STUDENT AFFAIRS, ACADEMIC AFFAIRS, AND THE INSTITUTIONAL MISSION: ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS AT A RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Factors such as changing student demographics, economic conditions, the emphasis on degree completion, technology, increased accountability, and an increased focus on student learning are changing the face of higher education. These changing conditions can be viewed as threatening, or as an opportunity for units to respond strategically and advance the institutional mission. The role of the academic affairs unit has not wavered because the unit’s day-to-day work directly serves the institutional mission (Helfgot, 2005). However, student affairs units undergo pressure to show relevance in order to thrive in the changing environment.

Understanding a collective interpretation of the role of student affairs work, how it relates to the role of academic affairs work, the intersections between the two units, and how all of this relates to furthering the institutional mission, is critical for the future of student affairs activity. There is limited research about academic and student affairs units in relation to the institutional mission. More specifically, there is little research involving administrator perspectives regarding this topic.

Through case study research design, this dissertation explores the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission. Using the institutional mission as the center for the discussion, this dissertation provides an in-depth understanding of how key administrators perceive the work of and relationship between academic and student affairs units. In addition, this dissertation identifies strategies to develop collaboration between academic and student affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission. Based on the findings, this study provides key information to
effectively initiate collaboration and ultimately consider the work of student affairs units as mission central.
Ubuntu is an African philosophy that means, “I am who I am because of others.” For as long as I can remember, I have lived with this philosophy in mind. The people in my life are at the root of what I do and how I view the world. Each person I have encountered along this journey has contributed to my Ph.D. story. My ability to complete this dissertation is strongly attributed to the support and encouragement from others.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The work of student affairs is undergoing pressure to stay relevant as the landscape of higher education changes. Student affairs is known as the unit of a college or university promoting student learning and engagement outside of the classroom. It is important for student affairs administrators to understand the mission of the university and the priorities of the president and board to guide their unit’s work. Just recently, student affairs leaders described the conditions of their careers as challenging, doing more with less, and constantly restructuring (Cawthon, Boyd & Seagraves, 2012). They are spending more time than ever demonstrating the beneficial contributions of out-of-class experiences (Whitt, 2005).

As a result of this pressure, the role of a student affairs unit is shifting. Historically, the general perception of student affairs is that it sits secondary to the academic mission and the work of academic affairs units (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001). Kezar (2003) described academic and student affairs units as “two perceived domains of student life” (p.137), adding to the pressure for student affairs units to demonstrate their importance to the institution and cultivate a seamless student learning experience. Over time, academic and student affairs colleagues are developing an understanding of each other’s cultures; however, researchers note that the understanding from both viewpoints is equally deficient (Philpott & Strange, 2003). The gap existing between the two units impacts how they view each other’s specific roles and perspectives. This flawed relationship proves to be one of the greatest sources of tension in higher education (Boyer, 1987). To understand where student affairs and academic affairs intersect and how the units can
maximize a collaborative partnership in accomplishing the institutional mission, it is critical to determine how the units perceive each other’s work within the institution (Ahren, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

Higher education institutions that are effective in enhancing student engagement demonstrate a sustained commitment of thoughtfulness to the institutional mission (Kezar, 2006; Whitt, 2005). Aligning programs and policies with the institutional mission and understanding organizational culture can assist student affairs leaders toward collaboration with units like academic affairs during times of change (Kezar, 2006; Tierney, 1988). For this study, a qualitative case study method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at a large, public research university.

The data collected reflect the perceptions of both academic and student affairs administrators—those who lead academic and student affairs units and are influential in steering the university. These data inform academic and student affairs leaders of access points and barriers when collaborating with academic affairs. In addition, this study provides student affairs leaders with information to better identify which areas to enhance within their unit to stay relevant and meaningful to the institution and the academic mission. The study’s findings also shed light on the roles of and relationship between academic and student affairs units, adding to the current literature. By understanding this relationship and the differences and overlaps in administrator perceptions, student affairs leaders gain key information to effectively position student affairs directly alongside academic affairs units to ultimately propel the academic mission of the institution. Finally, this study sets the groundwork for colleges and universities to consider the work of student affairs units as mission central.
Research Questions

This case study investigation addressed three research questions:

1. How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of student affairs and academic affairs units to the institutional mission?
2. What relationship is perceived between the cultures of student affairs and academic affairs units related to the institutional mission?
3. What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?

The Tension in Higher Education

“Higher education affects almost all of us—as students, parents, employees, employers, and citizens or as beneficiaries of scientific, medical, and technological research,” noted Weisbrod, Ballou and Asch (2008, p.1). There are 4,634 colleges and universities in the U.S. and nearly every college and university is grounded by a mission statement (Chronicle, 2012; Pellow, 2006). The institutional mission statement is a statement that defines the purpose of an institution, suggests its values and priorities, and provides guidance for decision-making, accountability, and resource allocation (Meacham, 2008). Further, Manning and Kinzie (2006) argued that every U.S. college campus demonstrates some type of student affairs work on their campus. If nearly every college campus is serving students outside of the classroom, this suggests there is national recognition that student affairs work is recognized as part of college and university life. For student affairs units to be seen as an institutional priority, they have to be able to identify with the academic mission of the institution. Student affairs administrators have a responsibility to perform within the parameters of the institutional mission in order to see favorable results during times of decision-making and resource allocation. In order to
successfully integrate into the academic experience at the university, student affairs units need the institution to find co-curricular work meaningful to the mission.

On some campuses, academic and student affairs professionals act in two different worlds. When studying the academic and student affairs narratives, Hirt (2007) explained that both units use different narratives when discussing the university and the role they serve within the university. History reveals that this disconnected relationship has been an issue for quite some time. Collaboration between the student affairs and the academic areas has been an “on-again, off-again” relationship since the mid-19th century (Philpott & Strange, 2003). Kezar (2003) defined collaboration as individuals and groups working together toward a common purpose, with equal voice and responsibility.

The origin of student affairs work historically aligns with the academic mission. The student affairs movement began in the 20th century, following a growth of extracurricular activity on college campuses (Nuss, 2003). Due to higher education’s increased emphasis on improving undergraduate education, Sandeen (2004) acknowledged a growing support to contribute to the total student experience at this time. Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) suggested that higher education’s evolution of mission and goals during the 1920s marked the foundation of developing the “whole student” (p. 149) as an educational objective. Around this time, institutions practiced in loco parentis where the faculty originally inherited the responsibilities of living in residence halls and supporting students outside of the classroom—later defined as student affairs-related tasks (Dickerson, 2000; Nuss, 2003). Beginning in the late 1940s, World War II veterans filled college classrooms, and the country’s social norms were challenged drastically by efforts like the women’s movement and the civil rights movement. College student demographics were changing and the student affairs narrative shifted from an
assumed parental role to a holistic supportive role, “providing a broad array of programs and services that students wanted (social, athletics, recreational)” (Hirt, 2007, p.53). Then, as baby boomers came through the university the student affairs narrative shifted again to focus more on student development and student learning (Hirt, 2007). Since then, out-of-class learning has been the responsibility of student affairs professionals, as it is believed student affairs units promote learning in all situations and environments (Manning & Kinzie, 2006). According to Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1996), student affairs units generally push for “unifying the curriculum and the extracurricular into an educational paradigm that sees students learning from experiences…resulting in holistic development” (p. 220).

The institutional mission was once centered on both moral and academic values. However, now colleges and universities notice a heightened emphasis on the academic mission of the institution, and the role of student affairs is characterized as a supportive role (Garland & Grace, 1993). As a result, student affairs units are challenged to reposition their role as mission central and demonstrate their significance in the achievement of institutional goals. Largely, it is the adaptability of the field that causes the student affairs field to withstand the test of time. The field continues to evolve as higher education receives more pressure to provide a higher quality of undergraduate education (Nuss, 2003). Contemporary student affairs work is focused on bridging the social and academic divide and using learning outcomes as standards for programs, resources, and support (McClellan, 2004).

**Considering Student Affairs as Mission Central**

Student learning is not simply a result of what happens inside the classroom, but a culmination of all environments and experiences within the college domain (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Kuh and Schuh (1991) described student affairs as a unit within the institution
that expands the academic experience by promoting student involvement and out-of-class learning opportunities. Sandeen (2011) explained student affairs as an emerging field designed to serve the whole student. What student affairs units provide to students out-of-class contributes significantly to a student’s academic, intellectual, and cognitive development and should support the academic mission of the institution (Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). However, as the field copes within the changing higher education context, the charge for student affairs units to align directly to the student academic experience becomes more difficult. During a time where external forces test the resilience of university units, student affairs units have to continually prove that caring for the whole student contributes directly to institutional priorities (Paine, 2013). Student affairs can demonstrate value by focusing on and highlighting work that is mission central (Cawthon, Boyd, & Seagraves, 2012). If a student affairs unit fails to adjust as the institution evolves, the unit may be left behind and considered unnecessary.

The role and need for academic affairs work remains relevant because the unit’s day-to-day work directly serves the institutional mission (Anderson, 2008; Helfgot, 2005). Accordingly, student affairs units should find ways to work with academic affairs to stay central to the institutional mission (Dale & Drake, 2005). The push to grow student enrollments, improve retention, and enhance academic achievement creates access points for student affairs to become “fuller partners” within the institution (Garland & Grace, 1993, p. 21). By refocusing the work of student affairs on service and education, the unit “is in a better position to be recognized as a full partner in supporting the institution’s mission and supporting students to realize their educational and personal goals” (Seifert & Burrow, 2013, p.143). The failure of institutional leaders to see a direct connection between students’ out-of-class activities and their academic agenda interferes with students’ overall personal development and the quality of their academic experience.
(Seldin, 1990). By integrating with academic affairs, student affairs units can directly reflect the institutional mission and enhance student learning (Calhoun, 1997; Kuh & Schuh, 1991; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994).

As a national effort to clarify the role and demonstrate the value of student affairs work continues, the field encounters a wide diversity of institutional missions, rapid technology developments, a lack of consistency in undergraduate education, and uncertainty of where the unit fits within the institution (Sandeen, 2011). One of the most complicated organizational challenges for student affairs units is managing multiple departments operating within one large unit (Smith & Rodgers, 2005). Not only do values vary across institutions, but they also vary within the institution resulting in inevitable subcultures at colleges and universities (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). The challenge for student affairs units to establish a narrative within a single institution contributes to a misunderstanding of the student affairs field nationally.

**External Forces Changing Higher Education**

Factors such as changing student demographics, economic conditions, the emphasis on degree completion, technology, increased accountability, and an increased focus on student learning are changing the face of higher education. Student affairs administrators can perceive these changing conditions as threatening—facing the risk of falling on the priority list and getting left behind. On the other hand, these conditions can be viewed as an opportunity for units like students affairs to respond strategically and prove direct significance to the institutional mission, advancing the field for the future. These environmental challenges change the way student affairs units execute their work and intensify the need for organizations to align with a well-defined mission statement (Ireland & Hirc, 1992). However, the primary purpose of providing programs, resources, and support to develop the “whole student” does not change
(Porterfield, Roper, & Whitt, 2011). Harris (2009) recommended that student affairs administrators understand the mission and fundamental values of higher education and the institution to thrive in the changing environment.

**Changing Student Demographics**

An increasingly diverse nation generates a more diverse college student population. Students of diverse backgrounds view a college degree as an opportunity toward upward mobility (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Colleges and universities have become increasingly accessible to women, people of color, and students from low-income families, ultimately changing student demographic characteristics like age, enrollment status, attitude, family conditions, and health (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

As a result of changing student demographics, the description of a traditional college student is no longer easy to determine. People pursuing higher education are more likely to be a minority, first-generation, older in age, enroll part-time, require financial assistance, and possibly have a disability (Komives & Woodard, 2003; Williams, 2014). Williams (2014) profiles today’s college student as an older female who is a member of an underrepresented group, likely Hispanic, and arrives to college with unique needs, values, and expectations from her predecessors. Institutions are hard-pressed to prepare for these changing demographics.

Institutions narrow in on first-generation students as they prepare for these changing demographics. First-generation students tend to work more hours per week than traditional students, come from lower-income families, and are less involved with their peers (Terenzini et al., 1996). The more time students spend at work, the less time they have to engage in co-curricular activities outside of class (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Working students compromise opportunities like internships, service learning, or participating in campus programming.
(Komives & Woodard, 2003). For example, particularly on large campuses, students who do not ever live on campus could go their entire college career without interacting meaningfully with a university staff member (Paine, 2013). First-generation student or not, the part-time student movement is on a rise as a result of the changing student demographics and increasing tuition and fees (Komives & Woodard, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996).

