduated within a given time period to provide insight on their identity as an alumnus or alumnae as expressed through the context of their college engagement and their engagement since. While these data are not able to be generalized to the entirety of college alumni, or even all alumni of Public Midwestern University, they are useful in providing a deeper understanding of how early alumni make sense of what it means to them to be an alumnus or alumnae.

Population and Background

Institutional Background

The institution that provides the setting for this study has been masked to protect the identity of the institution and the study participants. Public Midwestern University has been classified as a research university by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The campus population is around 25,000 students. The student body is primarily Caucasian, with minority students comprising 18% of the population and international students, from nearly 90 different nations, represent roughly 5% of the total. More than 20% of the

overall population is pursuing graduate studies. There are 240 academic programs offered, 101 of which offer graduate studies and 30 of which lead to a doctoral degree. The main campus has the capacity to house nearly 5,500 students and is in fairly close proximity to the downtown of the city. Some of the highlights of campus are the large, well-equipped student recreation center and state-of-the-art facilities for business, chemistry, science research, health and human services, and visual and performing arts.

Public Midwestern University has been recognized as among the top-100 public universities in the United States by U.S. News & World Report for over a decade. In addition, the university has its own chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest and most widely recognized academic honor society in the nation. This is a significant honor as fewer than 100 public universities in the country have been selected to shelter a chapter. PMU has a highly rated engineering college, a nationally recognized aviation college, and thriving business and education colleges.

Alumni are one of the top two sources of additional funding for colleges and universities. In 2011 on average, the two largest sources of gifts were “alumni (25.7 percent of gifts) and foundations (28.6 percent). Non-alumni giving made up 18.6 percent of all gifts, followed by corporations (16.6 percent), other organizations (9.4 percent), and religious organizations (1 percent) (Kiley, 2012; p.2). When looking exclusively at gifts, 25% of total contributions does not sound too awful. However, when real numbers come into play the picture becomes far less optimistic. One must be aware that 25% of gifts is not the same as 25% of overall budget or even close to assuming that 25% of alumni give. These percentages hold true for PMU as well.

According to PMU’s Budget Office website (which I will not cite further as it would reveal the study institution), the total General Fund budget for 2010 was over \$323,000,000. Tuition

revenue made up about 64%, state appropriations made up almost 34% and all other revenue including gifts and auxiliaries made up nearly 3%. Does this mean that alumni giving accounts for one half percent of the general fund? Not really. Most alumni funds at PMU are restricted and as such cannot be used in the general fund unless specifically directed. This is at once a boon and a burden. The benefit of restricted funds is that they must be used to meet the intentions of the donor. This means that a gift to the library will actually be used for the library. The burden is that people give to what they care about, not what the institution cares about or needs funding for at the time.

Population Background

Participants for the study were selected based on their year of graduation from Public Midwestern University. All twelve of the respondents graduated in the year 2001 or 2002 with an undergraduate degree from Public Midwestern University. The participants ranged in age from 31 to 35 years old. This study did not control for gender or biological sex, however all of the participants self identified throughout the course of the interview. This resulted in a breakdown of four female and eight male participants. Gender was not used in analysis of the data.

Perceived prestige, participation, and satisfaction with degree were expressed in terms of degree and career across all of the participants. As such, program of study and subsequent career are important to consider in the analysis and a brief summary of the relationship between degree and current occupation will be provided to add context to the data analysis and results sections in Chapter 4. A more complete personal profile of each participant will also be presented in chapter 4. Three of the participants currently work in the same field in which they received their undergraduate degree. Four of the participants work in affiliated fields where they

use their degree, but their undergraduate area is not their primary job responsibility. Another three of the participants stated they are using what they learned in their degree program, but not in the field of their degree. The remaining two participants currently do not work outside the home as they are the primary caregiver for their children. Seven professional degree areas are represented among the twelve participants, with business represented three times. Engineering, history, and communication are all represented twice, while aviation, chemistry, and music theatre performance are represented once.

Conceptual Framework

Introduction

The conceptual frame driving this study is rooted in the Identity Salience Model of Relationship Marketing Success (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). While this framework is predominantly linear in nature, it still accounts for multiple factors playing their roles simultaneously with consideration of multiple relationship inducing and non-relationship inducing factors. The current study examines the relationship inducing factors only and does not examine the non-relational factors. These factors are used as a framework for analyzing individual interview data from alumni who graduated within the same time frame from the same institution. Examination of the data with consideration of these factors is necessary to better understand their contributions to the formation of an alumnus identity, which will be helpful in the construction of more complex models in the future.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of identity salience is grounded in research on identity theory (Burke and Stets, 2009; Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Stryker 1968, 1980; Turner 1978). Identity theory is essentially the concept that individuals maintain several

identities based on their self-concept that define their lives and the actions they take. These identities are arranged hierarchically and those that are more salient are also more prominent and therefore more likely to impact behavior than those that appear lower in the hierarchy. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) propose that identity salience plays a significant role in the success of relationship marketing efforts regarding non-profit organizations such as postsecondary education institutions. Their quantitative study results indicate that this holds true. Individuals who demonstrate a more salient alumni identity are more likely to donate to their alma mater and promote it. This is different from other studies surrounding relationship marketing because: 1) the relationship is between an individual and an organization where there is already an established relationship, and 2) the reciprocal factor is not concretely economic in nature.

The current study takes the findings of Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) and expands upon them by examining the relational factors in their Identity Salience Model of Relationship Market Success to better understand the extent to which they contribute to a salient alumnus identity.

While the results of the Arnett et. al. (2003) study are consistent with other alumni studies, Michalski and Helmig (2008) point out a valid concern regarding the measurement instrument. While the instrument appears to provide a valid measure of the presence of an alumnus identity, it is not in the purest sense a measure of salience. "...the focus of the research design was not to measure the rank of a given identity in the hierarchy of an individual" (p.55). Michalski and Helmig continue by explaining that the measure as situated within the work of Callero (1985) "did not measure the object of interest satisfactorily because there was no relative component in the methodological approach" (p.56). In other words, one cannot measure relative hierarchy of identities without multiple identities considered or presented in contrast. Michalski

and Helmig recommend a paired comparison scaling as an alternate methodology. While their concerns have merit, they can be mediated by considering that there are two frequently used definitions for identity salience.

The definition used by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) is grounded in identity theory (Burke, 1980; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker, 1968) and posits that people have several identities, and that salient identities are more likely to affect behavior than those that are less important. The modified Callero (1985) instrument provides a measure of identity where the salience measure is represented by the corresponding action of donation or promotion. If a strong identity leads to action, it is salient. The second definition more strongly considers the concept of identities as internalized role expectations that are organized within the self in a salience hierarchy. Salience is further defined as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (Stryker and Burke, 2000; p.286). This more refined definition gets at both the hierarchical nature of salience as well as the resulting behavior in the form of invocation. This study will use the second definition to guide its conceptualization of identity salience and will use the model proposed by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) to guide the interview questions and subsequent analysis.

The Arnett et. al. study is important in framing this dissertation. First, this study has the distinction of being the only study to have confirmed empirically “the fact that identity salience is a key mediating construct for (nonprofit) relationship marketing success” (p.59). It provides empirical evidence to support the assertion that alumni identity salience is a significant factor (at $p < .01$) in determining alumni contributions. Second, it allows for building beyond current alumni studies situated in more traditional frameworks such as distinctly sociology, psychology or human development. It accomplishes this by taking areas that have been shown to be

significant in identifying likelihood to donate such as participation, prestige, and satisfaction and demonstrates that those factors are correlated with a salient alumni identity. Participation and prestige demonstrate a positive correlation at $p < .01$ while satisfaction shows a positive correlation that is not statistically significant. Third, the model proposed by Arnett et. al. considers multiple theoretical perspectives in its construction, which is the direction in which alumni studies must head if they are to be relevant in the future.

Qualitative Procedures

Identifying Participants

The findings presented in this study are based upon open-ended interviews with twelve college graduates who were identified as Public Midwestern University alumni through social networking with primary contacts and the broader social networks of the researcher. These participants were a convenience sample gathered by the principal researcher through first person requests through Facebook and LinkedIn messages requesting participation, as well as requests posted to PMU Alumni Facebook and LinkedIn groups. Social network sites were also used as a contact point for those interviewed and served as a mediated introduction site through which the primary researcher could directly contact individuals to whom he had been referred. Email was also used to schedule interviews and send and receive documents. There are no controls for demographic data in this study excepting for graduation date and alma mater.

No efforts were made to control for race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, marital status, or any other factors other than alma mater and year of graduation. While the sample size is limited, the purpose of the study is to achieve depth with the results over breadth. Using social networking tools to obtain the convenience sample also provides some limitations in that the sample may be very homogenous and is limited to those alumni who use social networking sites.

An assumption was made that those who are willing to sign up to be a part of an alumni social networking group would be more likely to respond to an invite to participate in the study. This did not turn out to be the case though. A majority of participants were identified as a result of snowball sampling from suggestions made by the first two interview participants, who are part of the researcher's own social network groups on LinkedIn. As always, research bias can play a role in the study. As an alumnus of the school being studied, the primary researcher is not without bias. While familiarity with the institution can provide bias and frame the analysis of data, it also allowed for a deeper rapport with subjects during the interview and an increased ability to understand answers and probe for more information in meaningful ways.

Interview Protocol

Once interview subjects meeting the appropriate criteria were identified using the researcher's social networks either directly through interpersonal connections or through social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, these individuals were contacted, and asked to return a Research Participant Information and Consent Form with contact information and preferences for interview times if they were interested. Interviews ranged in time from one half hour for the shortest to almost 2 hours for the longest. The average interview time fell around 80 minutes. The interviews opened with a brief discussion of the study and a verification of participant consent and progress into the open ended questions. It is understood that a limitation of the methodology is that it is highly reliant on self concept and memory, and as such has little external validation. The number of participants and questions are both consistent with the nature of the study. The twelve interview questions used to guide the interview protocol can be found in the Appendix. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend one or two central questions with five to seven follow-ups resulting in no more than a dozen research questions total. The conceptual

frame used to guide generation of the questions lead to three main areas of questioning with three to four sub-questions each. The interview questions provided a well fleshed out picture of the individual alumnus' and alumnae's undergraduate experience, experience as an alumnus, and perceptions of how others see their alma mater.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone. The researcher took notes during the interviews and was careful to indicate specific quotes. The shorthand notes were typed up following the interviews and fleshed out. Any uncertain notes were followed up with the participant via phone or email for clarification. One-third of the interviews took place in person. All of these in-person interviews were recorded to augment interview notes. A comparison of interview notes to interview recordings found that the researcher notes were very reliable in identifying the main themes and tones of the conversation, and that specific quotes indicated in notes were accurate to the recordings as well. Recordings have been stored in a secure location and are not associated with the participants' real names. The identity of all interview subjects has been masked using a pseudonym generated at random through an online baby name generator. The researcher is the only individual with access to the key indicating the participant's real name. This practice in conjunction with the masked institution, and limited demographic and personal data, provides maximum confidentiality for the participants.

Data Analysis and Role of Researcher

The data analysis was conducted using a line by line textual analysis of the interviews. The first step was to analyze the interview data for each participant as a unique entity. During this analysis, the researcher identified main ideas, supports, themes, and also noted any emotional responses or patterns within the interview data (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994). Brief

summaries of the individuals' narratives are developed out of this analysis. After the general themes and patterns are noted, a more focused secondary analysis was conducted with the general themes in mind. The purpose of this analysis was to identify any themes or trends within the broader theme. For example, if participants all indicated dissatisfaction with their college experience as a general pattern the researcher needs to go back and look at the data for patterns explaining this dissatisfaction. The same process was followed across each individual interview question as well.

Once themes and patterns were identified, the results were examined in the context of the conceptual frame. Are these results consistent within the framework? Are there outliers that are not explained or supported by the framework? Are there inconsistencies? As the research questions for this project were generated with the theoretical frame in mind, an analysis of the data by research question was helpful in conducting this portion of the analysis. It also clearly defined those responses that fell within the theoretical frame and those that emerged from the data as unique.

The researcher engaged in several processes to address the validity of the identified themes. First, it is important to note that the researcher is an alumnus of the institution being studied. This is of particular note as this is a study of alumni of that institution. Given this fact, there is the potential for an inherent bias towards or against the institution. The researcher has taken steps to assess the validity of the study and the findings through using a qualified peer debriefer (Creswell, 2003) in the field to review the entire project at various stages to help minimize this possibility. Even though the researcher graduated two or three years prior to the participants, there is an overlap where the participants and the researcher may have been at the

institution at the same time. In this case the proximity to the experience can serve as a type of validating process.

The researcher's familiarity with the target institution provides insider knowledge that allows him to act as another source for triangulating data. For example, the researcher could confirm the inauguration of a new president, the riots that occurred, the activities of certain student organizations, etc. that provided additional source support. The researcher was present for several major university events mentioned and is familiar with the places and locations discussed during the interviews. These familiarities lead to the researcher being able to ask follow up questions that garnered deeper data than outsiders may have been able to achieve. As an alumnus, the researcher remains associated with other alumni and was able to share the themes and findings of the study with several of these others as a means of further checking their accuracy.

The researcher also engaged in some member-checking regarding the identified themes. One quarter of the respondents were contacted with follow up questions on notes that needed clarification. During this conversation, the researcher discussed the preliminary findings with the participants and asked whether they felt these were accurate. All participants asked felt that the themes identified were accurate and appropriate.

Summary

At the outset, this study promised to have useful results. The challenge, as always, is to find the right way to approach the problem. The qualitative procedures outlined in this chapter resulted in the findings presented in the following chapter. Chapter 4 will provide a brief personal profile of each participant, present the data and provide an analysis of the data by research question.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The true joy of research is in its results. The purpose of each project varies, but all studies share one commonality: discovery. When the results are exactly what were expected this can be a wonderful validation of the process for the researcher. When the results offer something unexpected, the richness of the qualitative approach allows space for the unexpected to emerge from the interview process. This is when the possibility of something truly unique comes into play. The results of this study offer both support for existing literature and something new to consider.

In spite of all of the literature on identity and alumni, universities still have limited understanding of the role identity plays in alumni engagement through promotion or donation. One way to begin to explore this problem is to find ways to better understand alumni identity and those factors that contribute to its salience. Identity is at its base a function of meaning making (Burke and Stets, 2009). How individuals make meaning of their experiences and of themselves in the situational self, as represented through a given salient identity, is invoked based on perceptions of need in a specific situation. The specific context for this study is being an alumnus or alumna of a specific university from a specific graduation date time frame. This chapter will provide an organization of the data analysis, unique characteristics of each respondent via a brief personal profile, as well as analysis of the data by individual research question and discussion of the emergent themes.