As faculty, academic administrators, and other university staff encounter an increasingly diverse college population, student affairs professionals serve as valuable resources. Garland and Grace (1993) explained that institutions serve students who are energetic and invested in their community and social development. Tinto (1997) recognized academic and social development as crucial, even for non-traditional undergraduate students who do not live on-campus or engage in out-of-class activities. If students desire the holistic student experience (academic and social development) and if research says this type of development is critical, combining the talents of both academic and student affairs professionals in a collaborative effort to serve students leads to the most effective institution (Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2016).

**Funding, Tuition, and Enrollment**

The need for student affairs practice exists now more than ever with a growing student population attending college. However, higher education is asked to support more students with limited dollars and resources. State funding is thinning and careful attention is spent on how financial resources allocated (Schuh, 1993). When examined, student affairs units are perceived as being supportive of, but not central to, the academic mission (Rames, 2000). As a result, student affairs units experience scrutiny during this time. Operating with limited resources and pressure to support more students, student affairs units feel an urgency to defend the value and demonstrate a connection to the academic mission (Stewart & Williams, 2010). “Our [student
affairs’ willingness to develop partnerships across campus will be crucial to student success and to our ability to garner the resources necessary to do our work” (Paine, 2013, p. 227).

Nationwide, states spent $2,026, or 23%, less per student on higher education in the 2014 fiscal year than they did in 2008 when the recession hit (Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014). Enrollment in public higher education increased by about 1.3 million full-time equivalent students, or 12.4%, between the beginning of the recession and the 2011-12 academic year (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman 2013). Because of the decrease in financial resources and the rise in student enrollment, budgeting processes intensify, along with the need for student affairs leaders to explain and defend the value of their programs and services (Stewart & Williams, 2010). Additionally, as students pay more to enroll in college, due to the decrease in state support, it is increasingly more important for student affairs to demonstrate that their work directly contributes to the student learning experience (Blimling, 2013).

As mentioned, colleges and universities struggle to meet operational needs without increasing tuition. Tuition is one of the leading sources of revenue for state-assisted institutions (Rames, 2000). Deep budget cuts in state funding for public higher education has pushed a greater share of the cost onto students and their families (Schoen, 2015). In addition to increasing tuition, institutions add on student fees to offset the funding decline. Student fees are a go-to charge for public universities in a financial bind because fees are easier to initiate than raising tuition (Pickert, 2008). The College Board reports that the average cost of tuition and fees during the 2015-2016 school year was $9,410 for state residents at public colleges and $23,893 for out-of-state residents attending public universities. Schoen (2015) raised the question: Considering the increasing financial burden to the student, am I getting what I want from my college experience? Or, what am I getting for the price? As more students and families ask this question,
administrators may feel pressure to explain why college tuition at public universities is nearly quadrupling and what they will do to resolve this issue.

University administrators are pressed to rework their institutions’ academic programs, administrative services, and student affairs operations to contain costs and increase revenue. Some institutions question student affairs units as an unnecessary bloat, a drain on institutional resources, or “fluff” that adds little or no value to higher education (Helfgot, 2005; Schoen, 2015). With that in mind, institutions are likely to examine their funding for student affairs and other nonacademic units with a more powerful microscope (Schuh, 1993). As institutions of higher education focus on increasing efficiencies by containing costs, streamlining services, and reducing duplication, senior administrators are responding by eliminating and reducing certain student affairs services. For example, Texas Tech University dismantled its student affairs infrastructure in 2011, eliminating top administrator positions to save $500,000 (Grasgreen, 2011). Another example is the student affairs operating budget at Stanford University where in 2010, the student affairs budget was cut by 15%, saving 3 million dollars in general funds (Sullivan, 2009). Similar to Stanford, The University of California at Davis cut the student affairs budget by 2.3 million dollars (Kindred, 2011), The University of California Los Angeles’ student affairs unit reported a 3.3 million dollar loss in 2003 (Lee, 2003), and The University of Nebraska reduced the student affairs budget by $750,000 and eliminated 20% of the staff (Overmyer, 2003). Most recently, Louisiana State University (LSU) turned to external donors to make up for the system-wide 65 million dollar reduction in state funds and cover student resources like the Center for Academic Success, First Year Experience, and the Career Center. LSU also considered raising the student fees by as much as $700 in one fiscal year (Carter, 2016). Most concerning, Western Kentucky University anticipates a 6.7 million dollar loss by
2018 and reports that the “less-academic programs would be affected” (Mudd, 2016). These examples provide evidence that student affairs units suffer as institutions react to budgetary pressures. The threat of budget cuts or fewer resources heightens the urgency for student affairs units to move quickly and establish their centrality to the institutional mission (Cage, 1992). Budget cuts cause senior student affairs officers to reexamine the purpose of student affairs and look for greater efficiencies, creating a stage for collaboration. “The learning environment benefits from partnerships with academics, and now the economic environment demands it for our very survival” (Romano, Hanish, Phillips, & Waggoner, 2010, p. 68).

The Market

Financial tensions can drive activities away from the core purpose of an institution (Fugazzotto, 2009). To intensify the situation, markets push institutions to be responsive, accountable, and productive (Zemsky et al., 2005). As state support weakens, public institutions begin to operate more like private institutions (Zemsky et al., 2005). Over the past 10 years, non-profit organizations have tripled the amount of business-related activity. This activity is unrelated to the organization’s mission (Jones, 2007). Hirt (2007) overviewed higher education corporatization through four narratives: knowledge regime, consumerism, manufacturer, and public versus private good. This market-driven perspective, embraced by academic partners, focusing on driving faculty research, serving students as customers, creating personalized education, and valuing private benefits conflicts with the current student affairs narrative focusing on student development and learning.

Students and parents expect more, have less to spend, and have greater options of institutions to attend (Davis Educational Foundation, 2012). According to Harris (2009), the demand to satisfy students results in administrators allocating resources that do not directly
emphasize the mission. Attracting, satisfying, and retaining students are proving to take precedence over mission, access, and knowledge acquisition (Harris, 2009; Hirt, 2007). In terms of recruitment, students are attracted to universities for amenities and products not captured within the institutional mission statement (Harris, 2009). When students and parents expect more, it costs more to offer the elaborate student experience they are demanding (Davis Educational Foundation, 2012).

As schools plow money into new residence halls, administrative costs, and sports stadiums, some students find themselves paying for services they will not use. In an era where people can customize and bundle their preferences from a smorgasbord of options, students are not able to choose how they spend their dollars by customizing or bundling university opportunities. Instead, institutions continue to compete in this “amenities war,” and students continue to pay for it (Davis Educational Foundation, 2012). In fact, student debt has doubled since 2008, reaching 1.3 trillion dollars nationwide (Mcfarland, 2016).

The competition between institutions pressures administrators to transfer funds to areas outside of the academic mission in hopes the institution can create revenue and recognition (Harris, 2009). Not only does external competition between institutions exist, but institutions also experience internal competition within the organization (Bok, 2003; Harris, 2009). Bok (2003) and Harris (2009) explained departments across the institution compete with each other for limited resources, causing administrators to prioritize. Staying relevant and innovative while keeping the student and mission in mind is the complexity universities are challenged to navigate.

Critics blame administrators of “entrepreneurial universities” for bringing business ways into the academy and disregarding the academic mission (Bok, 2003). Much like businesses,
colleges and universities cannot operate successfully without money and they can only spend what they make (Zemsky et al., 2005). Mission drift occurs if institutions choose to allocate resources to items unrelated to the original mission (Zemsky et al., 2005). When universities focus on maximizing profit, they are likely to engage in questionable practices leading to a decrease in student access and quality of education (Bok, 2003). Ultimately, universities that operate to survive in the marketplace are at risk for mission drift.

Accordingly, the changing mission and goals of institutions make it more challenging for student affairs to maintain organizational integrity (Baird, 2011). Aligning student affairs practices and policies proves difficult if the institutional context is ambiguous. Institutions have recently been described as market-driven, citing government, societal expectations, and globalization as leading forces. Higher education is experiencing a major shift in funding allocation. Services responsible for recruiting and retaining students are viewed as a priority during times of university financial constraints (Rames, 2000). Units are evaluated in terms of outcomes and prestige now more than ever, “causing pressure on student affairs to show direct impact on the retention of tuition paying students” (Baird, 2011, p. 18). In addition, student affairs units are challenged to align and use language that reflects the market-driven narrative their academic partners have adopted (Hirt, 2007).

Degree Completion

The story of college completion is changing due to the diversity of postsecondary students (Humphreys, 2013). Students coming from different places of origin with varying income levels experience a rapid rise in costs. As a new student demographic is entering higher education, a population that was already financially tested is struggling more than ever to finance
their education (Humphreys, 2013). At the same time, college completion is emerging as a national conversation.

Former President Obama cast a vision for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. Community colleges play a significant role in this ambitious undertaking as they provide open doors to diverse students (Handel, 2013). The role of community college is impacting the way four-year colleges and universities do their work by sending a growing number of transfer students and ultimately changing the four-year institution student make-up nationwide (Handel, 2013).

Obama’s completion agenda would require coordinated efforts. Since 2014 through the completion of his term, Obama’s administration invested more than 135 million dollars to propel the completion agenda and improve the value and affordability of college (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The push for college completion drives investments into the Federal Pell Grant Program—the source for college affordability. Under Obama’s completion agenda, students had the opportunity to be awarded more money through the Pell Grant. However, this arrangement came with stipulations. Students could maximize their Pell Grant if they attend school year-round (fall, spring, and summer) and stay on-track. On average, students could have been awarded an additional $1,915 for finishing faster and a $30 bonus for enrolling in more hours. Ultimately, this policy rewarded accelerated degree completion using the rationale that finishing faster means students could complete their degree at a lower cost with less student debt (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The completion agenda discussion has prompted the idea of a three-year degree. According to Hurley and Harnisch (2012), the three-year degree concept sets to accomplish similar goals of the public four-year mission: access and social mobility. They assert three-year
degrees can support common institutional goals, including increasing college access to a diverse reach of students, demonstrating advancement in the curricula, and improving measures of efficiency (Hurley & Harnisch, 2012). While there is controversy concerning whether the three-year degree actually places less financial burden on the student, there is also real concern an accelerated degree compromises personal development and real-world experiences (Jaschik, 2010). Rhoades (2012) agreed the completion agenda compromises educational quality. An accelerated degree allows little time for students to acquire relational and critical thinking skills, become civically engaged, and take part in out-of-class experiences—all things promoted through student affairs’ work. This idea may be attractive to a small percentage of ambitious students, but most students cannot meet the requirements because of student financial issues, family obligations, college readiness, etc. (Hurley & Harnisch, 2012). Typically, students need even longer than a four-year period to complete their degree (Luckerson, 2013). Some colleges and universities go as far as implementing incentive techniques to encourage graduation in four years. For example, at The University of North Carolina, major and minors will only be recognized on transcripts if students graduate in eight regular semesters (Luckerson, 2013).

Rhoades (2012) interpreted the completion agenda as an attempt to increase output and productivity in public colleges and universities. Even student engagement activities are now focused on degree completion and retention. Strained economic circumstances lead to this way of thinking (Hurley and Harnisch, 2012). Humphreys (2013) suggested higher education reframe this market-driven way of thinking from a “more for cheaper” mindset to a “more for better” attitude. After all, colleges and universities accomplish more than just graduating students (Rhoades, 2012).
Technology

Colleges and universities are challenged to remain on the cutting edge of technological advances in order to maintain a competitive edge, accommodate diverse learners, and generate revenue (Garland & Grace, 1993). Faculty, administrators, and students find that technology is quickly changing the approaches to teaching and learning. Taylor and Holley (2009) determine that changing the approach of teaching changes the strategy of student affairs work.

While technology creates opportunities for higher education, it also creates challenges. The New York Times published an article about how people are dividing their attention in this digital age (Turkle, 2015). People do not feel as invested in one another, specifically due to cellphone distractions. Similarly, an Inside Higher Ed article defines social media and cellphone use as significant distractions to the college student experience (Grasgreen, 2013). Student interactions look different than they used to. Technology has the power to reduce the positive impact of authentic human interactions and requires people to challenge human values (Upcraft & Goldsmith, 2000). Students are less comfortable having face-to-face interactions and they rely on technology when pressed to step outside of their comfort zone (Grasgreen, 2013). The college experience is described as an interactive process where students are shaped by all parts of their environment (Taylor & Holley, 2009). Technological realities press student affairs units to consider new ways to promote student learning and effectiveness. As students become disconnected, the efforts of student affairs units become even more necessary for students to reconnect (Upcraft & Goldsmith, 2000). Given these circumstances, student affairs units have the opportunity to fill a significant gap in the digital age. However, they have to be engaging and efficient in doing so, or else they will miss the chance.
Student enrollment in online degree programs is increasing (Tabs, Waits & Lewis, 2003). So what does this mean for student engagement and the role of student affairs units? Students report their enrollment in an online program obliges them to be selective about participation in out-of-class activities (Taylor & Holley, 2009). Online students usually have little on-campus connection, preventing them from experiencing traditional classroom learning, candid social interactions, and co-curricular activities (Holley & Taylor, 2009). In one study, students describe their online education experience as isolating and express the desire for a social outlet (Holley & Taylor, 2009). Regardless of the changing pedagogy, the value of the learning community and human interaction remains constant (Kretovics, 2003). Student engagement programming that complements alternative course delivery options is necessary to support the 21st century college student. When institutions work toward tackling the online learning phenomena, academic and student affairs staff discover that lines become blurred (Taylor & Holley, 2009). This is the ideal setting for student affairs to position their work alongside the institutional mission.

Assessment

The student affairs field evolves as higher education receives more pressure to provide a higher quality of undergraduate education (Nuss, 2003). The pressure for higher education to share assessment of student learning is forcing student affairs units to shift toward a focus on learning outcomes. “Postsecondary education continues to face many pressures from a multitude of constituencies to demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals” (Sandeen, 2011, p. 813). The reality of these pressures causes student affairs leaders to manage multiple goals placed upon them. For student affairs units to stay relevant, it is necessary for their goals and outcomes to align with the institutional mission (Cawthon, Boyd, & Seagraves, 2012; Kuh, 1996).
Conclusion

In this chapter, the need to stay central to the institution’s mission in response to a diverse nation, economic limitations, technology advancements, and accountability was introduced alongside an introduction to the role of student affairs in higher education. Higher education institutions are tested to be innovative as they achieve student-learning outcomes for more students with fewer resources, and student affairs units feel the pressure to demonstrate their value to prevent elimination.

This dissertation captures university administrators’ experiences with the work of student affairs and academic affairs units as the landscape of higher education changes. When student affairs administrators are aware of how the field is perceived, they can better position themselves in the academic arena. Using the institutional mission statement as the center for this discussion, this study seeks to understand the relationship between student affairs and academic affairs units and what it means for furthering the institutional mission. In Chapter 2, the conceptual framework for the study is discussed.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

As colleges and universities work through environmental changes, cross-campus units may be most successful when they collaborate on efforts related to the main functions and mission of the institution. Adjusting to a changing environment while upholding the mission and encouraging democratic relationships is a characteristic that leads higher education institutions to become one of the most esteemed organizations in society today (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). However, as the institution moves forward in a changing environment, some units are at risk of being left behind. The changing environment causes the institutional mission, goals, and culture to shift. This environment makes it challenging for units such as student affairs to maintain mission alignment (Baird, 2011). Further, the conflicting cultures between academic and student affairs units function as a barrier for cross-campus collaboration, also contributing to the characterization of student affairs units as outliers. Overall, collaborating across units to accomplish the institutional mission during change is complicated. By studying the university as a total system and its culture, it becomes clear how each unit plays a role in accomplishing the institutional mission.

This chapter opens by reviewing the literature associated with institutional mission as the foundational statement established for organizations to operate within and for units to use as guidance when executing their parts. Acknowledging the external economic challenges and institutional pressures, this chapter then reviews the literature related to organizational change as the groundwork for understanding how to manage changing higher education organizations and
direct them toward collaboration and mission-centered outputs. Next, this chapter recognizes organizations as systems using systems theory and describes culture as a lens to create meaning about what is happening in the system. In addition, it discusses academic and student affairs units as subsystems within the university that develop their own subcultures with unique values, beliefs, and norms. Finally, the chapter concludes by recognizing the need, barriers, and opportunities for collaboration between academic and student affairs units. Ultimately, this literature builds the foundation to launch the study to understand the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering institutional mission at a large, public research university.

This case study investigation addressed three research questions:

1. How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of student affairs and academic affairs units to the institutional mission?

2. What relationship is perceived between the cultures of student affairs and academic affairs units related to the institutional mission?

3. What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?

**Conceptual Framework**

This chapter reviews the following areas of literature: institutional mission, organizational change and change theory, general systems theory, organizational culture, and collaboration. These areas are significant because together they provide a foundational context for understanding how university units interact, relate, and work together to accomplish the institutional mission during times of change and challenge. Further, the literature sets the stage to explore current and potential collaborations between academic and student affairs units at a
large, public university. Overall, the literature indicates that as large, public universities evolve and campus units exist as autonomous, specialized subsystems, with their own individual cultures, collaboration is difficult but necessary to accomplish in order for each unit to fulfill the institutional mission.

The Role of Mission

Successful organizations are organizations that encourage collaborative activities across units to accomplish their main functions and mission (Senge, 1990). In times of financial constraint, challenging technologies, accountability, and other environmental shifts, university units need to do a better job of aligning institutional programs and policies with the campus mission (Ireland & Hirc, 1992; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). For example, Kezar and Kinzie (2006) explained effective higher education institutions excelling in student engagement are sensitive to the mission and use it to enhance student engagement strategies. Similarly, Fjortoft and Smart (1994) concluded institutions where organization members report a high level of mission agreement are perceived to be more effective. Ultimately, administrators who understand their institution’s core purpose and tie it to their unit’s outcomes provide the richest academic environments for students (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris & Dorman, 2013).

Some literature argues mission statements matter, while other literature is disputing the value of mission statements altogether (Anderson, 2008). The literature explains two interpretations of mission statements: espoused or living missions (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). When a statement exists but very few people use it to guide their work, it is considered an espoused mission. Institutions operating with an espoused mission suffer from a lack of alignment and are less efficient and effective. Living, or sometimes called active, mission statements steer what the institution does and whom it serves. Morphew and Hartley (2006) addressed the disagreement
regarding the purpose and significance of an institutional mission statement. Some scholars (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 458) criticized mission statements for being “excessively vague” (p. 457) or existing only because they are expected to exist within higher education, “much like quads or football stadiums.” In contrast, others (Campbell & Yeung, 1991) described mission statements as intentional and thoughtful statements providing strategic direction. Meacham (2008) and Ireland and Hirc (1992) built the case that mission statements shape an organization, explaining mission statements are not only used to navigate long-term planning, but also can be used to steer day-to-day operational decisions.

The reviewed literature explores the concept of institutional mission as both a unique, distinctive organizational statement and a statement according to institutional type or sector (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). A mission statement expresses the organization’s core general purpose and the reason for existence (Daft, 2005; David, 1989). Therefore, a college or university mission statement is “rightly understood as an artifact of a broader institutional discussion about its purpose” (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 457). There is not one agreed upon definition of what a mission statement is (Forehand, 2000). Through a structural lens, mission defines the expectations of an organization by setting its values and priorities (Fugazzotto, 2009). Meacham (2008) described an institutional mission statement as a mechanism that guides decision-making, accountability, resource allocation, and personal development. Ireland and Hirc (1992) suggested, at minimum, mission statements should include how an organization is unique, what it hopes to be, and those it is designed to serve. A mission statement helps administrators determine not only what institutions will do, but also what they will not do (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Fundamentally, mission statements are the foundation for which future actions are built (Ireland & Hirc, 1992).
Mission statements are also related to institution type and how the university operates (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). For example, large public research universities are characterized as loosely coupled systems that operate with multiple goals (Fugazzotto, 2009). These universities are designed to provide social and economic mobility opportunities to students of the state that cannot afford a high-quality private education (Burd, 2010). They are also focused on the output of research to benefit the surrounding community, the state, and beyond. Research universities focus on the strengths inherent in their mission in order to conquer the challenge of their large and sometimes impersonal environments (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). For example, faculty play an essential role in fulfilling the institution’s mission to advance the knowledge and education of citizens. Institutional mission influences the definition of faculty roles and the balance between teaching, research, and service activities (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris & Dorman, 2013).

To accomplish the mission at a large, public university, several units are involved. The institutional mission individually impacts these units in unique ways. Specifically, mission shapes the professional practice in units such as student affairs. At a large research university, student affairs professionals serve as specialists in their specific areas, sometimes not even regularly interacting with other student affairs colleagues across campus. In this large campus context, student affairs professionals find it difficult to collaborate. Even if they have intention to collaborate, student affairs professionals at large institutions often do not know where to start because of a lack of knowledge about cross-campus happenings (Hirt & Robbins, 2016).

Mission is a key organizational element in developing effective campus collaboration (Kezar, 2005; Kezar & Lester, 2009). Kezar (2005) determined if certain terms or values related to collaboration are included within the mission statement, it might be easier for institutional units across campus to integrate the mission into their work. In order to reinforce the mission
statement as an integral part of campus operations, administrators spend time and effort consistently articulating and socializing people to it. Overall, mission helps people reflect on values and cultivate a shared vision and sense of purpose around why collaboration is beneficial (Anderson, 2008; Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Involvement from all stakeholders is necessary for an institution to be mission central (Wattananimitkul, 2002). Harris (2009) recommended administrators understand the mission and fundamental values of the institution to thrive in the changing environment. Mullane (2002) affirmed when all management levels subscribe, mission statements could be used as strategic tools. For example, campus personnel utilize the mission to drive hiring processes, recruit, and set expectations. The mission is included in key institutional documents used to solidify important practices such as accreditation or assessment and is part of campus decision-making (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Furthermore, budgets, rewards, programs, resource allocation, and evaluation practices are all institutional elements grounded by the institutional mission (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Organizational mission statements assign responsibility to multiple stakeholders, set expectations, and provide focus by outlining organizational priorities (Ireland & Hirc, 1992; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Meacham, 2008). With this in mind, the mission statement can be relied on to provide organizational unity and serve as an area of common understanding (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Konz & Ryan, 1999; Mullane, 2002). Not only does the mission provide direction to internal stakeholders, the mission statement also serves as an important source of information to an organization’s potential members (Konz & Ryan, 1999; Mullane, 2002). It is one of the most visible and powerful articulations of the culture, exposing the organization’s values and purpose (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Therefore, it is important to represent a well-articulated mission
to both internal and external audiences (Ireland & Hirc, 1992; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Wattananimitkul, 2002).

In higher education, the mission is often examined externally because of the central role it serves in institutional assessment and accountability. The presence of mission statements is widespread as public sectors establish them as a result of accreditation and state legal requirements (Weiss & Piderit, 1999). Hamelman (1970) contributed early on to the conversation surrounding mission significance by acknowledging accreditation pushes institutions to stay accountable to what the mission promises. Today, all major accrediting bodies require institutions to demonstrate that its mission is suitable and viable in some reasonable way (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris, & Dorman, 2013).

Crafting a Mission Statement

Although organizations can mitigate internal and external challenges by crafting a mission statement, some organizational leaders choose to exist without one. Organizations will make this choice because of the time it takes to create a mission statement, comfort with status quo, confidentiality concerns, numerous stakeholders, possible controversy, organization autonomy, and tradition (Ireland & Hirc, 1992). Nevertheless, organization members seek meaning through their work, and higher education leaders are responsible to shed light in this area. This responsibility requires the college or university to have a unique mission—one that differentiates it from others (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). The mission functions as an instrument for university leaders to help organization members appreciate the bigger picture and recognize the purpose of their work. Certain components of the mission may be more significant to university stakeholders than others (Forehand, 2000). Pellow (2006)
determined administrators need to perform an internal and external assessment of the environment before they can shape a formal mission statement.

The mission is made up of two parts: the core values and the core purpose (Daft, 2005). A basic mission statement includes how an organization is distinctive, what it desires to be, and those it intends to serve (Ireland & Hirc, 1992). Typically, a university mission statement includes organizational values, academic goals, and calls for community members, faculty, and students to behave ethically (Pellow, 2006). Meacham (2008) added that institutional mission statements include the institution’s history and identity, overarching consensus, and agenda items. Largely, teaching, research, and service are embraced as the primary elements of a college or university mission statement (Fugazzotto, 2009; Hamelman, 1970; Weisbrod, Ballou & Asch, 2008).

Mission statement development is normally a collaborative effort between multiple stakeholders (Anderson, 2008). However, there is not one formula for developing a mission statement (Forehand, 2000). Mission statement characteristics include consensus on campus-wide values and expectations for student learning and development (Meacham & Barrett, 2003). In addition to incorporating organizational values, Pellow (2006) described mission statements as capturing academic aspirations and calling for community members, faculty, and students to behave with high morals. Because the mission may be viewed and interpreted by prospective students, potential faculty members, and public officials, mission statements must be clear and well thought out (Hirt & Robbins, 2016; Sheaffer, Landau & Drori, 2008). In order for university leaders, the primary owners of the mission, to provide clear direction, mission statements should be articulated in a language understood by all members of the organization (Anderson, 2008;
Konz & Ryan, 1999). Finally, mission statements should be continually reviewed and reexamined to align with the changing environment (Isch, 1986).