Organization of Analysis

This chapter will begin with a brief personal profile of each of the respondents. The descriptions will provide a snapshot of the individual to provide context for their responses used

throughout the analysis section and the rest of the paper. The findings of this study will be broken down and organized by individual research question. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater understand their undergraduate experience?
2. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe their experience as alumni?
3. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe others perceptions of their alma mater?

Within each question general themes that pertain to that area will be addressed using specific quotes and paraphrasing from interviews with respondents. While academic and career preparation were not asked about in the interview process, themes in this area were so prominent in the interview data as an emergent trend that this area will be discussed as a separate section in the same way as the data directly pertaining to the original research questions.

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

This section provides brief profiles of each of the individuals who were interviewed for this study. The purpose of these profiles is to provide the reader with a context for individual responses and to illustrate that the alumni who participated in the study, by providing their insights on their own experiences, are real human beings with genuine unique experiences as individuals. The uniqueness of the individual experience is particularly important when a study is exploring individual identity in the context of a possibly larger social situational identity (Bowleg, 2008). As this study places emphasis on those factors that contribute to the salience of an identity, understanding the differences and similarities of the individual respondents gives any

trends that appear across different personal experiences and individuals more weight as shared meaning making. As mentioned in the methods section, respondent names have been masked and a new name has been randomly generated for each individual. The information provided about each individual will be specific enough to paint a picture of the individual yet broad enough such that they will not be able to be identified based on the description. Combined with the fact that the institution is also masked, this should provide the confidentiality explained to respondents in the consent form for this study.

Alex

Alex grew up in a rural area of the same state as PMU. He decided to attend PMU because it was smaller than the large state institutions yet larger than the smallest ones. He had family in the region that only lived a couple of hours away. Given that he had a moderate ACT score and GPA, he was admitted to the institution on probationary status. Alex majored in business administration and HR management. He always wanted to go into business and did not want to waste his time with anything else. Alex was involved in intramurals at the recreation center, but really focused on his academics so that he could improve his GPA and meet his probationary status. Alex spent his first year building his friendships and relationships in an informal capacity. Upon graduation Alex found the job market to be “horrible.” After working manual labor jobs for a little over a year, Alex pursued graduate studies in HR Labor Relations which is the field he currently works in. Though he still keeps in contact with some of his friends, he does not see them often and is not involved as an alumnus in any other way.

Jason

Jason grew up on the opposite side of the same state as PMU and attended an elite public high school. Jason decided to attend Public Midwestern University because of its paper

engineering program. This program has a rather strong reputation at this university and as such was a draw for him. His primary goal when he started college was to make money. Jason is very close to his family and chose PMU because of its proximity, within a few hours, to them. He was a member of the student organization for the paper program, but didn't fit in very well. He also engaged in intramural bowling, yet found most of his social interactions revolved around his engagement in his residence hall community where he lived for 2 1/2 years. The friends he made in the residence halls remain a close social group of his today. This is also where he met his wife through friends of friends. After graduation, Jason did not go to work for a paper engineering company. He instead pursued work in the area of environmental engineering. This is an area that he had gained an interest in during his undergraduate years. He still works in this field and has advanced into management. While he is not an active alumnus, he does purchase the PMU alumni license plate for his car.

Jim

Jim was an aviation flight science major at PMU. He selected this program because of its national reputation in this field. While there are private flight schools that can also provide a pilot's license and appropriate training, PMU offers a more robust education that he felt provided greater opportunity. Jim was a member of a fraternity and was pretty active in that organization until his senior year. He is still close with his fraternity brothers. Jim and his wife remain connected to his PMU friends by attending birthday parties, life events, and social gatherings for these friends and their friends' children. As a pilot, he travels for a living so does not get back to his alma mater too frequently. He feels that being a PMU alumnus has been helpful in his field and enjoys the affiliation with his alma mater.

Simon

Simon went to college because it's just what you are supposed to do. The goal is to go to school, get a good job, and make a living. The desire to get a good job influenced his degree choice and his school choice as a result. PMU offers a highly rated mechanical engineering program and offered him more scholarship money than other more prestigious competing schools. PMU was by far the best value of his choices in state. Simon was involved in marching band for four years. Combined with the liberal arts requirements for his degree, this offered him a more well-rounded experience than some of his peers who attended strictly engineering schools. After graduation Simon went to work for the naval surface warfare division in the defense industry. He later moved for his wife's educational pursuits and worked for a short time in electrical engineering, for which he had very little training. Another move later, and he has been back to work with the Navy ever since. Simon currently resides in Washington, DC. While PMU does not have much of a presence or reputation in that area of the country he does work with some fellow alumni and finds it amusing that PMU's football rival has a satellite office near his home. Though he has been invited to play in the alumni band for homecoming, he has not felt inclined to do so yet.

Chip

College was always assumed for Chip. He was part of a cohort of students that were very academically oriented in his high school. This previous academic success combined with his parents' expectations and encouragement sent him originally to a prestigious four-year research institution. After 2 1/2 years, he transferred to PMU due to reduced cost and a change in major. While completing his undergraduate experience, he joined the historical honor society and was president his senior year and wrote for the college newspaper. One of the things that really

stands-out to him about his undergraduate experience is his conversations with faculty and the support they offered. As a result of these faculty interactions, he was very engaged in his academic major. Their encouragement, combined with several personal experiences, lead to his pursuit of graduate study at PMU. Chip continued his academic success by completing his MA and returning to his original, more prestigious, institution as a doctoral student. His early experience as a doctoral student left him feeling that his academic preparation at PMU was far less “robust” than that of his peers from other institutions. After completing his doctoral studies, Chip currently works as faculty at an elite public research institution.

Ariel

Ariel went to college because her parents told her she had to. Many of her friends from high school were at PMU; however, they did not end up keeping in touch. Ariel majored in business management as it seemed like a very useful and flexible degree. During her time in undergrad, Ariel went on an alternative winter experience, was involved in residence hall government, and really embraced and enjoyed living in the residence halls. She met and connected with a close knit group of friends in the residence halls. These friends are still close to her and her husband, whom she also met in the residence halls, to this day. After graduation, Ariel combined her degree with an interest in culinary arts and worked at a restaurant as an assistant manager for a few years. Dissatisfied with her work experience, Ariel did not return to work after the birth of her first child. Ariel currently stays at home with her two children and works part-time as an administrative assistant.

Ryan

Ryan went to college because it's just what you do after high school. His parents insisted that he attend the small private Christian school that his father attended. This experience did not

work for Ryan and he transferred to PMU, where his best friend attended, at the end of his first year. Ryan was a pre-med major until a frank conversation with his advisor landed him in chemistry where he thrived. Ryan got married within his first year of enrolling at PMU and had a child soon after. His social engagement and campus involvement were limited due to work and family commitments that took up most of his time outside of classes. His academic success led to several jobs in chemistry while in school that counted as internships, as well as provided support for family. Shortly after finishing at PMU, Ryan went through a divorce. Unhappy with his work and in need of a change, Ryan pursued a second bachelor's degree in 3-D art. He currently works at a ceramics studio as a ceramic glaze formulator and ceramic artist where he actively uses both his chemistry and art degrees. Ryan keeps in touch with his friends from his year in the residence halls at PMU. While he remains fond of PMU, he has found his affiliation with his second institution much more beneficial in his work.

Marc

Marc comes from a family of educators, so college was always in the plan. He wanted to go into engineering and considered elite institutions in the state. PMU was the only institution that offered engineering graphics and an industrial design track. Marc had attended a summer engineering camp at PMU that was also influential in his decision to attend. He was a member of his high school solar bicycle team which encouraged him to work with the solar vehicle team at PMU. Despite his academic success in engineering, Marc did not feel like he fit in with the other engineers. Marc was also a member of a fraternity where he became president of Fraternity Council and later president of another student organization. Marc's involvement with his fraternity and his dissatisfaction with the engineering culture led to a change of major during senior year. He switched to a student planned curriculum that closely resembled

communications and was able to graduate without a delay thanks to the support of his advisor. After graduation, Marc pursued his master's degree in higher education and student affairs at a different university. He is still formally involved with the PMU fraternity chapter, has been a dues paying member of the alumni association, and is informally involved in many other ways. Overall, he is proud of having attended PMU. He currently works in student affairs administration.

Michelle

Going to college was not a guarantee for Michelle. Due to the nature of her father's very mobile job following military contracts, Michelle had been homeschooled for a number of years. After completing her homeschooling requirements for graduation, she spent one year at a private liberal arts college before transferring to PMU for their public history program. While at PMU, Michelle was a member and then president of a student organization in history. Prior to her senior year, she was selected as a recipient of a prestigious history fellowship. She is one of the only students from the Midwest to have ever been admitted to this program; fellowships are typically awarded to students from Ivy League schools. This fellowship inspired Michelle to pursue graduate studies in materials culture and architectural history in another region after graduation from PMU. Though she was a Presidential Scholar, inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated at the top of her class at PMU, she still felt underprepared for the academic rigors of graduate education. While in graduate school, Michelle married a fellow PMU alumnus that she met through friends of friends in the residence halls. She and her husband remain connected to these mutual friends to this day. Currently, Michelle works in government and is president of a statewide nonprofit in her professional area.

Alan

It was not really a matter of if one was going to college, but where, in Alan's family. Alan was interested in aerospace engineering and applied to an elite in-state university. After not being accepted, PMU was his second choice. Academic challenges led to a major change to communications and public relations with a focus in journalism. Alan was very involved in campus activities. He was part of the campus student government, lived on campus for 4 1/2 years where he was also a part of residence life staff, and was voted Homecoming King. He was also loosely connected to a campus ministry student organization. His work in residence life led to his going on a mission trip immediately after graduation where he met his wife and decided to pursue campus ministry as a calling. Alan currently works in campus ministry at his alma mater's rival institution, a fact that is not lost on his students. Though he “feels pretty good overall” about his PMU experience, he does find his alma mater’s reputation as a “party school” challenging at times. Alan is not specifically working in his degree field, yet he uses the education that he received in his work every day.

Emily

Emily chose PMU because it was close enough to home, but still far enough away, and had a business program with a strong reputation. She was a business and finance major and actively participated in marching band and as an usher at the campus professional auditorium. Emily was engaged in the honors college and found those courses to be most rewarding. After graduation, Emily signed up and worked for the Peace Corps for two years. This experience led to a deeper interest in non-corporate work environments. The challenge for her is that PMU did not provide a very sound academic base for her to work in this area. While her finance education has been a benefit, most of her value has come from post baccalaureate work experience more

than any social or academic connections from PMU. She has spent the last 10 years traveling the world in various positions and professional capacities. Her vast experience abroad has left her feeling that PMU has little influence outside of the state and immediate region. Emily is currently in the first semester of her MBA in sustainability at a prestigious private research university this year. Emily has very few connections to PMU as an alumna outside of surface interactions on social media sites.

Ella

Ella never thought that she wouldn't go to college. She attended an elite high school where 99% of her peers went on to college, and her father is an immigrant who was the first in his family to attend college. Everything in Ella's environment told her that college was the next step. Public Midwestern University was actually Ella's last choice until she visited campus. She got a "good vibe" from the theatre department, loved the facilities and appreciated that there were greater opportunities to perform than at many of the elite private schools she had considered. As a music theatre performance major, being involved was less a choice than a requirement. Ella was in a show every semester she was at PMU, yet still found time to be involved in the theatre fraternity, women's theatre board, and serve as an orientation student leader in the summers. Her positive experience, and the local opportunities in her field available to her through her undergraduate education, encouraged her to remain at PMU for her MFA in non-profit administration. While working, Ella remained connected to PMU and even participated as an Alumni Ambassador. Ella worked and resided in the city where PMU is located until she moved to another state for her husband's education in 2010. She currently stays at home with her new child, volunteers in her church, and continues to wear her "obscene amount of PMU gear."

Analysis of Data by Research Question

Undergraduate Experience

The first research question outlined earlier in the paper asks: How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater understand their undergraduate experience? Several of the open ended interview questions ask the participants to think about their undergraduate experiences. Participants were asked specifically about their formal and informal involvement in extracurricular activities. They were asked to make meaning of these experiences by explaining their most defining moment or activity and how their overall college experience has impacted their life today.

The theoretical frame proposed by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) framed the initial analysis of the data. The area of undergraduate experience is framed with consideration of the Arnett. et. al. definition of participation as formal and informal engagement with the institution and others at the institution, while enrolled as a student. Sun, Hoffman, and Grady (2007) argue that participation is the root experience leading to the development of the alumni role identity, and serves as the base from where other identity concepts start. This is further supported by a unique study on attachment decay by Burt (2001) that indicates that embedded relationships to peers while attending college determine attachment to the peers and institution throughout the rest of the lifespan. Line by line analysis, and question analysis of the interview notes with specific regard to participation yielded a consistent representation of social participation through engaging close informal friend groups as the dominant theme in this area. Also of note is a theme of greater specificity of social interactions being recalled by those who engaged in more structured formal social and work groups, such as residence life staff, marching band, and fraternity membership.

As noted in the review of literature, the challenge with using participation as a factor is that it relies upon memory, and as such is less trustworthy as time passes (McAdams, 2001; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao, and Coll, 2005; Weerts, and Ronca, 2007). However, when considering that the participants are only ten years out from college this is less of a concern than when studying mid-life or older alumni (McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan, 1993). Given the level of detail and ease with which participants were able to recall specific experiences, there is little concern for excessive recall error due to time lapsed or other factors in this study.

In general, most participants spoke positively about their undergraduate experience. Every individual provided at least one positive social experience regarding friend groups or extra-curricular group involvement and half reported similarly positive experiences surrounding their academic programs. While specific experiences at PMU were often spoken of fondly, the questions about how the individuals have understood these experiences over time were often quite neutral in tone. As a means of focusing in on the activity which holds the greatest meaning for the participant, and as such is most likely to be related to an alumnus identity, participants were asked to identify what they would consider the most defining moment in their undergraduate experience. Clarification was offered if asked for by asking them to talk about the one thing that most defines their college experience.

Activities and Defining Moment

What was most surprising about the responses regarding participation in extracurricular activities was their overall lack of depth. Participants were asked to identify the organizations and activities that they were a part of and discuss their level of activity within those. The researcher expected that the participants would be more interested in talking about their undergraduate involvement than they were. Despite the lack of anticipated depth regarding the

organizations and specific memories, some patterns still emerged. While it should be noted that extracurricular activities are not the same as a defining moment, every participant stated that their most defining moment happened in the context of their involvement in one of their previously identified activities. Those who reported more depth in their involvement in an organization or activity were also more likely to refer to that activity more frequently throughout the interview. This applied to both formal and informal activities.

An analysis of the activities cited and the activities that formed the context for the defining moment reveals four primary activity types. Five people cited academic related involvement as a primary extracurricular activity and as the context of their defining moment. Three people cited their involvement in the residence halls as a resident or as residence hall staff. Two people specifically cited their involvement in their fraternity. Two people cited their participation in marching band as central to their experience. Examples from each of the identified four activity categories will be used to paint a picture of how the defining moment is couched within the context of college participation.

The largest showing for correlation between participation in an activity and defining moment is in academic engagement. Alex and Ella's experiences were the most direct. Alex said that because he was admitted under academic probation, he had to focus on his GPA and that was where he put most of his time. He also said that earning his way off of probation in his first year was his most defining moment, because it proved he had the academic ability to be successful at PMU. Ella stated quite simply that, "As a music theatre performance major, theatre rules your life. I still got to have the full college experience, but everything else was built around performing. Performing defined my undergraduate experience."

Chip and Michelle also identified their most defining college experience in the context of their academic involvement. Chip said that, “My relationships with, and conversations with faculty really stand out in my experience. I think fondly of my work at the student newspaper and it certainly helped me learn how to construct a well written argument, but the relationships with people in the history department were most meaningful.” Both Chip and Michelle identified that they were involved in leadership of history student organizations that helped facilitate connections with faculty advisors. Michelle’s engagement with faculty lead to her selection for participation in an elite student fellowship, which she cited as her defining moment. Michelle and Chip’s engagement will be discussed in more detail in other sections of this chapter.

Involvement in the residence halls was the second most represented activity that resulted in a defining moment. Ariel spoke often about her experience living in the residence halls. She identified that while she was involved in other activities like alternative winter break and floor council, they were time limited or one time experiences. Her primary activities centered on her social interactions in the residence halls. “Living in the halls makes you more open to new social situations.” The residence halls are also where she met her husband through her friends. Alan said that he was a member of the residence life staff at PMU. This experience was a defining moment for him because it connected him to campus and student services. The work in student services, combined with his work in campus ministry, lead him to go on the mission trip where he met his wife and decided to pursue campus ministry as a career. Jason tried getting involved in a number of student groups without much investment. He found that his social involvement with friends from the residence halls was his most sustained and fulfilling extracurricular activity. Jason states that, “Without a doubt, meeting my wife was the most defining moment of my undergraduate experience. We met through friends of friends in the residence halls.”

While less represented, the paths in the last two categories are the most direct. Both fraternities and marching band are more formal types of extracurricular activities and their innate structure contributes to their potential for impact. Jim and Marc were both not only in a fraternity, but held leadership positions in it as well. Both cited this as their primary organizational involvement and as their defining moment. Neither offered a specific instance in this organization that made them feel this way, but said that it was the overall impact of being a member of such an organization that is significant. Jim stated, “Being in a fraternity is not like being in a club. It is very in-depth. It is a whole different way of knowing people.” Marc expressed similar sentiments adding that, “the sustained association makes it more meaningful. It doesn’t end when you graduate. I am still formally involved with my fraternity to this day.” Simon and Emily were both in the marching band. They both felt it was a valuable social departure from their academic studies, and looking back, both found the friendships they made in that context had more meaning than any other relationships at PMU. Simon described a particular experience traveling with the football team to the conference championship. “It was just amazing. There was so much energy and team spirit and I really felt connected to it all right in that moment. That was what college was supposed to feel like.”

Satisfaction

Satisfaction alone is not enough to motivate alumni to donate or promote the institution (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). The relationship between satisfaction and donation is not statistically significant. The data collected from participants in the current study supports the earlier empirical findings of Arnett et.al. where a number of participants indicated moderate to high satisfaction yet have low promotion and donation. Only four individuals in the current study indicated that they had ever given money to PMU. Only one of these gives regularly.

Although most participants indicated they would recommend PMU to a prospective student, only three have ever taken an active role in promoting the university. Satisfaction can be correlated with identity salience, which in turn has a statistically significant relationship to both donation and promotion at $p < .01$ (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003). This suggests that if you want alumni to donate and promote, they need to understand their satisfaction in ways that impact the salience of their identity as alumni.

The results of this study support the idea that there is a relationship between satisfaction and identity. Those whose responses suggested a higher level of satisfaction also seemed to exhibit stronger identification with their alma mater. Even though this is expected based on a majority of the literature (see Chapter 2), Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) did not find a significant correlation between satisfaction and identity salience. The findings of this study dispute that, and imply a direct relationship between satisfaction and identity. For example Ariel, who resides in the same state as PMU, indicated that her and her husband (also an alumnus) purchase the University license plate option when they buy and renew their automobile plates at the Secretary of State's office. A percentage of their plate renewal fees go toward supporting their alma mater and they drive around with the PMU logo on their vehicle. Jim and Ella both said that they wear PMU gear any chance they get and are always willing to talk about the school. This is consistent with other identity literature on the subject of identity based decision making (March, 1994). When given the option to promote their identity as alumni these individuals often choose to do so. On the other side, those who expressed less satisfaction with their alma mater are understandably less likely to make the identity choice in favor of promoting an identity as an alumnus.

Most people spoke of their satisfaction in terms of how they felt about the institution, or as an expression of perceived quality of education in the context of how well it prepared them for their life post degree. This made the analysis of this particular subcategory difficult. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) indicate that satisfaction is positively correlated to both prestige and reciprocity. Although the current study does not examine reciprocity, elements of that factor are present in the interview results. The complex nature of satisfaction as it emerged throughout the interviews has led the researcher to discuss it in the context of other factors. Satisfaction as it relates to prestige, feelings, and academic and social preparation, is discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Alumni Experience

The second research question asks: How do alumni who graduated between 10 and 11 years ago from the same alma mater describe their experiences as alumni? Several of the open ended interview questions ask the participants to share their experience as an alumnus regarding their relationships with their alma mater and other alumni in both formal and informal ways. While formal and informal relationships as alumni are often seen as more distinct in practice than undergraduate activities, they remain intertwined by the nature of their origin and the way in which perceptions of relationships change over time (Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2008). These social roles are important in verifying the social role identity aspects of an alumni identity. The more the experiences as an alumnus verify the alumni identity, the more likely it is that the alumni identity will be salient and prominent (Burke and Stets, 2009). Participants were asked specifically about their formal and informal involvement in alumni activities and activities involving other alumni. They were asked to make meaning of these experiences by expressing how they feel about being an alumnus of PMU and the extent that it is important to them.

Though feelings were not a focus of the Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003 article, satisfaction is accounted for in it. As mentioned in the literature review, satisfaction exhibits a positive correlation with identity salience, but not at statistically significant numbers. This is contrary to much of the relationship marketing literature in for-profit sectors that often relies upon satisfaction as the key mediating factor in brand loyalty and affiliation (Michalski and Helmig, 2008). Despite this, Arnett, et.al. stated that it appears that satisfaction is a complicated factor that warrants further consideration in future studies as an emergent phenomenon related to prestige and reciprocity in non-profit environments. Feelings about being an alumnus were considered as they can serve to demonstrate whether identity verification is happening in the meaning making process (Burke and Stets, 2009; Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2008). Those who have positive feelings toward their alma mater are more likely to have found their experience as alumni matches their perception of what it means to be an alumnus.

Informal Social

The most common response regarding formal and informal involvement with other alumni was by far that individuals had maintained close friendships with friends from their alma mater. The depth and frequency of these social interactions ranged from infrequent and casual to “we see our friends as often as we can.” What is interesting about the relationships as described to the researcher is that there were some patterns that emerged from the responses. Most importantly, those that expressed that they had maintained close connections with their friend group from PMU said that these friendships originated in the residence halls or through membership in a fraternal organization. Given that fraternity involvement is membership based, this aspect will be discussed in the formal social section in greater depth.

A number of individuals stated that their experience living in the residence halls is what connected them to the PMU friend group they are still in contact with today. Ryan states, “I still hang out with the people I lived with in the dorms. Even though I moved off campus after my first year at PMU, because I got married, I would still see my friends who lived on campus.” He continued to share that his marriage while in college did not help his social integration. “I wish I could have engaged more. But, socially, getting married, having kids, and then getting divorced – was not so good. It’s not PMU’s fault though – I could have made those mistakes anywhere.” Ryan stated that his best friend from high school lived and worked on campus so it was easier to stay connected because “the effort was not a one way street.” Nearly two-thirds of the participants cited that living in the residence halls played a role in facilitating their relationships. Ariel summarized it best when she said, “Living in the halls makes you more open to new social situations. You don’t want to do it forever, but there is something about being young, in the dorms, with your friends – you only get one shot at that.”

It is important that she did not highlight the formal residence life programs or hall activities as the primary drivers of those relationships, but spoke of them as part of the overall environment. This is consistent with Tinto’s (1993) observations on the interplay of formal systems (i.e., the residence hall structure and policies) and the informal (i.e., the day to day interactions in that setting) as they influence student retention. Ariel comments on this indirectly when she talks about feeling more satisfied with her experience when she lived on campus than when she ultimately moved to an off campus apartment. Several respondents commented on “reverting to dorm behavior long after graduation” when they socialized with their residence hall friend group. Michelle summarized this concept best. “When we get together, it seems like we mimic the setting of the residence hall by hanging out together in the same small room in the

house to talk, eat, play games, etc. I mean here we are- adults, with the large house or apartment we wanted while we were in school, and we still tend to gravitate to socialize together in a single room, like being back in the dorm.”

Another observation is that those participants who remained in the state or region have on the whole maintained stronger ties with their PMU friend group than those who have left the region. Jim stayed in the state and lived in the immediate area for seven years before moving to the other side of the state. As a pilot, he travels for a living so does not get back into town often, but he does frequently see his friends that live in state. His friend group attends each other’s weddings, graduations, kids’ birthdays, and other life events. When a friend recently got married in the PMU area, he and his wife made a week out of it and stayed in the area. Ariel made similar observations about distance and friends. “My husband and I are both alumni and we share a friend group. We have other friends, but our closer friends are those that went to PMU with us.” This is the type of feedback institutions like to hear from alumni. It is evidence that a social bond occurred with other students while in attendance. That bond is interpersonal though and not institutional. The institution is viewed as a setting. She, like several others, stated that her friends were all at each others’ weddings, have kids of similar ages, and they support each other in life events. She also commented that it is interesting to look at a couple of her friends who went to graduate school out of state and then returned. She noticed that they stayed in contact, remained close and saw each other every few months, but that these friends had added a new group that she didn’t know at their grad school. Currently these friends live very close and they get together as frequently as children and work will allow.

Ryan is one of the participants who remained in the region for a couple of years after his time at PMU and then spent many years out of state before returning back to the region and then

recently to PMU's home state. He stated that while he maintained contact with friends, "moving away certainly posed logistical challenges that limited the frequency of contact." Proximity as a factor in facilitating attachment has been explored in other literature to a limited extent (Burt, 2001). While it is assumed to have an impact on the embedded relationships, the strength of the relationship while in school far outweighs the impacts of relocation. Emily and Simon have both moved from the Midwest to opposite coasts or even abroad, as in Emily's case, for a time. Emily left for the Peace Corps right after graduating and has, "a few close friends I keep in touch with, but don't see often." She was quite specific that the benefits of informal engagement are very local, short of close friendships. This is consistent with PMU alumni numbers, where 67% of alumni live in state and 96% reside in the USA. This also reflects that PMU's focus is close to home. This is discussed in greater length in Chapter 5. Simon also commented that "outside of a handful of PMU grads in my office workgroup, I don't run into other alumni." Simon did note that his colleagues and he would have dinner with one of their professors when he came into the area for work, but the professor has since passed away and they don't do anything regular as a group anymore. Like Emily and Simon, Chip indicated that he has a few close friends, three, that he keeps in contact with regularly, usually via phone call or social media. Every single participant indicated that they used social media to remain connected with their close friend group regardless of distance. This is certainly an area that should be considered in greater depth in future studies.

Those who are married and spoke of family during the interview were also more likely to have expressed stronger ties with PMU friend groups. As mentioned above, Jim and Ariel both expressed a high level of interaction and engagement with their friend group from PMU. Both indicated they are married and that family and life events are shared with this peer group.

Similar comments to varying degrees were made by Jason, Michelle, Ella, Alan, and Ryan. All are married, with the exception of Ryan, and expressed their friendships in terms of extended family. Ryan said that having gone through a bad divorce at a young age likely brought him closer to his friends. They were there for him and serve as surrogate family. Studies in this area are somewhat conflicted and limited (Burt, 2001; McAdams, 2001). In some cases life-events have been shown to enhance the connections to alma mater, while in other cases family can detract from the relationship with alma mater.

The most interesting thing about the informal relationships discussed in the interviews is that PMU is, in most cases, framed as the context for the initial contact, but is not necessarily the tie that binds. Several individuals commented that they would have likely made friends no matter where they went to school. Ryan states, “I could have done it elsewhere, but I didn’t, and I can’t make any speculations or what-ifs.” These close friend groups made up of alumni keep individuals anchored to the institution by virtue of shared experience and sense of place. Nostalgia and personal life stories come into play. Personal loyalty and a sense of extended family are also present. The themes identified in this section are consistent with findings in Burt’s 2001 case study about attachment decay in alumni. “As expected, attachment declines across the years after graduation (linearly for the first twenty years to about half its initial level), and decay is inhibited when connections with GSB [program] graduates are embedded in stable relations of family, work or long-term friendship.” Those in this study who express greater stability in long term connections with other alumni also expressed stronger emotional connections regarding their alma mater. Everything an institution wants to see in its alumni groups is present in these informal friend groups, except formal engagement. While nearly all recipients mentioned informal friend groups, very few mentioned formal activities related to

their alma mater such as attending formal university events or watching athletic events as central to their socialization.