A carefully crafted mission statement can improve the performance of managers, employees, and the larger organization (Forehand, 2000). The effort to build institutional mission consensus is not one-dimensional, and mission statements alone are not enough to promote effective performance. Just as much time and attention needs to be allocated toward aligning actual programs and activities to the shared mission as is allocated toward writing a mission statement.

**Mission Drift**

One major flaw of colleges and universities is losing touch with their mission, or not aligning campus practices directly to the institutional mission (Blanchard, Waghorn, & Ballard, 1997; Diamond, 2002). Jones (2007) characterized this behavior of straying away from the mission as “mission drift” and explained multiple sources of mission drift exist. Mission drift occurs when organizations are distracted and time, energy, and money are no longer mission central (Jones, 2007).

Today’s research university’s agenda includes disseminating knowledge, advancing research, increasing resources, diversifying student opportunities, and exceeding expectations. However, external forces cause leaders to disregard the original purpose of higher education and move the institution toward another identity (Checkoway, 2001). For example, the college ranking criteria influences colleges and universities to pursue items beyond the institutional mission (Harris, 2009). Harris (2009) explained competition between institutions pressures administrators to transfer funds to areas outside of the academic mission in hopes the institution can create revenue and recognition. The literature not only discusses external competition
between institutions, but it also references internal competition within institutions (Bok, 2003; Harris, 2009). An example of this scenario is when university units, like academic and student affairs units, compete with each other for limited resources, causing administrators to prioritize as they make allocation decisions. In addition, government and private agencies contribute to mission drift when they provide financial support to non-profit organizations, such as public universities, creating some level of control on how the non-profit operates (Jones, 2007). Expanding on governmental support, Jones (2007) identified another source of mission drift as non-profit wealth. When non-profits have a surplus of funds, the organization tends to focus on endowments, serve private interests, and overspend on items unrelated to mission (Jones, 2007).

**Organizational Change**

Organizational change begins with the organization’s mission statement (Bolton, Brunnermeier & Veldkamp, 2008). When an organization understands what it is, what its strengths are, and what it is aiming to achieve, it can respond proficiently to turbulent environments (Wheatley, 2006). However, those same turbulent environments prompt today’s colleges and universities to expand their already broad missions (Weisbrod, Ballou, & Asch, 2008).

The landscape of higher education is in flux—change is happening all of the time, at every level of the institution (Bess & Dee, 2008). As mentioned earlier, institutional pressures like technology, changing student demographics, internal and external competition, cost constraints, assessment and accountability, government funding, and the consumerism movement result in inevitable organizational change (Gumport, 2000; Kezar, 2001; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Scott, 2003). These pressures and more contribute to an institutional context where change is multifaceted, abstract, and challenging to initiate and manage (Bess & Dee, 2008; Bolman &
Deal, 2008). At a time when the existence of a clear identity generates organizational success, higher education is suffering from mission ambiguity. The changing landscape and ambiguous missions makes it more difficult, yet important, to determine and understand the relationship between student affairs units, academic affairs units, and the institutional mission in order for higher education leaders to steer the university in a collaborative, mission-centered direction.

Change can be demanding, threatening, and stressful but also revitalizing and vital (Lane, 2007). The complexities of organizational change make it difficult to find a common language to examine change (Kezar, 2001). In an effort to make sense of this complexity, scholars continue to explore the topic and contribute to the literature defining change. Zaltman and Duncan (1977) defined change as an alteration in the structures, processes, and/or behaviors in a system. Schein (1985) shared a cultural perspective, suggesting change occurs when individuals and groups rework the purpose of the organization. He described change as a modification of organizational values, beliefs, myths, and rituals. Bolman and Deal (2008) provided a similar description to Schein’s (1985), discussing change as an intrusion on deeply rooted symbolic customs, conventional ways, and routine behavior. Expanding on this definition, they explained change as an act that alters power relationships and weakens existing agreements and understandings.

Change tends to be a long-term and slow-paced process (Schein, 1985). Particularly at a college or university, change is gradual. Educational organizations are loosely coupled, bureaucratic, large systems—all characteristics that make large-scale change less likely to be quick and less likely to affect the entire organization in significant ways (Simsek & Louis, 1994). Under these circumstances, localized, departmental innovation may occur more readily, but organization-level changes may require more systematic strategies that detail clear relationships among the multifaceted units of a college or university (Bess & Dee, 2008).
Understanding how change works at a university-wide level and across units is necessary in order to effectively lead higher education organizations. Accordingly, theories and models were developed in order to successfully execute change management. As higher education leaders confront trends toward more central, managerial accountability and the creation of more decentralized units within colleges and universities, frameworks for organizational change that reflect both top-down and bottom-up perspectives are fundamental in managing change.

University leaders should be prepared to employ multiple models of change. Bess and Dee (2008) approached change management by distinguishing the difference between planned and emergent change models. Based in systems theory assumptions, planned change examines how external concepts are implemented into organizations and how internal organizational characteristics nurture or inhibit change. Essentially, the planned change method concentrates on implementing change over a designed, intentional process. For example, incorporating collaboration between academic and student affairs units in the university’s strategic plan and/or priorities is a top-down, planned change strategy that communicates the importance of cross-campus interaction to further the institutional mission. Moving from the idea that change can be planned, the emergent change model takes an incremental, responsive, and adaptive approach. While planned change operates from the assumption that people resist change, the emergent model assumes people desire to make changes in their roles and relationship. Emergent change may begin on a small, localized scale and then distribute more widely throughout the entire organization. For example, university-wide collaboration between academic and student affairs units, such as a service learning initiative, may emerge through a small project involving only a few faculty and staff members and later be incorporated on a larger scale. Emergent change allows for anyone within the multiple layers of an organization to initiate change, expanding the
opportunity for leadership. Campus leaders may disregard a key source of change if they do not pay attention to the effects of small-scale initiatives. However, they need to recognize that not every small-scale initiative can or should become institutionalized.

**Employing Organizational Change**

Creating meaningful change on a university campus is not automatic; it must be led and managed (Scott, 2003). Higher education leaders are tasked with determining whether leadership means bringing an organization back into equilibrium, pressing an organization toward continuous change, or what Bess and Dee (2008) suggested as the ideal approach—aiming toward a balance between the two. To make the most informed change decisions, it is necessary for change agents to recognize and understand the patterns within their organization by taking a step back and observing the big-picture (Heifetz, 1994; Kezar & Eckel, 2000).

The shortage of effective change leadership plays a key role in an organization’s failure to adjust to changes in the global environment. Kotter (1995) proposed an eight-stage model that serves as a guide for leaders to employ effective change. In his book, *Leading Change* (1995), he outlined eight steps for organizational leaders to follow when leading change:

2. *Form a powerful guiding coalition*: Assemble a group to lead and support the change effort.
3. *Develop a compelling vision and strategy*: Shape a vision that guides change and outline strategies to accomplish that vision.
4. *Communicate the vision widely*: Clearly spread the message of the vision throughout the organization.
5. *Empower employees to act on the vision:* Cultivate the environment that promotes, not undermines, the vision.


7. *Consolidate gains, create greater change:* Strengthen and maintain momentum.

8. *Institutionalize changes in the organizational culture:* Create connections between behaviors and organizational success; develop means to ensure leadership development and progression.

This model relies heavily on the organization’s leader; however, it also supports the idea that significant change involves people at each layer of the organization. The most successful changes are the result of a team effort (Scott, 2003). Leaders should consider each stage of this model as they steer change while upholding the mission of the organization. Particularly when leaders of large organizations, such as a university campus, are initiating change, they have to approach change using strategy, involving others, and keeping the organizational culture in mind.

Organization leaders may need to employ both planned and emergent change models to accommodate different circumstances across the organization. Similarly, different change models may be used for different units within the organization (Bess & Dee, 2008). Kezar and Eckel (2000) found implementing change strategies/models is effective if the strategies/models support the organizational culture. Their findings indicate it is critical for institutions to examine their own culture as they undergo the change process.
A Cultural Approach to Change

Cultural approaches to change expose the social and symbolic nature of organizations. Cultural considerations underscore the importance of people within the organization, their beliefs, personalities, feelings, and values (Kezar, 2003). For example, administrators exercising a cultural perspective as they orchestrate collaboration across units may consider how and why a move toward collaboration affects the identity of units involved. The culture of an organization is reflected at different levels—the organizational mission, individual beliefs, and at a subconscious level (Schein, 1985).

“One of the reasons for higher education’s success in a changing world has been its ability to stay focused on its mission” (Kezar, 2001, p. 8). But as the mission becomes vague, colleges and universities are tested to develop greater clarity about what the key role of higher education should be in the current context (Scott, 2003). Shared cultural traits, such as values and commitments, among institutional units keeps change focused on broader organizational priorities, rather than drifting toward independent goals (Bess & Dee, 2008).

A changing context gives reason to reexamine culture and structure (Kezar, 2001). Collaboration between units like academic affairs and student affairs prove difficult because of structural modifications that interfere with communication as well as relationship development and cultural differences. In organizational change, mission, strategy, leadership, and culture hold more weight than structure, management practices, and processes (Burke & Litwin, 1992). However, Kezar (2003) found a blended approach to change, incorporating structural and cultural strategies, would maximize the university change management process.
The University as a System

The organizational environment is comprised of key structural, procedural, political, cultural, and human features such as institutional policies, organizational charts, decision-making processes, leadership, training, climate, and politics (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Organizations are dynamic, self-regulated systems that strive to maintain a state of equilibrium (Bess & Dee, 2008). They maintain order when two critical elements are present: a clear sense of identity (mission) and freedom. Organizations are stronger and more coherent when people have the autonomy to make their own decisions while being guided by a well-defined organizational identity (Wheatley, 2006). This is especially important in loosely coupled organizations like a large university where there is greater independence among units like student affairs and academic affairs.

Originating in natural sciences and gaining prominence in the 1960s, general systems theory underscores the importance of system coordination. A system is a set of components that are interrelated, interactive, and interdependent in some relationship (Hall & Fagen, 1980; Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Most people have limited perspective of the total system because they focus on one part of the system and dismiss any other variables (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). However, general systems theory emphasizes the need to make the total system the focus of attention. As a result, systems theory encourages very broad generalizations about the character of an organization. In summary, general systems theory stresses the significance of environmental impacts on the organization, the diverse make-up of an organization, and the interdependence of the organization’s components (Kuh, 1983). By examining the total system, it is easier to understand how each part contributes to the overall mission. The theory provides a framework that focuses on the primary mission, or purpose, of a system.
Systems theory is a useful analytic method for beginning to understand organizational phenomena. Understanding general systems theory helps explain the relationships between system parts and the environment, or everything around the system (Bess & Dee, 2008; Wheatly, 2006). The new science explains that nothing lives alone and relationships are the foundation for everything. “We are constantly called to be in relationship—to information, people, events, ideas, life” (Wheatley, 2006, p.145). Relationships inevitably change as an organization’s experience changes. A systems theory approach can be a valuable way to explain the behavior of organizations coping with continuous change (Amagoh, 2008).

In order to understand systems theory, it is essential to be familiar with the components of the theory: inputs, organizational memory, and outputs. Inputs are anything that enters a system and is stored until needed to return to the environment as a product or result (Birnbaum, 1988). Organizational inputs take several forms, enabling systems to operate or providing bits of information to inform institutions about how they should behave or make decisions. Examples of inputs include products, raw materials, human resources, information, technology, cultural expectations, and past human predispositions (Bess & Dee, 2008). Once inputs are stored and recorded for future processing, they are saved in what is called the organizational memory. When the time comes, products are exported as outputs and returned back into the system (Birnbaum, 1988). A true transformation occurs when inputs enter a system. They are stored and then transformed through the use of different technologies and end as finished products. For example, knowledge, values, and attitudes are transformed in a college student (input) as they progress through higher education (Bess & Dee, 2008). As higher education leaders develop policies and practices, they should keep in mind that systems can reach a similar outcome with different
initiation positions and through different paths. This allows for strategy and decision-making to be specific to the mission, size, history, and culture of a specific institution.

One of the most common problems in systems is dividing people or units into specialized functions where expertise can be applied. University administrators are challenged to find ways to connect specialized people and units both structurally and relationally (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969). As systems grow, they become more decentralized and components take on more diverse roles. Also, as they grow, systems may lose vitality or break down. At this point, organizations risk the chance of entropy—a drift toward disorder or uncertainty in a system. During entropy, specialization and efficiency weaken, roles become blurred, and the ability to identify the functions of each system component declines (Bess & Dee, 2008).