Formal Social

Very few individuals mentioned formal social engagement with other alumni. Only three out of the twelve spoke about their formal engagement and of those only one went into any significant detail. Jim and Marc were both in a fraternity. They both indicated that they are still affiliated with their respective fraternity as alumni members. Both also indicated that their fraternity brothers are part of their informal friend groups as well. Jim indicated that he has returned to the frat house for homecoming weekends and reunions and that he enjoys reading the PMU alumni news online. He stated that he “wishes he could be more involved, but his travel for work makes it difficult.” Marc is still closely involved with his fraternity in formal and informal ways. He has participated in a variety of formal roles with his fraternity since graduating and participated in alumni events. Marc also tried to get a Latino Alumni Association group going, but did not have much success. “Sustained involvement was difficult to maintain and interest has never seemed to last long enough to be viable.”

Ella is perhaps the most formally engaged with her alma mater out of the group. Ella lived in the same city as PMU for eight years after graduation and was very involved with her alma mater and even worked for PMU at various points. She worked at the State Youth Arts Festival hosted by PMU for eleven years, attended PMU athletic events and theatrical productions regularly, and served as an Alumni Ambassador until leaving the state in 2010. Ella stated that, “As a former orientation leader and after having been in so many productions at PMU, it just felt like I should stay involved.” She also expressed the strongest positive

emotional reaction to her alma mater, which is consistent with other studies that demonstrate proximity to alma mater can influence emotional connection to it (Burt, 2001).

Feelings

Participants were asked how they felt about being an alumnus of PMU. As noted by Palmer and Koenig-Leiws (2008), “O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2003) note that emotional displays may contain the ‘true self’ on the basis that what people get emotional about reveals what they consider to be particularly salient” (p 66). Given this consideration in the context of the scope of relationship marketing studies, emotion may be as reliable a factor to consider in identity salience as satisfaction. Even though they were asked about their overall satisfaction earlier in the interview, several people gave very similar responses for both questions, as was expected. Asking about ones feelings is still a cognitive approach that is different than engaging an emotional response. That was not the goal of this study, but may need to be a consideration in the future as greater differentiation between satisfaction and emotional response could be of use in understanding those factors which contribute to a salient alumni identity.

The challenge is to look at how an individual feels about being an alumnus as distinctly different from satisfaction with education (Volkwein and Sweitzer, 2006). Several subjects had a neutral response to the question, such as Alex. “I’m not ashamed I went there. Compared to a new, online for profit school, I appreciate the history of the institution. The traditional bricks-and-mortar school. It gives it weight.” These are not necessarily the expressions of warm feelings that institutions hope to hear from their alumni. Chip echoes these feelings when he says, “I have mixed feelings. Overall I’d say it was good enough”. Simon starts out neutral, but ends a little more positive. “I will always have an affinity toward the school. I still have a love

for the school and what it gave me.” Even though participants stated how they felt, it still, in many cases seemed to be an extension of satisfaction with their experience. Despite a significant felling of neutrality that permeated responses from all participants, there were moments in each interview where stronger emotions prevailed.

Those individuals who had a more negative or neutral response tended to be those individuals who had experienced some challenges as a result of their post baccalaureate pursuits. Those who were most positive enjoyed sustained direct benefits from their college experience post-degree. Ariel expressed her feelings about being a PMU alumnae quite simply, “Positive and happy. I am always happy to pass along a recommendation to go to PMU.” Ryan shares, “It was a good experience. I am happy I went there and as time goes by I find new ways to appreciate it.” Alan is also positive and finds some humor in maintaining a positive glow in his current work. “I feel good about it. Overall, positive. I am not embarrassed by it, even though I work at the rival school.” Jim goes beyond expressing his love of the school verbally and shares, “I love being able to make the PMU connection such as when I am wearing T-shirt or sweatshirt or hat. I received the education I needed and the social connections I formed are still valuable and active.” He not only appreciates his education, but due to the professional benefits of being associated with PMU as a pilot he advertises his affiliation by sporting PMU gear. Ella shares a similar comment, “I have lots of PMU pride and an extreme crazy love for the school. I have an obscene amount of gear I still wear. I just love my school.”

Ella was by far the most positive of the participants, yet she is disappointed in her alma mater’s communication with her. “The only thing that disappoints me is that they don’t seem to love me as much. I gave them eleven years between school and work and volunteering and all I get are requests for money. Not even so much as a keychain.” There was certainly a conflict in

her response. Ella is the ideal for any college program. She was engaged, motivated and sure of her academic path. She excelled in her undergraduate studies, stayed with PMU for her master's degree, and was an active alumna. What happened? PMU didn't bother to say "thank you" in any way that mattered and Ella noticed. The question for PMU needs to be, "How many other 'Ellas' are out there feeling the same way?" The situation does not improve upon further probing.

When the interviewer asked to talk about more about the perceived one-way relationship, Ella made a good observation. "I just, sometimes feel they love to claim your success, but not really you. If you do something noteworthy it will make the newsletter and benefit them, but they make it feel a bit like you succeeded because of them not because of your personal merit. They should be sending the message that high achievers chose PMU." PMU provided a setting for success, but failed to seize an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between individual and institution. Ella ended by asking a question. "Are they really responsible for all of that though, or are maybe our expectations of what they should be doing too high?" Where does the responsibility lie? The feeling of not really knowing what is expected of them as alumni was prevalent in the group. Emily stated a common sentiment when she said, "I felt that we were never taught how to be alumni or what it means to be a college graduate beyond having a degree." Is this because PMU did not do it, or because the subjects did not know where to look, or that they needed to look?

Those who felt more negative about their experience still appreciated their education, but found it lacking in the context of life after college. Jason shares, "Oftentimes I think it was a mistake to go to PMU. There are many things lacking. At the time it was recognized as a top undergraduate institution and I'm not so sure about that anymore. The school is a good deal. It

is a good value but you get what you pay for.” Jason implies that the quality of the institution may have changed, but that he is not sure. He even questions his decision to have gone there. His statement reflects frustration with perceived lack of preparation over a dislike for the institution. There is an emotional give and take that is present throughout the interviews. Essentially participants feel that they received a fair education, that there were some things they were not happy with, but they enjoyed their time at PMU and feel an affinity for the institution.

Making Meaning of Others’ Perceptions

How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater make meaning of others’ perceptions of their alma mater? Several of the open ended interview questions ask the participants to share experiences as an alumnus where group membership or alumni status played a role in their life. Participants were asked specifically about the perceived prestige of their alma mater and to share any experiences where others’ perceptions of their alma mater played a role in their life positively or negatively. They were asked to make meaning of these experiences by explaining how they feel about being an alumnus of PMU and to relate experiences that support their feelings.

Prestige versus Reputation

Do you believe that those you interact with view PMU as prestigious? The response to this specific interview question was consistent across all participants who expressed some variation of the same response. Every person paused before answering, as if uncertain of how to respond or that speaking their perceived truth was somewhat conflicting. Then, with resolve, each participant answered with some form of “no” followed by a qualifying explanation about the school’s value and highlighting those programs that have the highest positive reputation in

general. Those who graduated from one of the flagship programs hesitated the longest before answering and gave the most comprehensive follow-up explanations.

Several programs at PMU were noted as having a very strong reputation and being well respected. As indicated in the institutional profile in Chapter 3, PMU has a highly rated engineering college, a nationally recognized aviation college, and thriving business and education colleges. The programs identified by the participants as being “well respected” and having a “great reputation” are identical to those listed. This consistent observation lends credibility to the participants’ responses as it indicates a shared perception that is validated by third party rankings and professional assessments. This also creates a sense that the perceived lack of prestige noted by the participants may also be more valid than expected. The perceived lack of prestige is often noted in comparison to other state institutions that are perceived as prestigious. Jason commented that, “In the state overall it is usually Land Grant State University and Elite Public University that compete for prestige. I chose PMU for the paper engineering program, which they don’t really have at Elite Public University. PMU isn’t necessarily prestigious as a whole, but I would say the paper engineering program is high prestige, it has a solid national reputation.” This statement embodies the idea that while the institution as a whole may not be viewed as prestigious, there are programs that are perceived as meeting that standard.

Jim expressed similar feelings regarding the aviation and flight science program. Jim is a graduate of that program and currently works as a pilot. He stated that PMU’s program is “One of the best in the country for aviation. It has a great reputation. Really the biggest competitor is Private Aeronautical University, but PMU is, even if they are similar in reputation, PMU is much more affordable. It is a better value.” Again, a specific program has a certain amount of prestige, but that prestige is not connected to or transferred to the institution as a whole. Simon,

another engineering student, made similar observations as Jason regarding the prestige of PMU compared to other schools in the same state. However, unlike Jason, Simon currently works in his field outside of the Midwest. Simon noticed that, “Those who know the field, who know engineering, know the school, and it, the engineering program, has a good amount of respect.” Chip noted that in his experience others very clearly do not view PMU as prestigious. The only exception he noted is, “...in the very rare occasion that I meet someone who is in aviation or paper science.” Chip’s observation further supports that programmatic reputation and prestige far outweigh perceptions of institutional prestige in the eyes of alumni and others.

Those who attended graduate school and those who left the state or region reported more specifically on the lack of prestige than those who did not attend graduate school or remained in state. This perceived lack of prestige by others was made tangible when individuals were in an academic setting with others who attended more prestigious institutions for undergraduate study or lived outside the region. Ella lived and worked in the region for eight years after graduating. She graduated with an MFA from PMU and worked in her field the whole time. “Being a PMU graduate worked in my favor while I was living in [the city],” shares Ella. “I was already connected through my undergraduate work. There was a real sense of community – a hometown feel to it.” Despite the positive feelings and tangible benefits of attending PMU while living local, Ella still feels that she would not call PMU prestigious and that others would not as well. Like others, Ella brought up Elite Public University as “the prestigious one in the state.” This was further supported when she moved to another region where, “Nobody knows PMU.” After having lived in such close proximity to PMU and having a close relationship with her alma mater, the difference is “stunning”. Her experience at PMU has in some ways been reduced by leaving the region, “When people hear ‘master’s degree,’ that’s all that matters.”

Emily stated her experience in the Peace Corps as eye opening in more ways than one. “It is important to realize that the world is not where you went to school, which is a good thing, because PMU has no overseas presence.” She spoke at length about how the further away from PMU one is the less people know about it let alone where it is. Emily also discussed how in seeking employment alumni of other institutions would often show some favoritism toward fellow alumni, but that this is not the case with PMU alumni. She stated, “PMU grads do not value PMU grads. We could use a little more nepotism; it gives other schools an advantage we clearly don’t have. Outside of [the state] it is nothing but a big old state school.”

Emily’s observations based on others’ lack of reaction or institutional knowledge of her alma mater is not uncommon. Chip and Michelle both indicated a very distinct lack of respect for their undergraduate degree from PMU on the whole while they were pursuing graduate studies at more prestigious institutions (by their own and others’ reckoning). Chip noted that being a PMU alumnus “is not an icebreaker that having attended an elite institution is.” Chip followed his BA and MA work at PMU with a Ph.D. from Elite Public University. His degree from Elite Public University provides him with common ground to connect with faculty and peers that PMU does not. Michelle had a similar experience while pursuing her master’s degree.

During undergraduate studies Michelle had been selected as the recipient of a prestigious fellowship on the east coast in her field. She is one of the only people from the Midwest to have ever been admitted to the program and one of the only individuals to not come from an Ivy League school. Her experience in the fellowship was a preview of her grad school experience. “Nobody knows anything about PMU. My advisor was a former fellow so his name helped some, but I was still clearly in over my head. I felt underprepared academically and socially. I learned a lot, but it was really my own hard work that got me through it.” Michelle stated that

her status as an alumna of the fellowship has given her more regard than her status as an alumna of PMU ever has, in spite of being a presidential scholar and Phi Beta Kappa at PMU. “In grad school, the fact that I was a Fellow culturally made up for having gone to PMU. It at least allowed me to make connections that would have otherwise been unavailable to me had I relied solely on merit and having gone to PMU.” Participants who went to grad school somewhere other than PMU indicated that they felt a lack of academic preparation. Participants also felt that PMU’s perceived lack of prestige was a factor in how faculty and peers initially perceived the participants’ qualifications for study. This theme is discussed at length later in the paper in its own section.

When all of the interviews are taken into consideration, none of the participants felt that others considered PMU prestigious. Based on the experiences they provided and the reasons they gave it is clear most of them do not disagree with this perception. That being said, the participants were all able to share examples of a program that had a “good reputation” at PMU or were able to relate in some way that it was ok that PMU was not prestigious, especially when compared to Elite Public University. Based on participant responses it is clear that participants share some commonalities in how they make meaning of these perceptions and that the question of perceived prestige evoked responses that warrant further investigation. Alumni in this study all appear to have a similar picture of their alma mater’s lack of prestige as an institution, while at the same time recognizing those programs that have the highest reputation among outside agencies. How others perceive their alma mater holds meaning for them and influences how they relate to their alma mater. The difference between prestige and reputation as it emerged in the interviews is interesting. It poses the question as to whether prestige or reputation is more

important in the development of a salient alumni identity. This could be an area worth investigating in future studies.

Managing the Party School Reputation

Michelle told a story about a recent experience of hers that perhaps best frames the perception of PMU as a “party school”. Michelle has recently become part of a social group of mothers from her son’s class at school. Without exception all of these women have at least a bachelor’s degree and most have a graduate degree, Michelle included. During a ‘moms’ night out’, a humorous comment was made by one mom about her ability to out-drink another mom who had gone to a rival university. This school rivalry is between two elite state schools and is well known in the state. The jokes continued off and on until Michelle commented that “I have you both beat, I went to PMU for undergrad.” Everyone in the group agreed they couldn’t beat that, and Michelle was declared the unofficial victor. “The irony,” Michelle pointed out to the interviewer, “is that in undergrad, I rarely drank and never partied. These women did not know that. They awarded victory to me – solely on their perception of PMU’s reputation as a party school.” As Michele described this there was almost a sense of pride in her voice. When asked about this, Michelle indicated that she could do little to change that perception so she may as well use it to her advantage in the rare cases she can. She indicated that her affiliation with PMU is, “mostly benign . . . the party school rep in the region is not professionally helpful, but makes a social statement, if you will.”

The interesting thing about Michelle’s story is that, while it is the most specific example of the “party school” theme in the study group, it reflects a common theme expressed by nearly all of the participants to some degree. Simon and Emily both indicated that as members of the marching band they had an immediate introduction to the “party scene” if they choose to

participate. Both alluded to the parties more than discussed them in detail. Both also reflected that the marching band in particular has a reputation for partying, but were quick to point out that is a perception that exists at, and about, most state universities. Alex said a similar statement even though he was not a member of the marching band. “PMU has a perception as a party school, but every school can be if you want it too.” This statement is representative of the base sense that alumni are aware of this reputation, but downplay it for the most part. This was most apparent in the interview with Alan.