A system is comprised of parts, but it cannot be fully understood by only studying its individual parts. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) examined several characteristics of systems such as wholeness, growth, differentiation, hierarchal order, dominance, control, and competition. Specifically, to understand a problem or behavior, it is essential to work with the whole system rather than individual problems or isolated parts. Kezar (2003) recommended applying the reengineering model to determine problems in the system. The model calls for all units and divisions across the organization to discuss roles, organizational charts, and work processes together. Daft (2005) added to the idea of wholeness, explaining when elements of the system fully understand the whole, each element within the system serves the goals of the whole system effectively. Studying the whole system provides insight into the parts and understanding the parts provides insight to the whole system (Wheatley, 2006).

Systems can be identified in two ways: closed systems and open systems (Amagoh, 2008; Bess & Dee, 2008; von Bertalanffy, 1968). The terms closed and open are used to describe the
control of boundaries (Bess & Dee, 2008). Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) originally developed these terms, defining closed systems as isolated from the environment and open systems as permeable and having continuous inflow and outflow (Bess & Dee, 2008). Held together with rigid boundaries, closed systems are linear and predictable (Birnbaum, 1988). While a closed system’s parts do not change, an open system is continuously looking for threats to initiate change and growth opportunities (Wheatly, 2006). With permeable boundaries, open systems cultivate interactions between the environment and various system parts (Birnbaum, 1988).

Because open systems are so responsive to change, they are able to regularly adjust to the environment, overcome entropy, and stay viable during disequilibrium (Wheatly, 2006). The strength of an open system comes from characteristics such as a strong center and clarity about what it is, what it needs, and what is needed to persist in its environment (Wheatley, 2006). In a changing environment, institutions of higher education can draw these characteristics from the institutional mission statement.

By drawing a boundary around a group of organizational happenings or behaviors, external audiences perceive that activity as a whole and seek to find meaning (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). As a result, the system develops an external identity, or the organization’s “public image” (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). This leads to perceptions about parts of the entire organization. To preserve a clear image of the institution, it is imperative that higher education leaders reach across boundaries to execute their roles and facilitate the flow of energy in and out of the institution (Bess & Dee, 2008). These valuable exchanges within systems take place at the boundary of a system. Thus, academic and student affairs units have an opportunity to maximize the amount of exchanges by determining where their work intersects, but the amount of attempts to accomplish these valuable exchanges is limited.
Academic and Student Affairs Units as Subsystems within the University

Understanding exchanges across subsystem boundaries is a critical component of higher education leadership (Bess & Dee, 2008). As mentioned, systems are separated from their environment by boundaries. Not only are boundaries used to distinguish systems, but they also help to delineate subsystems from their larger “supersystem” of which they are part (Birnbaum, 1988). Subsystems are described as basic units of the system that carry out a specific task and have their own characteristics and relationships (Bess & Dee, 2008). They can cause instability but are also depended on to work together and strengthen the organization as a whole (von Bertalanffy, 1968). For example, outputs from one subsystem may be desired by another subsystem, promoting collaboration and maximization. Wheatley (2006) pointed out while it seems like rigid boundaries are the best way to protect individuality and create differentiation within subsystems, they are also places for interaction and conversation.

Large research universities operate as loosely coupled organizations where subsystems are able to maintain a greater sense of independence (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Coupling refers to the strength of connections between organizational subsystems (Bess & Dee, 2008). Because of the autonomous nature of university units and departments, loose coupling is necessary to carry out an ambiguous mission. Unlike a tightly coupled organization, subsystems of a loosely coupled organization can make changes without causing any significant changes in another subsystem. As a result, this allows subsystems to be adaptable and responsive to function-specific problems or changes (Birnbaum, 1988). However, the same characteristics that enable a university to be adaptable and responsive also raise challenges for collaboration (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Higher education’s broad educational mission makes it unique. The mission serves and is
accomplished by numerous subgroups such as administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and external constituents (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). “The departmental silos and bureaucratic, hierarchal administrative structures in higher education represent an institutional and academic history that goes back a hundred years” (Kezar, 2005, p. 52). Specifically, Birnbaum (1988) explained how academic and student affairs administrators fulfill different roles and responsibilities, interact with different areas of campus, have different motivators, and come from varying backgrounds. As colleges and universities become more complex, the mission suffers and leaders within various subgroups face the possibility to drift from the mission. Ideally, all subgroups would work together in harmony to accomplish the institution’s mission. Instead, leaders from across the institution disagree on priorities and on how decisions are made (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

In the 19th century, the field of student affairs emerged from changing institutional priorities and faculty research expectations (Sandeen, 2011). Institutions were left with a gap and needed people to focus on student life outside of the classroom. Over time, the role of student affairs professionals is drifting away from original learning-centered responsibilities. Currently, students experience a disconnect between academic and student affairs work (Dale & Drake, 2005). Student affairs units are challenged to find a place within the institutional mission and discover some coherence in the curriculum to align their work (Sandeen, 2011). Despite the evolution of higher education and the changes that come with it, Dale and Drake (2005) argued there is a “responsibility for student learning to become systemic and cut across classrooms, disciplines, departments, and divisions” (p.53).
Organizational Culture and Models

While systems theory uncovers structural trends and patterns of communication and interactions, it does not provide insight into the qualitative connections among components. Like systems, cultures are bound and evaluated by who is in and who is out (Schein, 2010). The literature suggests a need for further investigation of what is happening inside a system (Bergquist, 1992; Bess & Dee, 2008). Social constructivists believe it is important for each system to be studied individually through qualitative research (Bess & Dee, 2008). Studying the personality of an organization became a significant concern in the 1980s (Daft, 2005). A cultural perspective is important because it can lead to insightful analyses of organizations and offer powerful ways to understand profound sets of meaning, ideas, and symbols. Specifically, Bergquist (1992) recommended studying collegiate organizations through a cultural lens in order to understand widespread complexities in a realistic way.

Schein (1985) determined culture exists at three levels: artifacts, values, and basic assumptions. Artifacts are defined as visible organizational structures and processes that illustrate what people do; values are the goals and philosophies that people believe; and basic assumptions are considered the unconscious beliefs, perceptions, and feelings that guide people’s actions (Schein, 1985, 1992). The basis of culture comes from the organizational history and shared assumptions among the organization’s members (Schein, 2010; Tierney, 1988). The culture of a college or university can be preserved and deepened through the academic programs, social environment, architecture and other aspects of the physical environment, and artifacts such as ceremonials, language, heroes, and stories. Defined as the set of key values, beliefs, understandings, and norms that is shared by organizational members, culture anchors an organization’s identity. Culture is formally reflected through analyzing the external environment,
structural organization, attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders, and through its symbols like the institutional mission (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Daft, 2005; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010).

Culture describes the enduring set of values that motivate an organizational system (Burke & Litwin, 1992). In academic organizations, culture informs stakeholders about the values and goals most and least important to organizational members (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Organizational values are the long-lasting principles that hold significance, quality, and prominence within the organization. Values tend to vary across institution type and each type is bound together by different variables: types of leaders, measures of success, and management styles (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). Values are central to the organizational culture because they guide assumptions and beliefs (Daft, 2005). These assumptions lead to norms that are rarely questioned and mostly taken for granted. In fact, members of a culture may not even be cognizant of their own culture until they confront a different one (Schein, 1996). Wilkins and Ouchi (1983) explained organizational culture is most obvious when organization members shift roles, when subcultures clash, and when top management implements change in the organization.

Each college or university will develop their own distinct culture, which is also positioned within the unique culture of the institutional type and the multifaceted culture of higher education as a whole (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Institutional culture gets even more complicated to navigate and understand as the landscape of higher education becomes more diverse (Museus, 2007). On a college or university campus, culture provides a framework to understand the meaning of events and activities on and off campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Understanding culture also assists campus leaders as they are forming integrative structures and relationships within the institution, through the decision-making process, during strategic
planning, and when their institutions are adapting and responding to external forces (Daft, 2005; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Tierney, 1988).

Cultures are always changing. When institutional characteristics change over time, the culture also transforms. Depending on characteristics such as institution size, type, mission, values, history, geographic location, budget, student demographics, and more, colleges and universities establish and re-establish their own unique cultures. Bergquist (1992) studied organizations as cultures, identifying four culture types of the academy. These culture types can also take shape on a smaller scale within units of an institution. The four cultural models are known as collegial, bureaucratic, political, and negotiating.

- **Collegial**: This loosely coupled model encourages open communication, informal relationships, and civil discourse. Due to the lack of structure, organizations suffer from lack of organization and consistency.

- **Managerial**: This hierarchal model is motivated by goals and purposes, placing responsibility on the institution to develop students as responsible citizens by providing specific knowledge, skills, and perspective. Administrators are responsible to manage, faculty are expected to lead their classrooms, and influence ensues through formal communication channels.

- **Developmental**: This humanistic model is focused on the personal and professional growth of organization members. Placing teaching and learning at the center of the institution, characteristics like logic, inquiry, conflict resolution, and inclusivity are highly valued.

- **Negotiating**: This egalitarian model responds to the managerial culture by proposing that educational programs and priorities are negotiable. To operate in
this culture, administrators develop equitable policies and procedures for distribution of resources and benefits in the institution.

Bergquist’s (1992) culture types directly relate to Birnbaum’s (1988) foundational work, the four models of organizational functioning. Each of Birnbaum’s models represents an archetype of the institution. Like Bergquist’s culture types, various characteristics among all four of Birnbaum’s cultural models can be found in one singular organization. Furthermore, units within the organization can adopt characteristics of these cultural models. The four models of organizational functioning include the collegial institution, bureaucratic institution, political institution, and anarchical institution. Like Bergquist’s collegial model, Birnbaum’s collegial institution values relationships. However, Birnbaum’s collegial model was described similarly to Bergquist’s negotiating model—considering others as equals and sharing power across the organization. Birnbaum’s bureaucratic institution drew parallels to Bergquist’s managerial model, being described as using a bureaucratic organizational structure to coordinate the work of organization members. Next, Birnbaum’s political institution was characterized by power—power gained by expertise and access. Similar to Bergquist’s negotiating model, the political institution is an environment where individuals rely on others for resources. Finally, the anarchical institution is unique to Birnbaum’s model, illustrating an organization that encourages autonomy to each individual, but also risking possible duplication and/or conflicting goals due to the lack of central decision-making. Birnbaum (1988) recommended the ideal organization as a cybernetic system, or a blend between the bureaucratic and collegial institution.

Bergquist’s and Birnbaum’s culture models provide a solid foundation for higher education administrators as they assess and expand collaboration on their campus. In addition, understanding the characteristics of campus culture types, administrators become more familiar
with the environment they are negotiating within. For example, when campus leaders encourage others to achieve the mission in collaboration, understanding their reality is essential (Bergquist, 1992). Maintaining a strong pulse on the personality of the university gives campus leaders an opportunity to plan against conflict among units and develop a customized, strategic plan to link all institutional behavior back to the university mission.

Kezar and Eckel (2002) believed institutions should conduct an organizational culture audit before initiating change. To conduct a culture audit, institutional leaders sift through rituals, stories, daily routines, language, and more to develop a holistic influence on institutional culture (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983). Tierney (1998) developed a framework for how a culture audit can be structured and examined. By evaluating institutional culture through six concepts—environment (describing the context and the effect of the environment on the organization), mission (how mission is defined, interpreted, and executed), socialization (how roles are learned and success is earned), information (what information is valuable and who controls it), strategy (how are decisions made and who makes them), and leadership (who are considered the organizational leaders and what is expected from them)—Tierney (1988) ensured organizational members would view the culture more clearly. Once an administrator considers each concept, they can successfully establish a comprehensive understanding of their university’s culture.

“An organization’s culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). Leadership is frequently associated with culture because understanding organizational culture is beneficial to understanding how to manage an organization. When an organization first establishes a foundation, leaders define the culture through intentional teaching, coaching, role modeling, reward allocation, recruitment, selection,
promotion, and other means of influence (Jaskyte, 2004). But instead of starting from a blank slate when shaping culture, leaders inherit raw materials from the past—values, beliefs, artifacts, stories, heroes and heroines, rituals, and practices (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Leaders adjust and build upon raw materials, using them to express cultural values. Specifically, Daft (2005) outlined four tools leaders use to communicate and permeate the culture:

- **Ceremony**: a planned, special event that is typically conducted for the benefit of an audience
- **Story**: a narrative based on true events that is repeated frequently and shared among employees
- **Symbol**: an object, act, or event that conveys meaning to others
- **Language**: slogans or sayings to express key organization values

People may perceive ceremonies, stories, symbols, and language in unique ways and, therefore, relate to the organization in unique ways (Daft, 2005). The differing assumptions and beliefs held by individuals and groups lead to differing meaning constructions (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). An organization’s culture develops over time as members ripen beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that permeate and spread to new members. As an organization develops and expands, members establish their own understandings and the organizational culture reveals the total group’s understanding (Jaskyte, 2004). The ongoing interactions between people and the varying interpretations of the organization are shaped by and shape the organizational culture (Daft, 2005; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). This dissertation examines and compares the views of academic and student affairs administrators regarding the roles of the two units, the relationship between the two, and what that means for furthering the institutional mission. Approaching this study with a cultural lens is necessary because “understanding culture is valuable when
considering why different groups in the organization hold varying perceptions about institution performance” (Tierney, 1988, p. 6).

An organization’s culture may not always align with the desires of the external environment. The difference between desired and real values and behaviors is termed the culture gap (Daft, 2005). Failure to align and achieve institutional goals can be linked to inconsistencies in the institution’s culture or mission, or the lack of fit between the existing culture and the institution’s mission (Bess & Dee, 2008). Culture feuds are perpetual across colleges and universities and are, therefore, always a work in progress. Fundamental questions about meaning, content, and teaching “continue to fuel the fires of intellectual and political combat” (Bolman & Gallos, 2011, p. 116).

Culture can be classified by degrees of strength. Lane (2007) explained higher education institutions consistently show strength in the ability to preserve traditional culture and values. Schein (1992) explained the similarity and steadiness of group members and the length and intensity of the group’s shared experiences determine culture strength. Culture strength indicates the level of agreement among organization members about the importance of specific values and ways of behaving (Daft, 2005). The culture is considered strong when there is a widespread agreement among members, and weak when there is little agreement. When a culture is strong and consistent, great stories about the university materialize and organizational sagas emerge. Clark (1972) defined an organizational saga as a collective understanding of institutional character and unique accomplishments in a formally established group. Strong organizations can dig back through their history and tell a story that elicits pride and energy among members. Awareness of institutional sagas provides insight into campus culture and values.

However, a strong culture that does not promote change can be more destructive to an
organization than a weak culture (Daft, 2005). Bess and Dee (2008) suggested universities should aim to be integrative or else their institutional culture may become too strong and coercive. In other words, it is critical for universities to implement integrative tools that encourage various departments across campus to collaborate and cooperate with other units. With this in mind, university administrators can influence positive change and adaptability to continuous external forces by reaching across campus and working together. Specifically, this cultural approach promotes the intersection between academic and student affairs units.

**Mission and Culture**

To determine how well an organization preserves its culture, one should examine its mission statement (Konz & Ryan, 1999). Organizations utilize mission as an instrument to shape the organizational culture (Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997; Toma, Dubrow & Hartley, 2005). “Institutional leaders and researchers should consider the importance of understanding and using culture to shape the fabric and future of their institutions” (Museus, 2007, p. 39). The mission can serve as an institutional lens to understand change in the environment and relate institutional objectives with current events (Hendrickson, Lange, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Ultimately, mission statements stimulate productivity by providing organizational members with a clear sense of the organization’s purpose and goals (Kuh, 1983). As previously described, academic organizations are known to wrestle with goal ambiguity, highly specialized staff, vague decision-making processes, and environmental susceptibility.

Preserving the culture of an organization proves difficult, but is still easier than changing a culture (Konz & Ryan, 1999). For an effective culture change, it is essential for the entire college community—from the leadership to the frontline staff—to understand and accept a paradigm shift that includes new behaviors, vocabulary, and organizational norms (Dale &
Drake, 2005). Cummings and Huse (1989) suggested culture change could be facilitated through implementing a new version of the mission statement. Changing the institutional mission most often occurs as institutions of higher education evolve (Jia, 2009). When the market changes, colleges and universities have a chance to take advantage of new opportunities. During strategic planning, organizations develop a strategic fit with such changing market opportunities (Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Mission statement development becomes a central priority in order to build consensus and establish the new priorities during the planning process (Butler, 2000; Cochran & David, 1986; Isch, 1986).

The mission of the institution is one of the most visible and powerful articulations of the culture. It relates directly to campus values and provides guidance for people to act (Bolman & Deal, 2008). For an institution to stand out, the mission should incorporate unique characteristics specific to the institution. To accomplish this, it is key for the mission development process to be thorough and focused on university strengths. Kotler and Murphy (1981) determined a mission statement should be developed keeping the purpose and the strengths of the university in mind. In fact, the process for developing the mission may be more valuable than the actual document itself (David, 1989). Kotler and Murphy (1981) offered a business-related approach and recommend key stakeholders consider the following questions when developing or changing an institutional mission statement: What is our organization? Who is the customer? What is our value to the customer? What will our organization be? What should our organization be?

Mission statements impact organizational culture by provoking emotions and building relationships. Since non-profit institutions operate with multiple purposes, they may experience an identity crisis. This leaves colleges and universities with the difficult task to develop a mission statement that represents shared identity. Thinking critically about mission and space
encourages institutional leaders to challenge current structures and cultural elements (Fugazzotto, 2009). Campus leaders that subscribe to mission-driven management view the mission statement as a commitment. These leaders are challenged to drive the institution toward the mission while also communicating the mission to organizational members who are employing the organization’s strategy (Bolton, Brunnermeier, & Veldkamp, 2008).

Mission drives the behavior of the organization and organization members. This suggests reinforcement of the mission matters. When specific words or phrases are incorporated in the mission statement, organizational members are likely to place higher value on those areas and adjust their behavior accordingly. For example, research shows that schools explicitly stating ethical content in their mission statements actually influence student ethical alignment (Davis, Ruthe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2007). McDonald’s (2007) research agreed a clear, motivating mission statement helps an organization focus its attention on the innovations that support mission achievement. As a result, organizations with clear, motivating missions tend to be more innovative. As university administrators promote collaboration throughout the institution, the mission statement can be their tool.

**University Subcultures**

A total system illuminates an overall culture. Likewise, each subsystem within a total system can be characterized by a subculture (Schein, 1990). Subcultures can be described as small-scale cultures within a parent culture. Like the parent culture, subcultures share their own set of norms, values and beliefs. These may differ from the parent culture (Boisnier & Chatman, 2002; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Museus, 2007). For example, units across the university operate within unique subcultures that may be different from the overall institutional culture. Subcultures originate largely by like-minded people that face similar challenges (Boisnier & Chatman, 2002).
As organizations grow and mature, subcultures emerge and increase the capacity for organizations to be innovative and responsive (Boisnier & Chatman, 2002; Schein, 1990).

Large, dynamic, and complex organizations serve as “breeding grounds” for subculture development (Boisnier & Chatman, 2002, p. 22; Trice & Beyer, 1994). As stated previously, cultural values not only vary across institution type, but also within an institution. Subcultures seem to be inevitable at colleges and universities due to multiple units operating within one organization (Toma, Dubrow & Hartley, 2005). In fact, colleges and universities are so complex that subcultures can sometimes form within subcultures (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Subcultures can often be in competition with one another for resources, status, and power, challenging university leaders to prioritize and find opportunities for collaboration (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Collaboration is a shared responsibility (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Kuo’s (2009) data suggested the relationship between the academic and student affairs units could be both professional and collegial at times. However, collaboration between the two units proves challenging due to cultural and communication barriers. For over 100 years, autonomy, specialization, and competition have existed and contribute to the development of cultural differences between student and academic affairs units (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Kuo’s (2009) findings indicated the relationship between the two units is also fragmented due to administrative bureaucracies and poor interactions. Consequently, the two units operate as subsystems with their own unique subcultures. Philpott and Strange (2003) emphasized collaboration does not mean one unit needs to behave like the other, but instead it means to utilize both units’ talents to create a comprehensive student experience.

Cultural differences are identified as the primary obstacle for academic and student affairs collaboration. To name a few, academic and student affairs units experience a disconnect
in research content, lack of shared journal readings, differing values, skills, organizational structures, program outcomes, languages, and differences in professional preparation (Dale & Drake, 2005; Whitt et al., 2008). Even using similar words to discuss their work, the meanings are interpreted differently within the academic and student affairs subcultures. For example, Whitt, Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, McDonald, and Wells (2008) found academic and student affairs personnel have different answers when asked what it means to educate students. In addition, the relationship between academic and student affairs also conflicts because the two units differ in priorities and work style (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Kuo, 2009). Traditionally, faculty assume the role of sole educator and focus on knowledge, while student affairs units are known to serve students outside of the classroom and focus on a holistic student development approach (Hirt & Robbins, 2016). Specialization occurs across academic and administrative structures, creating unique goals and values across campus (Kezar & Lester, 2009). For example, student affairs units are described as collaborative and group-oriented while academic affairs units operate autonomously (Bourrassa & Krueger, 2001). The friction between the units is amplified by structural differences and conflicting sources of motivation (Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Kezar, 2006). Because each unit is positioned differently, decision-making is decentralized and senior leaders in academic and student affairs units may find themselves competing for power, resources, and influence (Kezar & Lester, 2009). The quality of exchanges between academic and student affairs units can indicate the effectiveness of campus management (Birnbaum, 1988).

As the two units work toward an effective relationship, managing cultural differences remains the top priority.

Depending on the people in leadership roles, the relationships between academic and student affairs units can change quickly (Kuo, 2009). Effective leaders in higher education will
aim to establish shared commitments between units to achieve institutional improvements (Bess & Dee, 2008). To understand collaboration between academic and student affairs units, an understanding of the differences between the two cultures is fundamental (Whitt et al., 2008). Kuo (2009) drove this point by affirming the best context for collaboration is when both academic and student affairs leaders understand “the complex cultural factors involved in maintaining effective relationships” (Kuo, 2009, p. 53). For successful collaboration, each unit must perform a culture audit to understand their own culture and the boundaries they create (Magolda, 2005). Once a culture audit is administered and units acknowledge and support the values of one another, relationships have the potential to strengthen (Kuo, 2009).

**Academic Culture**

Faculty self describe their roles as independent scholars responsible for research advancement and student teaching (Kuo, 209). Frequently cited in the literature, autonomy proves to be a highly prioritized value associated with the academic culture (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Kuo, 209; Magolda, 2005; Smerek, 2010). From the beginning of their academic career with the dissertation process through achieving tenure, faculty are conditioned to work in isolation and discouraged to pursue collaboration (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). In addition, the academic reward culture supports individual accomplishments and independence. Factors perpetuating this culture include individual teaching evaluations, singular leadership efforts, single author publications, and special distinction for individual goals met, individual programs developed, and personal development (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Lane, 2007). As a result of these factors and more, faculty tend to be independent thinkers who are isolated in their own worlds (Kuo, 2009).

The academic culture is made-up of several academic disciplines that have their own
cultural features (Birnbaum, 1988). Faculty culture mirrors many of the cultural features of their specific discipline (Bess & Dee, 2008). Those in academic affairs units, specifically faculty, tend to be disconnected from larger institutional activities and more focused on advancing their academic discipline through teaching, research, writing, and publishing (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Additionally, any issues are examined through a disciplinary or departmental lens (Kuo, 2009). Placing high value on creativity and innovation, the academic culture promotes nonconformity. In order to preserve academic freedom and freedom of inquiry, the academic community encourages scholars to challenge the process (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000).

Although specific disciplines shape academic culture, faculty across campus share some things in common: they generate and disseminate knowledge, prioritize academic freedom and individual autonomy, promote collegiality, and view plagiarism as the ultimate crime (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000; Magolda, 2005; Smerek, 2010). They are known to be domineering of their courses, their student contact time, and their undesignated time (Lane, 2007). Particularly at research universities, their research agendas are rigid, viewing every hour spent with a student, out-of-class, as an hour lost toward research and creativity (Schuh, 1999). Faculty are skeptical of administrative authority, questioning if it is actually helpful or worth considering (Schuh, 1999). They do not tolerate bureaucratic overreach or violation of legitimate, credible processes and procedures (Schuh, 1999). So while administrators may be working toward efficiency, faculty are likely motivated by logic over productivity (Kezar, 2006). Ultimately, faculty believe they understand the needs of students best and that activities in the classroom are superior to other activities happening out-of-class (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000).
**Student Affairs Culture**

The field of student affairs was developed to support students outside of the classroom, signaling a shift from institutions focusing primarily on the mind of the student to recognizing the social and psychological needs of the student as well (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Engstrom and Tinto (2000) explained academic and student affairs subsystems operate with shared purposes—education of the whole student. This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of a student’s personal growth (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Magolda (2005) described student affairs work as nurturing students’ various needs, cultivating a respect for diversity, developing ethical leaders, and increasing students’ self-awareness and personal goals. This holistic approach enables student affairs administrators to foster collaboration and effectiveness (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

The student affairs administration structure is bureaucratic and hierarchal in nature, opening communication from the top-down, but limiting communication across units (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Student affairs units are classified as loosely coupled systems. As a result, the capacity to form partnerships weakens as the university expands in size (Paine, 2013). The relationships between student affairs units nationwide are not closely tied, but the alliance that does exist is credited to a shared loyalty to the university, belief in the student development philosophy, and professional commitment (Kuh, 1983). Unlike the academic culture, the student affairs administrative culture is focused on operational effectiveness, strategic planning, human resources, and allocating inadequate funds (Kuo, 2009; Smerek, 2010). The pressures that come with these responsibilities cause administrators to focus on operational and practical values such as clarity, accountability, and consistency (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Higher education faces pressure “from a multitude of constituencies to demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals” (Rosser & Javinar, 2003, p. 813).
Feeling the reality of these pressures, student affairs administrators manage multiple goals at once (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Given the challenge to achieve multiple goals, the culture of student affairs units can be characterized as ambiguous (Kuh, 1983). Student affairs units find more success collaborating in groups to solve problems and accomplish goals (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). While in collaboration, student affairs professionals contribute unique assets. They are relied on as experts at understanding and appreciating diverse principles, student developmental needs, student subcultures, interpersonal dynamics, managing conflict, team building, popular culture, and understanding how institutional processes and politics work (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Furthermore, the student voice is represented because student affairs administrators seek student involvement in decision-making and serve as student advocates (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Caring for the whole student may be the constant during a time of change (Paine, 2013).