Alan works in campus ministry at PMU’s football rival. He stated that he often finds himself confronting and contradicting the party school image in his conversations with students. As a member of residence hall staff, campus ministry, and student government he indicated that the party scene was “not my speed.” His activities indicate that he was one of those students who actively worked against the party stereotype, something he continues in his work today. Interestingly enough, Marc’s experience resembles Alan’s. Marc was deeply involved in his fraternity and even was selected as the president of fraternity council. He indicated that PMU’s party school reputation combined with being in a fraternity has at points in his life had a negative impact. Like Alan, Marc works with students on a college campus. Marc works in student affairs administration, and indicated that early in his career, when his proximity to PMU was closer, he had to address the negative image frequently. He still finds himself redirecting students away from the party school reputation and instead focuses on sustained personal social connections with peers formed through fraternal organizations. Marc indicated that the stereotypes associated with Greek life follow outside the region, but that “outside the Midwest nobody is really aware of PMU.” He said that for this reason it all balances out to a rather

neutral reputation. The good and the bad are known in the Midwest, but once one leaves the region PMU becomes a non-entity, “unfortunately it becomes just another state university.”

In the most unique experience, Chip indicated that it was in fact a party that got out of hand that led him into his current academic path. When asked how his time at PMU has impacted his life today, he said that it was “ironic that a distinctly non-academic event inspired my research trajectory.” Chip briefly said that he was working at the 7-11 in the neighborhood near campus where riots broke out in the spring of 2002. Having to work in the midst of the chaos started him thinking about the relationship between the university and the surrounding community where many students live. Chip refined this interest during his MA work at PMU, where he attended based on faculty encouragement and support. He narrowed this interest further during his doctoral studies in urban planning and his current research as tenure track faculty examines the role of American universities in urban development. In the end, the reality of a riot influenced Chip’s academic path, while the perceptions of partying provided “street-cred” in social situations for the equally high achieving Michelle, and causes some ongoing grief for Marc and Alan who work with college students in a professional capacity.

Preparation

Preparation is a category that was not addressed in the research questions or expressly asked about during the interview, but emerged as a very prominent theme. While conducting the initial data analysis and coding the participant responses by specific research question there were a number of responses that fit into multiple categories. A majority of these responses, when examined together, shared a theme in common. That theme is related to how individuals perceive their college experience prepared them for their next phase of career, life, and academic experiences. Those who felt prepared for given situations based on their academic and social

experiences in college expressed this as a matter of expectations being met and cited a specific instance or activity that provided the required skill or knowledge. Those whom did not feel prepared for given situations based on their academic and social experiences in college expressed the lack of preparation as a matter of unknown expectations, requirements that they did not predict, and were not ever told to expect. These findings are supported by Pikes (1993, 1994) work relating perceived preparation to satisfaction.

The importance participants placed on preparation varied by experience. Interestingly, regardless of the level of emphasis participants assigned a fairly neutral value on the institution related to their overall satisfaction. Every single participant used some close variant of the phrases “good value” and “good enough” regarding the quality of education and the preparation provided by their alma mater. Every single participant gave at least one example of how their experience during undergrad either prepared them for, or failed to prepare them for, a life experience, career opportunity, or graduate education, since graduating.

Felt Prepared

As a general rule, those participants that worked in the same field as their degree area post-graduation, but did not attend graduate school indicated that they felt prepared for working in their field. Jim is a perfect example of this. Jim attended PMU for its top ranked aviation and flight science program with the goal of being a pilot. Jim stuck to his academic major, graduated, and found employment as a pilot. He still works in the field as a pilot. Jim stated that, “PMU aims to train pilots to professional corporate standards and is much more disciplined than a mom and pop flight school.” He expanded on the various paths one could take to get a pilot’s license noting that, “PMU not only gave me superior flight instruction, but allowed me to have the whole college-experience as well. This helped me find my niche in aviation as well,

which is very important in this field.” Jim was very complimentary throughout the interview. The tone in his voice matched his excitement when he talked about this experience and pride in attending PMU. While Jim represents only one graduate of this program, in speaking with him, it is easy to picture a graduating class with similar stories of success. Jim is not only confident in his professional ability, but sure that the education he received has helped his success.

Simon also felt that his academic program prepared him for his current career path. Simon actually goes so far as to say that he feels he got a “better, more well rounded, education in PMU’s engineering program than what my wife got at an engineering school.” He explained that outside of his own academic performance, PMU’s accredited program and good reputation in the field helped him land a job as a civilian engineer for the Navy right after graduation. Simon said that he had no problems performing his job and found that some other co-workers w\are also PMU alumni. At one point, Simon had to switch jobs to accommodate a move for his wife’s schooling. This job had a more significant electrical engineering component. Simon indicated that even though the work was difficult, because it was outside of his specialty area, he felt that the few classes in basic electrical engineering he had at PMU gave him an edge that allowed him to learn the job much more quickly than he expected. He eventually ended up back with the Navy where he currently works in the defense industry as a mechanical engineer. Simon chose mechanical engineering with the thought of “getting a good job”. He chose PMU because they offered more scholarship money than Land Grant State University and Elite Public University and had the same accreditation as the other two. “I could have gone elsewhere and gotten the academic pieces, but PMU was by far the best value out of my choices at the time.”

Ella is the exception to the category in that she went directly to graduate school at PMU after graduating with her BFA in music theatre performance. She stated that her MFA was “a

logical extension of her BFA.” Ella Considered elite private fine arts schools as well as a number of well respected private and public institutions in the Midwest. She ended up falling in love with the PMU campus, facilities, and opportunities when she came to audition for the music theatre program. “PMU has professional grade facilities, a well respected cohort of faculty and alumni and offered many more opportunities to perform than other schools. To top it all off, it was also very affordable in comparison to the others schools.” Like Jim and his decision to not go to a flight school, Ella wanted the complete college experience that an arts school wouldn’t provide her. Ella was cast in a production every semester of her undergraduate education. This experience was invaluable in helping her decide to move directly into her MFA in performing arts administration.

Having spent the better part of four years on the stage, she realized that it was not a lifestyle conducive to a family. As a new program at PMU, Ella had to find her own way in the MFA program at times, but felt the education and connection to practical skills development were well worth the challenges. After completing her MFA, she worked in arts administration doing marketing for a credit union and in 2007 she began working in worship administration for a church. “You have to be creative with your degree given the current state economy, but especially with the arts economy.” Ella moved away from the PMU area to another region in 2010 to support her husband’s education. She currently stays at home with their new baby, but still finds ways to remain engaged and use her education. “Having gone to college is very important. Even if I stay at home for the rest of my life it will have been worth it. I am still using my education in volunteering with my new church and engaging in local non-profit work. It makes a difference and opens doors for involvement that wouldn’t otherwise be available to me.”

All three of these individuals share a common thread in their stories of success due to perceived preparation. They all pursued work directly in the area for which they had been trained. Each individual enrolled in their academic program with specific end goals in the form of profession or employment in mind and feel they were able to meet these goals in part due to the opportunities their education at PMU provided. Despite their individual success, and feelings of preparedness, they all still indicated that PMU was the “good value” option. This is more remarkable in that the researcher never asked about value, yet it came up more than once in most of the interviews. Satisfaction is also higher among those who said they felt prepared by their undergraduate education. Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, (2007) indicate that “alumni who were treated more favorably as students, who were satisfied with their academic experiences, and who believe their college education contributed to their career success are more inclined to give as alumni than those with less favorable feelings and beliefs.” These empirical data are supported by the findings of this dissertation, which indicate that those who had experienced institutional support in their academic program and had close faculty relationships and faculty contact, had more positive social and academic experiences and expressed greater overall satisfaction than their peers who felt they had little institutional and faculty support and felt underprepared.

Not Prepared

Those participants that indicated they did not feel prepared by their undergraduate education tended to be those who pursued graduate education at a different institution or who worked in an allied field close to their degree, but not specifically within their field of study. Michelle went straight to graduate school at Flagship Public University in another region immediately after graduating from PMU. Michelle had always considered graduate school her next step after her BA in public history. Having come to PMU for their archeology program, she

found the public history program and connected with faculty there leading to a change in her focus. After being selected as a summer fellow in a prestigious residential materials culture program, and based on her honors thesis research she chose to pursue her master's degree in historic architecture and preservation policy. Her experience at the summer fellowship was challenging for her, both academically and socially.

Everybody else, every single person except me, came from an ivy league school or a super elite private liberal arts school. At first I was proud of having been selected along with these others. I felt my hard work and the social sacrifices I had made for academic success would finally bear fruit. I was wrong. I held my own, but through hard work and tenacity. I just did not have the social or academic pedigree and preparation that the others had. No one had told me that schmoozing and politics were such a big part of this world. I gave it everything I could, but I still felt like I was running a race where everyone else started a lap ahead of me and I had to catch up.

This was not the end for Michelle though. PMU continued to not measure up even after changing her academic approach to better reflect what she would need to be successful in graduate school.

When I returned to PMU, I worked even harder to get the most out of my education. I was selected as outstanding history graduate, inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, selected as a Presidential Scholar for my senior project and even mentioned in the presidential address at graduation, and I still felt underprepared for graduate school. It was apparent during my first week that I did not have adequate academic preparation. The only thing that saved me was the experience

of writing my honors thesis and completing my senior project, and the education I had received during my fellowship. My PMU degree was good enough to get me to the next step, but in the end, it was something I had to overcome.

Despite her best efforts and the best that the history program had to offer in the way of preparation and faculty support, Michelle still felt underprepared. She admits that part of this feeling is on her and recognizes that PMU can only be so much. “PMU is what it is. It gave all it could, but it just wasn’t enough for me.”

Chip also felt that his academic preparation was lacking. Like Michelle, he was a history major at PMU. Chip and Michelle both had the benefit of faculty mentorship and encouragement, but still were left feeling ill prepared once they left the institution. Chip decided to stay at PMU for his MA work in public history. He had also been an engaged undergraduate and continued his involvement into graduate school.

My experience at PMU was a real mixed bag. The research trajectory I am on to this day started at PMU. I had the good fortune to have faculty mentors who helped prepare me for graduate school and continued to guide me in my continued graduate studies at PMU. The attention certainly helped, especially when I needed recommendations for doctoral programs. I was admitted to [Elite Public University] where I eventually earned a master’s degree in urban planning and a Ph.D. in architectural history and theory. Though I greatly appreciated the PMU faculty support, when it came down to it Elite Public University provided a much better education. In comparing the two campuses PMU just felt that it had a lack of robustness, in the institution and in many of its students. So many people just

appear to be going through the motions. Being a graduate student at EPU was a very different experience.

Like Michelle, Chip found graduate school beyond PMU much more challenging. He thought he was well prepared, but did not realize his misconception until he began doctoral course work.

I was pretty well satisfied with my PMU education until I started doctoral classes.

Early in the semester gaps in my knowledge and my mediocre training became more evident. My satisfaction declined and I was frustrated by the need to play catch up in areas where my peers had an advantage due to better institutional preparation. After my experience starting out in my doctoral program, I was surprised when my PMU education actually helped me land a tenure track position. The hiring committee felt that my practical degrees were a complement to my stronger academic credentials. Other than that, my PMU association and degree haven't really helped or hurt me. PMU was *good enough* for what I needed to get by.

Again, the term good enough appears to describe one's PMU experience. Chip and Michelle both felt academically underprepared for their next steps after PMU. Both are high achievers who had a wealth of faculty support, but even that was not enough to overcome the lack of social and cultural capital at PMU. When these two participants talk about their lack of preparation, it is in part a gap in the academic programs at PMU, but it is also a lack of social and cultural connections that exist at elite, more prestigious institutions. By all reported indicators, both Chip and Michelle were academically successful students. Is their feeling of lack of preparedness a purely personal perception or is it more than that? The fact that both experiences are so similar speaks to something more than individual meaning making at work. These observations are

consistent with the perceptions of prestige reported earlier in this chapter. Alumni do not view PMU as prestigious and neither do others. This lack of prestige is even more tangible when academic preparation is considered.

Alex and Jason both went to work immediately after graduation however, neither specifically in their field. Alex majored in business administration and human relations management. He explains that he did not waste his time in school. He hit his classes fast and furious and checked them off the list. In doing this though, he neglected to get an internship while at PMU. “After graduating the job market was horrible. I never had an internship because no one ever told me it was that important, so I had very little experience and couldn’t get hired. I discovered that a BA is merely the ticket to get in the game. After a year of working manual labor jobs, I went to grad school at Regional Public University on the other side of the state.” Alex feels that he had a “decent education at PMU.” He discussed how he felt that a bachelor’s degree is important as documentation of a proven capacity to learn. He indicates that PMU didn’t prepare him for what he needed, but that he didn’t really prepare himself either. “I just feel that they should place greater emphasis on being clear about the career possibilities after school and what you really need to do to make that happen.” Emily’s experience in the college of business was very similar to Alex’s. Emily shares, “I learned very little of any use in my academic program at PMU. Everything I needed to know to be successful I learned in the Peace Corps after graduation and on the job I held after that.”

Jason majored in paper science, one of PMU’s premier academic programs. He was excited about the program and saw it as a good career option that would allow him to make decent money. He quickly found that he didn’t enjoy his program as much as he thought. He joined the student organization for the paper program, but “didn’t fit in real well.” As he

progressed the environmental engineering parts became of greater interest. He took as many of those courses as he could and even joined a student organization, but “that group was not very practical and felt way too granola.” Jason felt that the program had sufficient rigor, but that the scope was so narrow it didn’t allow for much flexibility. “The course work was difficult. It was nearly impossible to do everything that was requested of you in the time allotted. It forced me to learn how to manage my time and to take a loss when it made sense. Some things would just not get done and I had to learn to choose wisely and be ok with that. This lesson more than anything in all of the content is what I took with me into the workforce. Real work is all about prioritizing.” Up until this point Jason sounded like he felt that he had been adequately prepared for his career options, however that was not the case.

After being in the program for three years I discovered that if you were not going into paper making that the degree would have little value in allied areas. Even worse, I found out in my senior year that while the program was accredited the degree was not. This had a major impact on my ability to find work after graduation. It took me 8 years of getting experience in another area for it to finally pay off. I felt I had been prepared to work hard by the rigor of the program, but that I was not ready for the real world after graduation in spite of two internships. I own part of this, as my priorities changed after meeting my future wife from making money and moving for the good paper jobs, to having a family and remaining close to my relatives. I am proud of my degree and in the end it was a good deal-good value for what I got. I just wish that they had been clearer on the limitations of the program starting out, because I could have made some choices that would have made my experience more useful.