**Collaboration**

Under pressure from challenging financial times, changing demographics, globalization, federal accountability, and increased complexity, higher education leaders are required to rethink their work (Kezar, 2005; Kezar & Lester, 2009). With an increased interest to grow and improve campus-wide programs within the current institutional context, the culture of collaboration between academic and student affairs units is pressing. In fact, Dale and Drake (2005) insisted programmatic outcomes are enriched through collaboration between campus partners.

When everyone on campus—specifically academic and student affairs administrators—shares the responsibility for student learning, significant progress can be made toward improving it. However, Kezar and Lester (2009) stressed these types of partnerships are a “struggle to become institutionalized because higher education institutions are generally organized in
departmental silos and bureaucratic or hierarchal administrative structures” (p. 5). According to
business literature, units serving self-interests do not contribute significantly and efficiently to
the organization’s larger goals (Boyer, 1987). Although, when the big-picture is considered and
an initiative is accomplished through the efforts of multiple units, collective wisdom is
established and the stage for collaboration is set (Engelkemeyer & Brown, 1998). Kezar and
Lester (2009) argued maximizing the university’s collective wisdom can result in innovation and
learning, cognitive complexity, better service, cost effectiveness and efficiency, employee
motivation, student learning and teaching success, increased research production, improved
government and management, and greater operational effectiveness. Unfortunately,
Engelkemeyer and Brown (1998) found most colleges miss the mark by not using collective
wisdom to accomplish student learning.

First, to share responsibility for student learning, learning needs to be considered a duty
for both academic and student affairs units. According to the learning principles Engelkemeyer
and Brown (1998) referenced in their report, learning is fundamentally about making and
maintaining connections; it is a developmental, cumulative process involving the whole person;
and it can take place informally and incidentally. Considering learning through this lens, student
affairs leaders should acknowledge direct links to the student learning experience. The report
explained that everyone involved in the learning process is responsible for contributing to the
learning process. Consequently, in order to enhance the student learning experience,
collaboration between academic and student affairs units is necessary.

Schuh (1999) agreed linking out-of-class and academic endeavors results in a high-
quality academic experience. He introduced principles to evaluate the pulse of collaboration on a
college campus:
1. Student learning is essential to the institution’s mission.

2. Student learning is the organizing principle of the student experience.

3. The learning process for students is seamless.

4. Credit experiences require out-of-class experiences.

5. Student affairs staff co-teach courses with faculty.

6. Students describe learning as continuous.

7. Faculty interact with students regularly outside of the classroom.

8. Institutional committees and task forces include a balanced number of academic and student affairs professionals.

9. The development of learning communities is widely supported on campus.

Higher education leaders gain a better sense of their collaborative status based on whether or not these principles are pursued or mastered. Additionally, these principles help leaders identify where they are effective and where they can put forth more energy toward collaboration. Academic and student affairs units can best reflect and spread the institution’s mission when the units operate with good practice for partnership. Good practice for partnership includes fostering a learning-oriented culture, cultivating and nourishing relationships, awareness and consideration of the institutional culture, prioritizing assessment, and using resources strategically (Whit et al, 2008).

Strict, Dalton, and Crosby (2009) determined collaborations between academic and student affairs partners can “range from highly structured to casual personal contacts” (p. 11). When collaboration is successfully led, partnerships are defined as an organizational core value used to solve institutional problems or take advantage of institutional opportunities. A collaborative leader may also leverage assessment shifts, modify organizational structures, and
adjust budget allocation to enable collaboration (Dale & Drake, 2005). In addition, successful, collaborative campuses develop reward structures that reinforce collaboration, design administrative structures to reinforce people working across subsystems, and focus on being student-centered and forward-thinking (Kezar, 2005). To establish priorities at a large institution, resources and incentives are often needed. The structure and strategies that involve money or incentives are found to be more important at institutions with enrollments of more than 10,000 students. Finally, when organization members understand the benefits of collaboration from leaders, in addition to learning how to do it, they receive collaboration better.

In order for universities to maximize innovation and learning, cognitive complexity, customer service, value, and employee motivation, higher education leaders need to take responsibility for modeling collaboration on behalf of a shared mission (Engelkemeyer & Brown, 1998; Kezar & Lester, 2009). Ultimately, the directive to link the work of academic and student affairs units together comes from the president and other senior leaders (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Kezar (2005) added, senior administrative support was reported to be the single most valuable strategy for creating partnerships due to the sense of priority from people in senior positions. The literature suggests collaboration may be successfully led by one leadership position that reaches across both aisles, linking units together and managing resources cohesively (Philpott & Strange, 2003). However, there is an indication larger institutions with enrollments over 10,000 students may need to rely less on leadership and instead focus more on planning and restructuring (Kezar, 2003). These findings are consistent with the literature on institutional change—larger institutions rely on alterations to structure and incentives because changing the culture or reaching the whole community is too difficult (Kezar, 2001).

Strict, Dalton, and Crosby (2009) identified seven areas where collaboration between
academic and student affairs partners can take place on campus: (a) learning compacts, or formalized/structured interactions; (b) research, pairing faculty expertise with student development topics; (c) consultation, or teaching; (d) faculty advising of recognized student organizations; (e) committees/task forces, representing joint participation; (f) sharing facilitates/resources; (g) and informal contact/unplanned interactions. To begin collaboration efforts, universities focus collaborative activities on the three key pillars of the institutional mission: teaching, research, and service. Kezar and Lester (2009) provided examples of academic and student affairs integration that further the teaching, research, and service mission. Collaborative teaching can be service learning courses or first-year experience programs where faculty are developing curriculum and student affairs staff are coordinating community partnerships or providing supportive resources. Using similar collaborative strategies to advance the research profile of a university, faculty can apply their research expertise while working toward solving issues within the community—relying heavily on units like student affairs for connections to the community, getting students involved in the research initiative, providing resources such as space and supplies and/or promoting the research to their audiences. Achieving the service portion of the institutional mission relies on collaborative design. When service efforts, from planning to execution, are a campus-wide effort, more people are likely to be involved and therefore more community members are reached and the service leaves a greater impact. Service can also be an on-campus effort and all units, academic and student affairs units alike are responsible for reaching across the aisle and involving others in their activities.

Areas where academic and student affairs units overlap and have an opportunity to develop partnerships include student leadership programs, academic and behavioral misconduct issues, student recruitment efforts, residential learning communities, new student orientation,
service learning programs, distance education programs, counseling services, academic advising, academic bridge programs, conflict management services, campus-wide strategic planning, and first-year student retention programs (Boyer, 1987; Dale & Drake, 2005; Kezar, 2001).

According to Kezar (2001), first-year programs, orientation, counseling, and recruitment programs are the areas that proved most successful in partnerships. Kezar’s (2001) findings showed public, four-year institutions were most successful developing partnerships with 54% having six or more successful collaborations. Learning benefits were cited as the most important reason for engaging in partnership.

Kezar and Kinzie (2006) determined honing in on a few collaborative programs directly focused on the mission is better than implementing multiple. Their findings suggest that successfully improved student engagement strategies are thoughtful to their mission. Aligning programs and policies with the institutional mission is beneficial during times of change and accountability (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Additionally, focusing assessment efforts to be more learning centered will help get both units on the same page (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001).

Conclusion

Higher education endures a changing environment. As universities face change, they are challenged to stay grounded and guided by their mission. Several disconnected units are responsible for assisting the university to accomplish the mission while also responding to a changing environment. Campus units like student affairs get distracted by responding to daily challenges and quickly lose sight of and stray away from the original mission. However, campus administrators need to keep in mind that in order to effectively execute the university mission, all units should not only be involved but also work together. Understanding institutional mission
and organizational change is necessary for university leaders to effectively manage large-scale change toward collaboration that permeates across campus units.

To further understand the relationships across the university, this chapter examined the institution as a system made up of multiple subsystems that interconnect. The literature explains that when the subsystems work together, the whole organization becomes stronger. This reinforces the demand for and benefits of collaboration at a large, public university. Next, to broaden understanding about what happens inside a system, this chapter explored organizational culture. When leaders gain insight into the institutional culture, they have a better idea of how to integrate units and processes. In addition, insight into subcultures among university units directs university leaders to distinguish the opportunities and barriers for collaboration. The academic affairs subculture is described as autonomous in thinking, collegial in decision-making, and focused on advancing the academic disciplines. The student affairs unit’s culture is described as collaborative in thinking, bureaucratic in decision-making, and focused on developing the whole student. Understanding academic and student affairs as subcultures informs university leaders of conflicting values and goals and prepares them to strategically plan future interactions. Finally, the chapter ended with a discussion about collaboration within a university setting and the benefits, opportunities, and obstacles university leaders encounter when executing collaboration.

The literature investigates the relationship between academic and student affairs units, but there is limited research specifically featuring the collaboration between the units related to the institutional mission. More specifically, there is little research involving administrator perspectives regarding this topic. The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering institutional mission at a large, public, research university through a case study conceptualized
by assumptions from the preceding literature. Chapter 3 will outline methods and research design used for this dissertation study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design and methods used for this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the study, the purpose of the study, and the research questions guiding the study. Next, the chapter provides an explanation of the research design, the rationale for the site and participants selected for this study, the data collection process, and the data analysis. The chapter concludes with the risks and benefits of the study, the researcher’s subjectivity statement, and a summary.

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at a large, public research university. “To understand the campus environment, it is vital to uncover the lenses, understand how individuals make meaning from their particular lens, and describe how people’s many lenses connect and weave together,” notes Hirt and Robbins (2016, p. 63). To accomplish this goal, a qualitative case study method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of how key administrators perceive the work of and relationship between academic affairs and student affairs units in relation to the institutional mission statement. To ensure all participants were up-to-date with the institutional mission statement, I brought and shared a copy of Highlands University’s mission statement with each participant before the interview began. Ultimately, the individual assumptions and meanings of various university administrators collectively “co-create” the institution’s reality, which will be revealed in the study’s findings (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Wheatley, 2006).
In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, the participants for the study represented multiple perspectives from both academic and student affairs units. This study examined administrators at one institution that has experienced a rapid increase in student population and recently placed an emphasis on experiential learning (linking in-class and out-of-class experiences). Because of growing student numbers and the experiential learning initiative, university units working together to execute student learning and success is more important than ever at this institution.

**Research Questions**

This case study investigation addressed three research questions:

1. How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of academic affairs and student affairs units to the institutional mission?

2. What relationship is perceived between the cultures of academic and student affairs units related to the institutional mission?

3. What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?

**Research Design**

For this study, a qualitative case study method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of how administrators perceive the work of and relationship between academic and student affairs units in relation to the institutional mission (Creswell, 2013). Stake (1995) explained a case as a “specific, complex, functioning thing” (p. 2), and the qualitative approach will “gain an experiential understanding of the case” (p.40). Museus (2007) emphasized the value of qualitative research design by explaining the significant role it plays in shaping behaviors and experiences. A qualitative research design considers multiple levels of institutional
culture, including all relevant voices and varying analytical perspectives. Overall, a qualitative case study can explain, describe, illustrate, and enlighten (Yin, 2014).

Researchers identified different types of case study research designs: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015; Stake, 1995). When a study is focused more on examining a particular individual, group, event, or organization, rather than understanding a big-picture question or problem, it is defined as an intrinsic research design. Conversely, an instrumental case study design is when the specific case being studied is secondary to understanding the bigger problem. Lastly, researchers describe collective case study design as studying a collection of instrumental cases within the same project while also contributing to the current literature (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015; Stake, 1995).