Again the joint responsibility for preparation is noted, but there are clearly some areas where the institution did not perform due diligence. Degree accreditation is important, as is being clear about the career options of a given degree. Post graduation, none of these individuals mentioned that they sought assistance from PMU career services or that assistance was offered. What is important to remember in this section is that it is not the “reality” of the level of preparation that matters as much as the perception that there was a lack. Individuals’ perceptions influence the behaviors they exhibit and the decisions on which actions they may take in a given situation. Burke and Stets (2009) go into a lot of detail explaining this process. In short, individuals determine whether actions and experiences verify or contradict existing perceptions and beliefs and then act in a way that reinforces the identity they are most comfortable with in that setting. Individuals are more likely to take actions that verify an existing identity thereby influencing the salience of that identity and subsequent behavior. Subjects who indicated that they are high achievers and felt underprepared may have felt that way because their need to feel highly prepared is a significant part of their salient identity. George Kuh has more to say in this area.

Kuh (2001) indicates that those with aspirations of being college faculty or who have a high level of interest in scholarly and academic work are often hardest to prepare in college. The academic expectations in faculty work and associated research fields are so high that few institutions are able to meet these individuals’ needs at the undergraduate level. Kuh explains that empirically “those aiming at an academic career differed in their peers in every college going cohort” (p 286). He further explains that no amount of preparation will likely ever be good enough for this small group, while explaining that this feeling is reinforced by likeminded faculty who verify this belief by providing unreasonable expectations. This can be seen in the responses of those participants above who felt underprepared by their education. All of these

participants had aspirations toward academic work or were in one of the high reputation, high expectation programs offered by PMU. As mentioned earlier, both the college of business and the paper science program are highly ranked at PMU. Thus, to some extent feelings of lack of preparation may have been verified in their student experience and reinforced by their post bachelorette interactions in a competitive job market or in a highly ranked graduate program.

In 2001, George Kuh made the following observation about the role of undergraduate education in the face of a pedagogical shift away from knowledge acquisition. “The task of higher education has never been more complex and challenging. Most colleges and universities are not organized to help their students develop these kinds of competencies. Indeed, no higher education system anywhere in the world is set up to do so” (p 289). What is important to remember about this observation, is that it was made about higher education as it existed when the participants of this study were undergraduate students. This comment is about them and their experience.

The early part of the 21st century was a technological and sociological turning point in American culture and particularly higher education. Technology was moving so fast that there is no way the schools could keep up. Students who graduated during this time were not necessarily prepared for the world of employment they were entering. Emily actually identified this concern during her interview. “PMU felt out of touch with what you need to do in a modern era. People of our generation were not prepared by our education at PMU to work in a knowledge economy.” This is a trend that has been identified in this study, as well as a 2010 study on young alumni ten years out. McDearmon (2010) indicates that the concern over career preparedness is very present in feedback from young alumni. His qualitative study found that themes around career services were prevalent among open ended responses to an alumni questionnaire.

McDearmon indicates that “career preparation is something young alumni feel strongly about and may affect their willingness to make financial contributions” (p 38). The Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) model indicates that financial contributions are significantly correlated with a salient alumni identity. Based on these two studies and the current study results, it appears likely that preparedness is the outcome of an identity verification process that may influence the salience of the alumni identity.

Neutral

While there are always those outliers who exist on either extreme of any spectrum, most individuals fall into a more balanced middle category (Alverman, Obrien, & Dillon, 1996). In fact that proved to be the case in this study as well. One third of the participants spoke of their preparation in far different terms than those who more clearly felt prepared or underprepared. Alan, Marc, and Ryan, told similar stories about their preparation. What makes this group most distinct from the other groups is that they seemed to take their education at greater face value. While the not prepared group felt they had not received what they needed and the prepared group felt fully prepared for what came next, the neutral group expressed satisfaction with preparation in terms of broad skills versus knowledge acquisition. These individuals most clearly expressed separation between degree attainment and personal success or difficulty after graduation. They also held lower expectations of what a degree should provide, expressed greater appreciation for transferable skills, made a significant major change while at PMU, and made decisions to work in a different field than their degree after graduation.

Ryan, as mentioned earlier, finished his education at PMU at the same time as he was going through a divorce. He shares that this life event led to his decision to move away and pursue other education and employment. Ryan said, “I was not doing well in the pre-med track.

So when I met with my advisor, she took a look at my aptitude scores and suggested switching to chemistry. This was a great idea and I was successful in the chemistry track. I worked in the field while I was finishing school and supporting a family. After my divorce I needed a change of scenery so I moved and looked for something completely new.” Ultimately, Ryan returned to school for a second bachelor’s degree in 3-D art. While he does not work as a chemist he is still using his chemistry degree as a glaze formulator in a ceramics studio.

When I looked at the chemistry field initially after moving, I saw that everything has a significant onsite training piece. It was then I began to realize, that while knowledge attainment was important it was applied in broad strokes and didn’t really match the job market. My next revelation was in recognizing that a college education is more about learning about a field of study and how to learn in that field than it is about getting a job. You need to keep learning.

Ryan’s observations are at the heart of what faculty mean when they refer to lifelong learning. Ryan had expectations of gaining new knowledge, but a realistic outlook on the job market and what a degree really meant in that environment. He takes responsibility for his own learning and feels that, “PMU provided a good, but average education. Better in some cases - worse in others. I got what I expected and exactly what I paid for.” While many alumni relations professionals would see this as a possibly negative, it may be a positive attitude. How often do people complain when they get exactly what they expected?

Similar themes around lifelong learning, taking responsibility for one’s own education and transferable skills emerged in Marc’s story as well. Marc tracked into the engineering program based on his interests in high school. As part of the solar bicycle team at his high school he chose PMU in part because of a desire to be involved with PMU’s solar vehicle team.

Once he got to PMU though he struggled, not academically, but socially in his academic program.

I did not like the people in engineering. They were just not my type of people. I liked the work, hated the people. There was very little social interaction, and even when there was it was forced. Shut up and do the job was the rule for interaction. My senior year I realized I could not work in this field so I spoke to my advisors and was able to switch to a student planned curriculum that was close to a communication degree. I was very involved in my fraternity and president of the Latino student organization and wanted to keep working in those areas. My student leadership experiences lead me to pursue a master's degree in higher education student affairs at another Midwestern University in the state.

Marc said that he did not exactly get what he expected out of his undergraduate education. However, he accepts responsibility for that due to his late stage major switch. "I wish I would have studied something else at PMU, but that isn't their fault. Maybe I needed that experience to figure out what I really wanted to do." Marc currently works as a college administrator and is still actively engaged in his fraternity as an alumnus.

Like Marc, Alan came to PMU for an engineering program. After failing calculus two times and not being able to get admitted into the aerospace engineering program, he switched gears completely and double majored in communication public relations and journalism. Alan found this major was much more meaningful, especially when considered in conjunction with his involvement in student government and residence life staff. Much like Ryan, it was a life event that moved Alan in an unexpected direction.

Immediately following graduation I went on a mission trip with His House to Panama City Beach, Florida. While on this trip I met my wife and made the decision to follow a calling to mission work. I currently use my degree in my work as a campus minister, just not in the sense training was geared toward. I do a lot of writing and advertising and promotion of services, but I really use what I learned on residence life staff in my ministerial work.

Alan was one of few people who expressed that he did not find much value in the general education curriculum. He also expressed some frustrations with the system as a whole.

My life took such a turn right after graduation it is hard to express how I really feel about PMU. I don't actively think about my time at PMU. I was and still am very frustrated with navigating the university system and random education requirements in general. I never saw much value in them so expected to get little out of the experience. What I remember about my college experience is the social stuff. I don't remember most of my professors. I guess when I think about it, if you fit easily into the PMU mold you would graduate. Those who don't, like my freshman roommate, fail out.

Again the theme of integration comes up. Alan felt he integrated well into the system socially, but his own comments and choices following graduation indicate a low level of academic integration. Alan is a case where academic success after switching majors coupled with high levels of social integration lead to persistence. He takes credit for his own learning and decisions, while still stating his concerns with the education he received. Ultimately, he recognizes that PMU was only able to give him so much.

Good Enough

One final trend within this theme transcends all of the varying levels of participation and is perhaps the most surprising theme to emerge from this study. The exact phrases “good enough” and “good value” were used to describe a PMU education in every single interview. To be certain that the interviewer did not influence this specific wording, he reviewed audio recordings when available, interview notes, and interview questions. There were no indications that the interviewer influenced this response pattern. These phrases are consistent with an overall tone of neutrality in many of the interviews. The pros and cons appear to balance so well in the ways in which participants make meaning of their experience that they negate many of the strongest reactions. McAdams (2001) makes note of this phenomenon in his life stories approach to personality psychology. McAdams also indicates that in the construction of a personal life story “We choose the events that we consider most important for defining who we are and providing our lives with some semblance of unity and purpose” (p 110). Ariel makes a similar observation about her own memories of her college experience. “It is kind of like childbirth, after you are removed from having gone through it for a while, you only remember the positive outcomes. You remember the joy of your child way more than the pain of labor.” Participants in this study have each constructed their own story as a way of making meaning of their educational experience, specifically its role in preparing them for what comes next. While the stories are different the theme across them all is that they chose PMU because it was an affordable means of getting them where they wanted to be and in the end it met that expectation.

Summary

The primary focus of this chapter was on the characteristics of the participants and the presentation of the analysis of the data they provided through individual interviews. After

conducting an initial analysis of the responses with consideration given to the theoretical frame, another analysis was conducted to look for emergent themes that fell outside of those categories. Themes were examined to determine if they addressed one of the study questions. If they did they were categorized as such. If a theme did not fit a research question, or was prevalent enough to stand on its own, it was coded as equivalent to the research question. One major theme emerged from the data that was prominent enough to warrant its own section. This was the theme of perceived preparation.

At first perceived preparation appeared to be a theme within the question of understanding participation. However, the response data for this theme involved experiences beyond the scope of the time they were at the institution, making this larger than participation and overlapping how people described their experience as alumni. In the end the dual coding did not suffice as closer examination allowed that the theme was in fact about perceived preparation based on social interactions and perceptions of others beliefs. As the theme overlapped all three research questions, it was given its own section with a supporting theme of good enough. “Good enough” emerged from the microanalysis of the responses related to perceived preparation.

Chapter 4 allows the data, and the participants to speak for themselves for the most part. The data have been analyzed, coded, and organized in a way to better understand the information that they contain and their significance. While the analysis has revealed the shape of the findings they have not yet been presented. Chapter 5 will provide a summary of the study as a whole, a summary of findings, conclusions and discussion, limitations that emerged, and recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter 5 provides a brief synopsis of the study as a means of concisely framing the findings. While the data analysis provided the raw ingredients and what they mean, the findings frame the analysis in terms of the larger problem of understanding the salience of alumni identity. After adequate framing of the findings, the researcher will make some suggestions and implications for practice and future research regarding these findings.

Summary of Study

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this study has been to provide better understanding of early alumni role identity. Given that identity emerges through a process of interpreting and understanding ones actions in a given situation (Burke and Stets, 2009), this study used a qualitative methodology to gain insight into the ways in which early alumni understand their undergraduate experience. The previous chapters have all served to establish the topic within the existing literature and the world at large. They also provided the guiding conceptual framework, methodology and results.

Public universities have become more dependent upon outside resources due to reduced state and federal funds and market losses resulting in up to 40 percent decreases in endowment value (Johnstone, 2011). In hopes of an answer, many have made attempts to reinforce their endowments by increasing contributions from alumni. The challenge for the institution then becomes one of making that happen. Keeping students involved and engaged after they graduate and become alumni is no simple task. In fact, as Mael and Ashforth (1992, p.106) state,

“surprisingly little is known about the factors which affect alumni attachment and involvement.” Alumni identity is one of those factors about which “little is known.”

While many existing alumni studies seek to understand why alumni donate to their alma mater (Tsao and Coll, 2005; Weerts and Ronca, 2007, Taylor and Martin 1995), few seek to understand the role of alumni identity in general or in giving. As noted in the literature review in Chapter 2, most studies take a variety of quantitative approaches to identify variables that are likely to predict donations. One thing many of these studies have in common is the suggestion that while certain factors may exhibit higher levels of correlation than others, the issue is still far too complex to guarantee success. A number of studies in the past five years have begun to attempt to understand these complexities better (Simone, 2009; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao and Coll, 2005; Von Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010; Weerts and Ronca, 2007). While these works examine more than one variable in their search to identify alumni donor patterns, potential donors and to predict who will make donations, they still utilize empirical data analysis to do so, and do not consider identity a factor. This dissertation fills a gap in the literature by conducting qualitative research that focuses explicitly on alumni identity. The relationships and systems of interaction that coalesce to form alumni identity must be better understood before further studies in this area can occur with confidence. The findings of this study support the limited literature in alumni identity and add data for further consideration.

Conceptual Frame

Arnett, German and Hunt’s (2003) work places alumni identity at the center of the discourse as its central theoretical frame. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are four factors that contribute to a salient alumni identity; perceived prestige, participation, reciprocity, and satisfaction. The more salient the alumnus identity the more likely it is that the individual will

donate to their alma mater. Very few alumni donor models consider identity as the key mediating construct. The complexity of identity theory, combined with the desire to express a causal relationship between given factors, is likely to blame for this omission from the literature. Assuming that the alumni identity is a social role construct that is dependent on making meaning of social perceptions and interactions, Arnett et al. devised a model using relationship marketing theory to demonstrate a correlation between identity and donation and promotion. The 2003 study laid the empirical foundations on which this dissertation is based and allowed for deeper exploration of early alumni identity to occur.

Methods and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to add depth of understanding to the small body of research that exists around the identity of college alumni by using personal interviews to explore how early alumni understand their college experience in ways that may influence their identity as an alum. A group of twelve alumni of Public Midwestern University who graduated with their bachelor's degree in either 2001 or 2002 served as the target population. As this study utilized a small sample from a narrowly identified cohort, a case study approach was utilized to achieve greater depth in the data. A case study also allowed the researcher to identify trends across individual responses from within a single institution. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the ways individuals continue to make meaning of their undergraduate education ten years after graduation. Given the central role that meaning making plays in the development of a salient identity (Burke and Stets, 2009) any patterns and themes that emerged during the study will provide clearer direction for future empirical studies on alumni identity.

Revisiting the Research Questions

Before discussing the findings it is important to revisit the research questions guiding this study.

1. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater make meaning of their undergraduate experience?
2. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe their experience as alumni?
3. How do alumni who graduated between ten and eleven years ago from the same alma mater describe others' perceptions of their alma mater?

Research Findings

Introduction

The findings in this study not only support those of Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003), but also provide new areas for consideration as variables that may influence alumni identity. The findings met the study goals of better understanding those factors that contribute to early alumni identity and exceeded expectations in providing greater insight into the process by which alumni understand their undergraduate education. In Chapter 4, the study data and corresponding analysis were presented organized by research question. The summary of findings that follows is organized according to prominence of supporting data for the theme. Those findings which have greatest support in the interview data are highlighted in this section.

Even though the situations varied across the participants, it appears that the way they describe their life as an alumnus in terms of their college experience and the ways others respond to their alma mater is fairly consistent. The key findings of this study are as follows: 1) PMU

alumni describe their experience as alumni primarily in terms of informal peer-social groups formed during their undergraduate studies (i.e. close friends); 2) Alumni perceptions of academic and work preparation appear to play an important role in their satisfaction and institutional commitment; 3) Others' perceptions of PMU appear to influence alumni perceptions of institutional quality and value.

Summary of Findings

Informal Social Connections

One of the key findings of the study is that PMU alumni tended to describe their experience as alumni in terms of their informal social peer groups. When asked about formal and informal engagement with alumni and alumni activities, most participants stated that they only remained connected to other alumni who were close friends. When Ariel states, "My closest friends are those I met in college" she is making an observation that many participants shared. 75% of the participants stated that their closest friends are those that attended PMU with them. Conversely, only one-third indicated any formal engagement with their alma mater. Half of these were related to fraternity involvement and the other two individuals briefly held formal roles as alumni. The informal social contact dominated the stories that participants provided about their ongoing engagement with their alma mater. In this sense they are not so much relating to other alumni as they are sharing how they interact with their close friends, whom they happened to meet at PMU. This level of social integration even outweighed reports of academic integration. Overall, participants did not report engaging in major or academic area alumni groups or social alumni functions related to their area of study. In fact many, such as Marc and Jason, reported that they did not fit into their respective academic peer groups and found connections through other social groups that kept them engaged.

This dissertation suggests that social integration with a peer group may play a larger role in alumni identity than previously thought. Other recent alumni studies have come to similar conclusions. Burt's (2001) study on attachment and decay in alumni finds that the more a student exhibits embedded relationships, be they academic or social, the slower the decay rate of the relationship. This trend is apparent in this study based on participant comments reported in Chapter 4.

Perceived Preparation

Alumni perceptions of academic and work preparation appear to play an important role in the meaning making process. Participant interviews revealed that many alumni understand their college experience in terms of how well it prepared them for life after college. Pike (1993,1994) touches on this area a bit in two studies that examine the relationship between satisfaction and work experience and satisfaction with perceived learning, but they do not directly apply where this study is concerned. There appears to be some areas where there may be correlations in the type of post-baccalaureate experience and feelings of preparedness. Although the nature of this dissertation does not allow for empirical confirmation of that finding, the qualitative data are convincing and future studies will want to consider further examination of these relationships.

Chapter 4 provided some details of Chip and Michelle's experiences at prestigious graduate programs after their education at PMU. In their respective narratives the perceptions of other about their level of preparation influenced, and often reinforced, their self-perceptions in this area. Even though preparation emerged as a unique theme in this study, it is in fact also closely related to perceived prestige. This assertion is supported on the other end of the spectrum as well where Jim shares that being a PMU graduate is viewed in high regard in his career as a pilot. Simon told a similar story as well, where institutional reputation reinforced a

positive feeling of preparedness. The observed patterns are as follows: a) Those who were in highly respected programs and followed the traditional path from education to work indicated that they felt well prepared by their education at PMU; b) Alumni at PMU who went on to pursue graduate school beyond PMU felt that PMU did not provide adequate preparation; and c) Alumni at PMU who worked outside their degree area after graduating from PMU felt that PMU did not provide adequate career preparation.

Those trends were identified in participant responses to questions regarding a) how they felt about being an alumnus of PMU; b) how their satisfaction changed over time; and c) questions related to prestige and impact on life today. Participants were never asked if they felt that PMU prepared them for life after college or any variation on that theme. The closest question to that focuses on how their time at PMU has impacted their life today. However, that particular question yielded more data to support the informal peer group findings than any other area. The interview question that most directly evoked discussion of this topic was regarding satisfaction. Responses related specifically to perceptions of preparation emerged across other questions, but appear to be directly related to satisfaction. This observation will be discussed in more detail in the section on further research.

Good Value

Alumni of PMU in this sample consistently use the same two phrases to describe their undergraduate education, “good enough” and “good value”. These two phrases were repeated in every interview by every participant at some point. Often they were used repeatedly and in the context of their level of satisfaction with their education over the past ten years. Alumni at PMU have appeared to internalize their personal experience with, and others’ perceptions of, their alma mater. The implied consensus among participants is that PMU is a party school with no

prestige, which has four distinct programs with high reputational value and many others that will do the job at a fair price. The limited sample size and the make-up of the sample may play a role in this conclusion, which will benefit from a more empirical analysis. When Jason responds to a question about how he feels about being an alumnus of PMU with “It was a good deal – a good value at the time,” he is not being negative, but sharing that the return on investment is a big influence on his feelings towards his alma mater. In fact, when most participants came to a point in the interview where they made their own “good enough” or “good value” statement, they immediately followed it up with a qualifying statement.

After sharing that his overall satisfaction with PMU was “pretty good. I received a good, but average, education,” Ryan qualifies the statement in the next breath. “After going to another, less expensive, school for my art degree I realized that PMU was actually better than I had perceived it to be. I felt I got what I paid for.” Every time the researcher had this conversation the reactions were similar. Ella had stated that PMU was a much better value than the private performing arts schools, but she also said that once she left the only time she gets a phone call is when PMU wants money. “I still love PMU, but one area I am disappointed in is that all I get for eleven years of dedication are requests for money.” In this case Ella has expressed a positive emotional commitment to her alma mater, but is still bothered by a perceived lack of reciprocity where care is concerned. The feeling of frustration is present across all interviews, yet consistently participants share responsibility with PMU for this. When Alex states, “I never really fully connected to PMU, but that is more about my focus and interests,” he is saying institutional commitment will only go so far if the individual isn’t willing to engage and fully commit.

Conclusions and Discussion

In the end, participants in the study stated that they enjoyed their college experience at PMU, but have not really maintained close ties, if any, with the institution since they graduated. In their own terms, they all feel that they have achieved a relative amount of social and professional success. They all indicated that they have realized some of the goals that they had in mind when they set off for college. PMU did not give them everything they felt they needed, but in the end it has turned out “good enough”. Ariel comments, “I enjoyed my time there and think of it fondly, but you can’t go back. It is a once in a life time experience.” That one comment describes college in a nutshell. Each of these twelve individuals went to the same university, during the same timeframe, and had completely unique personal experiences. Within those experiences though, there are common threads that connect them together. Those threads are anchored in friends, preparedness, value of education and identity groups such as band and fraternities. The question remains though, as to how these threads relate to their alumni identity. While there is not an expectation that individual alumnus will share a common alumni identity, there is a belief that alumni from the same alma mater will have enough of a shared sense of place (Putnam, 2001) to constitute a formal group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Although, this case study is by itself too small to make any generalizations to all alumni, or even all alumni at PMU, it does provide new ideas for consideration in future studies and practice.

The findings as they are presented here are distinct from those of the conceptual frame that inspired the study, yet support that frame all the same. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) found that participation and prestige both demonstrate a statistically significant relationship to a salient alumni identity. Thus if an alumnus were to indicate that they were highly involved at a prestigious institution, they should also appear to demonstrate a high level of identity salience

where their role identity as an alumnus is concerned. What happens when a “prestigious” institution is not perceived as such? Or, what if that institution has a good reputation, but is not prestigious? PMU has many prestigious distinctions as indicated in the institutional background, yet alumni do not perceive it as such. The challenge of prestige is that it is not only about quality of education, but perceptions of that education in a comparative sense that is greater than quality and preparation. In the same way, participation is much more complex than the type, number, frequency, or depth of activities in which one engaged during undergraduate studies. Arnett et al. provide empirical evidence for a relationship, however once the factors are unpacked there is much more to consider.

This dissertation took apart three key factors as indicated by Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) participation, prestige, and satisfaction. After analyzing qualitative data from the participants, the themes were less present in the ways expected. Arnett et al. indicate that satisfaction has a positive relationship, but is not significant. The current study found that conversations rooted in satisfaction during the interview were a path to rich data on other areas through clear examples provided by participants. Overall level of satisfaction alone is not interesting. The ways that individuals explain how they understand ten years of experience as they seek to explain their overall satisfaction is very interesting. The hemming and hawing that result in a declaration of “good value” and “good enough” say much more about an institution and its alumni than a likert scale rating can. Satisfaction is more a reflection of the meaning making process that occurs in other areas. Students quit activities they are not happy with or change majors, so satisfaction is more a process of cognitive reflection back at what they wished they had done, or done differently. Taking this into consideration, everyone should have a high

degree of satisfaction due to the level of personal control one has on their path. However this is seldom the case.

The struggle to reconcile disparate feelings about their alma mater was tangible in the tone and carefully chosen words. These vocal cues (and visual when appropriate) are likely to indicate residual cognitive dissonance as a result of having post college experiences that do not quite match original expectations. Dissonance is a natural part of the identity verification process (Burke and Stets, 2009). The interview questions were designed to build on participants' recollections and bring them from their memories of the past into their feelings in the present. This design led each participant to really rethink their feelings toward, thoughts about, and overall desire to be affiliated with, their alma mater. In some cases it put people on the defensive a bit. They felt they had to justify or apologize for the school. By framing the questions in the manner and order as they were, participants went through the identity verification process that determines the salience of an identity (Burke and Stets, 2009) again as they processed with the researcher. Some participants were more aware of this than others. Those that exhibited higher tendencies toward a salient identity through their responses were more likely to claim an identity as an alumnus as when asked how they felt about being affiliated with their alma mater. These same participants also stated that they were "proud" or "happy to be associated with" their alma mater. Those who appeared to have a less salient identity used phrases such as "not embarrassed" or "ok I guess" when asked the same question. Others, like Alan, indicated it is a non-variable for the most part. "My life took such a turn so soon after graduation that I don't actively think about my time at PMU that often."

The challenge for most participants is that the only expectation of alumni they are aware of is, as Michelle puts it, "to continue to give them money after having given them thousands of

dollars already. I am still paying ten years later and they want more.” The reluctance of those who are in loan repayment to donate to their alma mater is well documented (Smith, 2012). Emily states it most clearly when she says, “The more I think about it the more I feel that I really don’t know what it means to be an alumni. No one ever taught me what I am supposed to do. I just graduate and they take credit if I’m successful and write me off if I’m not.” Ella expressed similar feelings regarding institutional credit. “They love to claim our success.” As noted earlier, there is a sense that personal success is viewed as a result of having attended PMU, more than portrayed as successful people choose PMU. A subtle difference, but important when talking about credit for excellence.

Undergraduate activities and defining moment were parallel, in all cases. Those who were on residence life staff cited that as their defining moment. Those in fraternities cited their involvement similarly, as did those who exhibited strong academic focus and high residence hall social involvement. Participants spoke far less about their undergraduate activities than expected. This is contrary to the Arnett et al. findings where participation appeared as the most significant factor. Friend groups formed through these activities were discussed at length though.

The distinct lack of overall participation in formal alumni events and socials is interesting to note. It may be a result of the small sample size, but it could also indicate a larger institutional trend. Given other external factors, such as the recent elimination of dues paying alumni association and a new focus on developing a medical school, it is likely that lack of formal engagement may be a broader concern at PMU. Only one of the participants was aware of the change in the alumni association, whereas all of them were aware of the new medical school. Despite these factors, all participants focused on their alumni friend groups as the extent of their

engagement with other alumni. How alumni describe their experience as alumni and make meaning of their experience is important in understanding the extent to which these experiences weigh in on their identity. Based on interview responses a bulk of the relationship was determined by their social networks in college. This is consistent with findings by Burt (2001) that stress the importance of integrated friend groups in creating sustained relationships and institutional affiliation past graduation. The ways in which individuals make meaning of their alumni experience are complicated but an important part of the overall process of verifying a salient identity.

The importance of others' perceptions appears to weigh heavily on the mind of participants, especially as it relates to feeling prepared. An emergent category that came in part from the satisfaction questions suggests that the two may be closely linked. Prepared and not prepared seem to fall along lines of those who were in programs that tracked into a specific work area, those that followed the traditional track, and those who are academic outliers. Kuh (2001) suggests that the higher the demands of the student the less likely they will be satisfied with their academic experience. This fits the study findings. Those who expressed they felt least prepared by their PMU education, had the highest level of degree attainment at a prestigious institution post-baccalaureate.

The value of this study lies ultimately in its identification of perceived preparation, informal peer groups, and lack of prestige as factors that should be considered in measures of alumni identity and should be examined in future alumni studies. Knowing that these are the trends that come up in conversations with alumni is important as it reinforces the idea that they matter. If they matter enough for alumni to talk about in an interview, they should matter enough to consider in future research.

Discussion of Limitations

Before moving into recommendations for practice and future research it is important to revisit the limitations presented in Chapter 1. The findings presented in this study are based upon open-ended interviews with twelve college graduates who were identified as Public Midwestern University alumni through social networking with primary contacts of the researcher. Facebook and LinkedIn were the sites used to identify and provide contact with potential participants. The use of social media to identify participants provides some limitations to the study and its findings. First, it limits participation to only those with regular internet access. Second, the primary contact sites are membership based. While there are no dues required for baseline membership, one must still be a member to communicate using that system. Third, participant selection is limited by the size and scope of the researcher's primary and extended networks.

Response rate was surprisingly a significant limitation to the study. As an alumnus of PMU the researcher has access to PMU alumni groups in both LinkedIn and Facebook. His total direct network between the two sites is over 11,000 people. When extended networks beyond first person connections and shared groups are considered, the number increases exponentially to nearly 1.5 million. The researcher posted a request for participation in each of three areas, once a month over a three month period. The three areas were his Facebook wall (with alumni tagged), his LinkedIn page and the PMU Alumni LinkedIn group. These posts led to five direct responses from individuals who were eligible for participation. The researcher sent twenty direct messages to individuals in his alumni network asking them to pass along a request for participation message to others. Two participants came from a non-PMU alumni connection who referred the individuals to the study. The remaining five participants were all referrals from

individuals who had already participated in the study. Despite significant social and alumni connections, the researcher still struggled with participation rates. Participation bias was an initial concern for the researcher, however the results indicate that is not a significant concern.

No efforts were made to control for race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, marital status, or any other factors other than alumni status and time of graduation. The sampling method did not allow for control of these factors. The focus of the study is on the alumnus and the ways they make meaning of their experience. Not isolating or placing emphasis on the above factors allows room for themes or trends to emerge in the context of the interview without influencing the study in that direction. As always, research bias can play a role in the study. As an alumnus of the school being studied, the primary researcher is not without personal bias. While the familiarity with the institution can provide bias, it also allows for a deeper rapport with subjects during the interview and an increased ability to understand answers and probe for more information in meaningful ways. In nearly every interview the researcher's institutional knowledge allowed for more open dialog and more comprehensive follow-up questions.

Several limitations emerged during the study. The first one was in the conceptual frame used for analysis. The nature of the data and the overall findings support the findings in Arnett, German, and Hunt's (2003) study. However, using the conceptual frame to generate the interview questions and in coding the responses may have limited the response data. Given the nature of the interview results a life stories approach (McAdams, 2001) may provide greater overall depth and allow for more insight into the meaning making process as it occurs in identity development. While the current study methodology is sound, the limitations within the frame should be taken into consideration in future studies. Secondly, the lack of any significant outliers in participant responses leads one to consider that the sample may not have been large

enough or robust enough to capture the full spectrum of alumni responses. As stated earlier the limitations of sample size have been noted and taken into consideration, however perhaps the impact of a small sample size was greater than anticipated.

Another consideration is that the sample and the means used to identify candidates may have led to an overly homogenous attitudinal group (Merriam, 1998). While the responses were not overwhelmingly negative they certainly did not show PMU's best side either. The extreme neutrality of overall comments seems to indicate an element of dissident enlistment tempered by the researchers own alumni status. What this means is that those with some concerns in a specific area regarding their PMU experience may have been more likely to respond to the request to participate in the study. Given that the initial respondents gave referrals for other participants, it is also likely that they referred the researcher to others who were like minded. Thus the purposeful snowball sample produced a more homogenous group than desired.

The implications of this particular limitation are such that, in recognizing it, there is value. Knowing that the sampling method may have had this effect, PMU can look to these findings as possibly being the worst case scenario, or as a representation of an exploration of the true middle. In both cases PMU may not see these results as necessarily negative. Overall the participants got what they were looking for from PMU and in that regard, PMU can claim success. After all, PMU's primary goal is to educate, not create alumni. Which brings to light one last limitation to consider; there are challenges inherent to studying alumni in general. When studying alumni, there is a heavy reliance on memory which impacts results (McAdams, 2001). It is also limiting to study engagement in a group that is reluctant to engage. If alumni are not engaging their alma mater why would they engage a researcher? Another challenge in alumni research is access. Once students graduate and become alumni, there is more limited access and

a broader range of factors to consider in assessment. As noted earlier in the dissertation, the complexity of many of the factors contributing to alumni identity, alumni donation, and just alumni in general make this subject inherently challenging to study.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study indicate that the informal social relationships students form during their undergraduate education remain their primary interaction with other alumni once they graduate. This suggests that alumni relations staff need to work more closely with student affairs professionals to establish those connections as valid alumni engagement. How can professionals encourage those informal groups to become slightly more formal so that they form alumni clubs, or work together to provide a scholarship? Student affairs professionals need to be aware that the work they do with students in the present is instrumental in fostering the relationships that will remain influential once they graduate. A salient institutional identity will more easily transition into a salient alumni identity if there are peer groups to maintain the connection through transition (Burt, 2001; Mael and Ashforth, 1992).

Those participants in the study who felt that PMU did not provide adequate preparation for career or graduate study were quicker to invoke the “good enough” phrase early in the interview. These individuals also indicated less connection to the institution compared to others, stated clearly they do not give to their alma mater, and have drifted away from their informal peer networks with the exception of one or two people. Academic affairs professionals play a vital role in building academic community that students can connect to. Jim’s feeling of connectivity to his program was in part due to the community that existed between students and instructors. Ella expressed similar feelings when she commented “The faculty in my program was just amazing. They encouraged and challenged and pushed you to do your best.” She also

commented that the theatre department had a culture and community all its own that created ties she maintains to this day.

This study found that it didn't necessarily matter whether peer relationships began in formal or informal contexts, but that they formed in the first place and that there is a common thread to connect to beyond their PMU student status. Jim and Marc both cited their involvement in fraternal organizations as their primary connection to campus, while Simon and Emily both cited their band experience as having had a similar impact. Chip and Michelle each found a home in the History department at PMU, even though they later felt a lack of academic preparation. In all cases, the institution played a role in facilitating the relationships by providing the physical and social space for them to occur.

As indicated in Chapters 3 and 4, most participants went to school because they felt they had to. It was the next logical step in their life. How invested in the institution are students who pick a college because it is "good enough" and "a good value"? This is one question that this dissertation cannot answer fully. The findings suggest that neutral feelings about alma mater as expressed by the participants indicate a less salient alumni identity. However, as indicated in the limitations section, there are sampling challenges around dissident enlistment that may be influencing the results. Only further research in this area will be able to show if there is a correlation between salience of alumni identity and perception of alma mater. As noted in the limitations section of this chapter, the data showed a lack of significant outliers in this study. This in itself provides an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the attitudes, feelings, and identity of those who exist in the neutral. The participants of this study will likely not weigh in on alumni surveys. They will likely not feel extreme enough about any issue to send an email or make a phone call to someone at PMU. They are likely to slip through the cracks. The value of

this dissertation is that it opens the door to understanding a segment of the early alumni group that has been difficult to identify and reach up until now. Better understanding of alumni identity and those factors that contribute to its development will allow for more targeted approaches to engage the neutral segment of the alumni population. Further research that can better understand the “good enough” group can greatly influence future practice in alumni work.

Enhancing Development

As with most alumni studies, the findings of this dissertation have some implications for development. The frequency of restricted donations suggests that those who give feel a connection to the institution, but especially that specific aspect of the institution. This belief is present in some level across all of the donation literature (Croson, 2007; Holmes, 2009). As mentioned earlier, most studies work backwards from their donors to develop a profile based on shared factors. They then seek to provide empirical evidence to support a certain level of correlation or causation. What all of these studies skip over are the relationship piece and the alumni identity.

This dissertation goes deeper than most alumni studies with regard to seeking understanding of how experience shapes alumni identity based on how alumni interpret that experience. Alumni at PMU stated that they were involved in a variety of activities that connected them to the institution during their time there. As mentioned in Chapter 4, those who were members of a fraternity were the most engaged post-graduation. The depth of the personal experience and its lasting impact appear to be an influence of the individuals’ alumnus identity. What is the practical value of this finding? First, if institutions can track student involvement more thoroughly while they are still attending they will have a better idea of those areas that are meaningful to the individual. Thus an individual who worked in the cafeteria may be asked to

support renovations of the food service areas. The former student body president would be invited back to speak at commencement or asked to donate to campus programs. Library Science majors will receive information about the library and an institutions collection development. The list goes on. Good record keeping and early relationship building will allow institutions to better target alumni for fundraising efforts in the areas they are most likely to support.

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation's greatest value lies in its potential to influence researchers and practitioners alike to rethink the way they study and think about alumni. As noted earlier, the predominant approach to alumni studies have relied upon survey data designed to identify donors. While data from this approach has value, it is rooted in a specific way of thinking about alumni. Very few studies challenge the existing base assumptions on which most alumni research is constructed. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) present an alternative way of thinking about alumni framed in relationship marketing. However, even this approach makes assumptions about alumni such as assuming the primary value or end measure should relate to donation or promotion, and assuming that participation, prestige, reciprocity, and satisfaction are relevant factors. It is not a matter of placing a value judgment on the standard assumptions; it is a matter of asking whether anything has been overlooked. This dissertation sought to better understand early alumni identity in the context of these existing factors. The use of qualitative methodology allowed for deeper analysis of the assumed factors. The identified themes provide a starting point for further research to reexamine the previously held assumptions. According to

the findings of this study it is likely that many will hold true, however consideration must be given to the possibility that they may not hold up to further empirical scrutiny.

The most significant implication for future research as a result of the findings of this study would be an empirical test of the qualitative findings. It is suggested that a future study would serve to test the Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) model assumptions along with the findings of this study. Closer analysis of the relationship between perceived preparedness and alumni identity would be of interest as would further exploration of the concept of “good enough”. Many studies examine alumni that contribute and several examine individuals who do not give, however none focus on the idea of the impact of a neutral institutional reaction to alma mater as an influence on alumni identity. Ella stated that she did everything she was supposed to as a student and an alumna and she “has been asked for money, but not my opinion”. As this dissertation demonstrates, institutions can be successful in keeping a student through graduation, but still lose them as alumni.

In practice, the more one invokes an identity or organization they identify with, the more likely it is that their identity related to that organization will exhibit greater salience (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The willingness to talk about an identity is an indicator that the given identity is more likely to be more salient (Burke and Stets, 2009). If alumni balk at talking about their experience with a fellow alumnus who has been referred to them by a friend, what are the chances that they will invoke this identity to a complete stranger in a professional setting? The more institutions can get their alumni to communicate with their alma mater immediately after they graduate, the more likely it is that alumni will continue to engage and communicate about their experience with others (Levine, 2008). In the context of relationship marketing it is well documented that different relationship types are more strongly correlated with sustained product

commitment (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003; Michalski and Helmig, 2008). Thus any sustained positive relationship will improve chances of encouraging repeat business or promotion of the product.

Every single participant indicated that they used social media to remain connected with their close friend group. This is certainly an area that should be considered in greater depth in future studies. Given that the sample was collected via social networking and that all participants noted their use of social media as a means of staying connected to other alumni, future studies of use of social media among alumni may bear good fruit. Studies in this area would do well to more closely examine how social media plays a role in alumni communications and if it is indeed enhancing interactions or just providing a new way of interacting with the same circles.

This study design could use improvement in the future. There are more targeted questions that can be asked and a larger sample would certainly serve to enhance response data. More qualitative studies with higher controls for sample population and a stronger case study approach may be of benefit to teasing out more themes related to alumni identity. Comparative studies at other benchmark institutions for PMU may be beneficial in providing a comparison case study. Themes that appear across institutions would be candidates for more in depth study. The area of identity studies is very rich and complex. There is a lot of room to play. One area that would enhance studies on alumni identity is the concept of intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005). The current study isolated the alumni identity as a means of pursuing depth in that area, however the alumni identity is much more complex than that as it encompasses the student identity and the employee identity among others. The alumni identity has many components that are interdependent. Intersectionality would allow for consideration that those

multiple identities work in concert to allow an alumnus identity to be salient when necessary, yet ever present in the self.

Conclusion

Through the long and storied history of higher education, alumni remain one of the most important, and possibly misunderstood, resources of a university (Levine, 2008). The traditional role of alumni is to support their alma mater through promotion and donation (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003; McDearmon, 2010), but that alone will not be enough in the future. Alumni are often viewed as members of a single group that share traits through virtue of having attended the same university (Baade, 1996; Clotfelter 2003). However, many practicing alumni relations professionals and recent alumni literature demonstrate that this is not the case (Simone, 2009; Sun, Hoffman, and Grady, 2007; Tsao and Coll, 2005; Von Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010; Weerts and Ronca, 2007). Alumni are a varied and unique group of individuals connected through a common or shared sense of place or nostalgia (Putnam, 2000). The challenge then is how to reach individual alumni on a personal level that respects the larger group membership yet ties in closely to the personal and role identities associated with their experience within that shared place.

Once a student makes their choice, and becomes a part of the institution, they further self select into other groups such as their academic major, formal social and professional activities and informal social and academic groups. As they progress through their college experience and integrate into academic and social groups they develop a new sense of self that determines their trajectory toward graduation. Much of the literature in the area of student development places a strong focus on the individual development during college (Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009), but fails to address how development of identity, specifically as it relates to the institution and their

role identity as an alumnus, continues to develop after graduation. Much like current student development literature seeks to understand student identity development with an ends toward improving the student experience and enhancing student learning, this study used identity theory and relationship marketing in an effort to better understand how alumni make meaning of their experience in ways that may contribute to an alumnus' identity. If scholars, student affairs professionals and development professionals really want to understand and influence alumni in meaningful ways that result in greater institutional engagement through promotion and donation, they need to rethink their approach to studying alumni.

The most important thing to note regarding the findings of this study and their implications for practice is that everything important to the alumni identity and understanding the college experience began while the participants were students. Alumni affairs, student affairs, and academic affairs professionals must place greater emphasis on developing the whole student and engaging them completely throughout their undergraduate experience. This will be much more difficult if efforts to connect continue to happen in isolation. While there are some high quality partnerships and initiatives that bring these often disparate units together, they are the exception not the norm. Institutions focus so hard on getting students to persist through to graduation, yet they do not really know what to do when they get there. It is like planning a road trip and carefully structuring and planning out the route, but leaving it all to chance once one arrives at the destination. Sure, it may work out sometimes, and the journey was great, but it doesn't always go smooth and sometimes one does not end up in a good place. If institutions focus on developing engaged alumni with a salient alumni identity, they will not only increase the joy in the journey and improve satisfaction with the destination, but it will change their students' lives as well.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Alumni Identity Study

1. What were your reasons for going to college, and specifically why did you choose WMU?
2. What was your academic major at WMU? Are you working in that field today?
3. What specific extra-curricular activities or organizations did you participate in while at WMU and how actively did you participate? (clubs, groups, activities, professional orgs, internships)
4. What would you consider the most defining moment in your undergraduate experience?
5. In what ways has your time at WMU impacted your life today (positive and/or negatively)?
6. Has there ever been an instance when your association with WMU helped you, or hurt you, socially or professionally?
7. Do you believe that those you interact with view WMU as prestigious? Give an example of an experience that makes you believe this?
8. How would you say that your satisfaction with the education you received while at WMU has changed over time?
9. What formal and informal ways are you engaged with WMU alumni and activities? (what and frequency).
10. How important is it to you that you are a college graduate? How important is it that you graduated from WMU?
11. How do you feel about being an alumnus (ae) of WMU?
12. What is the most important thing for me to know about your being an alumnus of WMU?

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