To answer the research questions, this study employed an instrumental single-case study design. The data were collected with in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis (e.g., strategic plans, organizational charts, quality enhancement plan information, institutional assessment, student learning assessment), both characteristic of case study research. This case study was designed to provide a rich, thick description of a bounded system and lend insight to the bigger picture (Merriam, 2009).

Site Selection and Rationale

This study examined one large, public research university in the Southeast region of the United States and the academic and student affairs administrators within the institution. The mission of the university studied focuses on advancing the intellectual and social condition of people by providing quality programs in the areas of teaching, research, and services. For the purpose of this study, a large research university is defined using the Carnegie Classification framework. A large research university is characterized as a public, 4-year institution, with more
than 10,000 students and granting at least 20 research doctoral degrees during the Carnegie
update year. A single research site was selected to gain an in-depth, focused understanding of 22
administrators’ perspectives. The institution selected for this study experienced an unprecedented
enrollment growth in the last 10 years, flourishing from approximately 22,000 to 36,000
students. As enrollment increased, the student demographics broadened, heightening the demand
of student support services. Additionally, in 2015, the institution under study launched a five-
year formal program promoting experiential learning. The program provides formalized
institutional momentum toward linking co-curricular experiences to the academic curriculum.
This purposeful sample provided an “information-rich” setting to conduct research, yielding
results that directly address the research questions (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002, p. 196). The
pseudonym used for the university is Highlands University.

**Participant Selection**

To gain a comprehensive, balanced perspective on the research topic, the participants in
this study represent administrators from both academic and student affairs units. For the purpose
of this study, university administrators are those leading various university units and/or are
influential in steering the organization. Therefore, their perceptions are significant because, as
university leaders, they have wide-ranging institutional knowledge and are influencing others’
perceptions.

A total of 22 participants from Highlands University were classified by three categories:
chief administrators, central administrators, and staff (see Table 1). These administrative
categories are differentiated based on where they fit within the organizational chart. The way
administrators are characterized and organized for this study is directly reflective of the specific
institution being studied. Chief administrators are defined as those that report directly to the
president, vice presidents or provost (e.g., vice presidents, provost, assistant/associate vice presidents, assistant/associate vice provosts, deans). Central administrators are those that report to assistant/associate vice presidents, assistant/associate vice provosts, deans (e.g. assistant and associate deans, directors and executive directors). Finally, staff can be defined as anyone that reports to central administrators and any other leaders within academic and student affairs units. Administrators were selected as the participants of this study over other university stakeholders such as faculty, students, and alumni because of their broad understanding of the university, the sense of priority/urgency they impart on the organization, and their leadership in facilitating strategic planning and structural changes (Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2005). The study aimed to represent a balanced amount of academic and student affairs administrators across all three categories. Due to the unequal distribution of people willing and able to participate in the study, the number of participants representing each category varied. The study ultimately captured the experiences of nine academic affairs administrators and 13 student affairs administrators. Eight of the participants represented the chief administrator category, nine participants served as central administrators, and eight participants were characterized as staff. Ultimately, selecting participants based not only on what unit they are part of but also where they fit within the organizational chart is important as this study aimed to be representative.

Through purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013), administrators were targeted by their title and responsibilities at the institution. I identified potential participants at each administrative level using tools like the university website directory and organizational charts. Once the potential participants were identified, each administrator received an e-mail informing them of the study. To provide further detail of the study, the e-mail included attachments of the participant consent form and a copy of the IRB approval. Any university administrator that fell
within the categories outlined was eligible to receive the e-mail and participate in the study. However, the participants represented in the study are those that responded positively to the email requesting their participation.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Weber</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. White</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ferguson</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
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<td>Dr. Flores</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
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<td>Dr. Johnson</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
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<td>Dr. Stephens</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Adams</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Fuller</td>
<td>Chief Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Cook</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Spell</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Davis</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis Jones</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige Alexander</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Rose</td>
<td>Central Administrator</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran Collins</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Tate</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrystal Tickles</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaitlyn Price</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashley Braves</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith Madden</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caroline Reed</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vivian Douglas</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>Academic Affairs</td>
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</table>

From there, the interviews were scheduled strategically so I was able to conduct several interviews per day, over a two-month period. The interview schedule was developed primarily on availability. The one-on-one interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and the participants were asked to consider the institutional mission statement while answering the interview questions. To ensure all participants were up-to-date with the institutional mission statement, I
brought and shared a copy of Highlands University’s mission statement with each participant before the interview began. It should be noted that any academic affairs administrators with previous professional experience in a student affairs unit were identified and analyzed separately to account for any variances in their understanding of student affairs work and how it relates to the academic mission of the institution. Any student affairs professionals previously occupying a role in an academic affairs unit were handled the same way.

**Data Collection**

The content for Chapter 4 consists of the data collected from this study. I collected data for this case study by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis. All interviews were held in the participants’ personal offices, adding to the qualitative experience. According to Creswell (2013), conducting research in the natural setting will provide the most realistic picture of what goes on in the organization and expose aspects about the participant that is inaccessible in other settings. In compliance with the Institutional Review Board, written consent was obtained as a first step of every interview. Next, I provided an introduction thanking the participant for participating, clarifying why they were asked to participate, and explaining the purpose of the study. To ensure all participants were up-to-date with the institutional mission statement, I brought and shared a copy of Highlands University’s mission statement with each participant before the interview began.

The interviews were guided by a protocol of open-ended questions I developed. The protocol was used to gather data that addresses the study’s research questions. Two interview protocols were used to customize questions for the two primary units that were examined—academic affairs administrators and student affairs administrators (see appendix A and B). The appropriate protocol was administered depending on the unit an administrator represented. At
times, I deviated from the prepared protocol to allow participants to share experiences and provide details without boundaries. The interview questions prompted participants to reflect on their experiences regarding academic affairs work, student affairs work, and the institutional mission. With permission from the participant, the 45-minute interviews were audio recorded. Throughout the interview, I also documented field notes—jotting observations, questions, codes, and ideas for future interviews or any documents needed to supplement what participants are saying (Roulston, 2010). Each interview concluded with me asking participants if they could share any valuable documents that could contribute to the study.

Once the interviews concluded, the audio files were transcribed verbatim and coded using an open-coding process, allowing for the data to shape itself and “capture new insights” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 197). The codes emerged into themes that guided the data analysis. To protect the privacy of participants, a pseudonym was assigned to each administrator and used when reporting any responses throughout the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Roulston (2010) designated qualitative research as a generative process. Throughout the research process, I consistently updated a digital journal, documenting any questions, ideas, memos, codes, “a-ha” moments, emerging themes, etc. Using a constant comparison mode of analysis, the interviews were transcribed and coded for themes as soon as the data were collected (Roulston, 2010).

After making field notes during the interviews, transcribing participant comments, and reading and rereading transcripts, I approached the data analysis with some broad themes in mind. After immersing myself in the data, the data went through an open-coding process and the codes were used to generate more specific themes. Once the interviews were transcribed, I
moved all the transcriptions to an excel document where I grouped two to three lines of text together and assigned codes to participant comments. Each code assigned captured approximately one to three sentences of participant comments. Once all of the interviews went through the first level of coding, the codes were grouped as they related to one another, developing themes. Five themes were named based on the grouping of codes: Prioritizing collaboration at the top, a shifting meaning of student learning, academic affairs as the primary function, “us and them,” and an institutional approach. The “us and them” theme was named using the vivo coding technique. In vivo coding is used when the participant says it best and the code is labeled using actual participant terminology (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the in vivo code became a theme because it encompassed the overall idea of a group of codes. The data analysis was organized by the themes that emerged during the coding process. The literature in Chapter 2 was used to assist in gathering information for and shaping the data analysis. Within the emergent themes, I addressed the study’s research questions and related the findings back to the areas of institutional mission, organizational change and change theory, general systems theory, organizational culture, and collaboration. Ultimately, the data analysis addressed the roles and responsibilities of student affairs and academic affairs units, the relationship between the two units, and what the relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at a large, public institution.

**Risks and Benefits**

The risks and benefits of the study were explained to the participants in the participant consent form included in the initial participant recruitment e-mail. There were no anticipated risks for participants in this study. Some participants may have felt distressed or uncomfortable reflecting on and discussing the complexities of their institution, especially if they had a negative
attitude towards specific topics a question(s) covered. To be certain the participants were as comfortable as possible, they were instructed at the beginning of the interview to skip over any questions or take a break, if needed. The participants had no risk of being identified with their responses because all participants were given an option of remaining anonymous. A pseudonym was used anywhere they were mentioned in order to protect participant privacy. In addition, participants’ formal titles are never mentioned and the real name of the university is not used. All original research study materials and documents only remained accessible by the faculty chair and myself. Information from the interviewers was kept in a locked filing cabinet, and electronic data was maintained on a password protected computer. The audio files of the interview were immediately deleted after transcription. In terms of benefits, the participants could have seen the interview experience as an opportunity to reflect on a significant issue in the field of higher education. By participating in the interview process, the participants were reminded of their direct influence on the relationship between academic affairs and student affairs units. They also may have viewed contributing to growing literature as a benefit.

**Subjectivity Statement**

As the primary instrument of a case, it is important for the researcher to reveal his/her subjectivity (Merriam, 2009). By stating the researcher position, readers understand the researcher’s relationship to the study and how it influences the research design and interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). In this section, I discuss my personal and professional experiences that shape my relationship to this research topic. I explain my perspective on the relevance of student affairs work, as well as my preconceived expectations of the relationship between academic and student affairs units.
I take a constructivist stance, interpreting the college campus as a space for students to create their own meaning and truth (Crotty, 1998). I am dedicated to creating opportunities where students can further define who they are while also making connections across all of their collegiate experiences. I believe people have a deep desire to feel connected to a group or community, and college students are no different. I view student affairs administrators as the people who reach out to students, outside of class, and provide intentional student groups, programs, or experiences to connect students to each other, the community, and the academic environment. As a former student affairs practitioner, I approached my work through an academic lens. I believe the goal of student affairs work is to complement what is happening inside of the classroom. To succeed in developing the “whole student” and to stay relevant in a university setting, it is important for student affairs leaders to consider the academic experience. Together, academic and student affairs units can work together to create a seamless and comprehensive student experience where students do not feel like they are part of a fragmented organization. Instead, the goal is for students to feel a part of one aligned community.

I am deeply invested in this research topic because of my academic background and professional experience. I earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs from a large, public research institution and went directly into a student affairs career at a similar institution. During my graduate experience, I was exposed to many ideas that shape my perspective of the student affairs field and how it fits into the landscape of higher education. At this particular institution, the vice president for student affairs also served as the dean of students and the vice provost. In this model, our leader had one foot in the student affairs unit and one foot in the academic affairs unit. I did not recognize it until later, but this simple structural detail influenced my view of how the relationship should work—collaboratively. The importance of
partnership became more clear to me when I transitioned to a professional position with academic affairs. The gaps between academic and student affairs play out in my work every day, and the possibilities for partnership become more evident. However, I am learning the importance of respecting boundaries and expertise while reaching out to collaborate.

I am aware that some view the work of student affairs as “fluff” (Helfgot, 2005). Even with my blended experience and respect for student affairs work, I find myself questioning how some of the work relates to student learning. It is my fear that the student affairs field may not be seen as a credible learning-centered field. However, it is possible that if administrators in student affairs units approach initiatives with a learning-centered lens, the field can be seen for the valuable work it produces. If student affairs and academic affairs units shared a mutually beneficial relationship, the units can function to their full potential and, in turn, provide the maximum student learning experience.

I am often curious about the core purpose of an initiative or organization and see significant value in using a mission statement as the guiding tool for an organization. In my opinion, all areas within an institution should be aligned with the institutional mission. The mission should provide guidance so that all areas work toward one goal. I am particularly interested in the relationships across the institution, specifically those relationships that directly enhance the student learning experience. In my experience, I have learned that students typically do not pay attention to the difference between staff, faculty, divisions, and departments. To them, we are all one organization. This places responsibility on university administrators to ensure we are all working collaboratively.
Assumptions and Limitations

Research studies face assumptions and limitations that may impact data interpretation. As stated in the subjectivity statement, my direct professional connection to this study’s topic and the participants being studied may influence how information is reported in the data analysis. My assumptions include: (a) mission statements guide the organization; (b) the relationship between academic and student affairs units is significant in accomplishing the institutional mission; (c) the relationship between academic and student affairs units is not maximized; and (d) it is vital for student affairs to align with the academic mission of the institution to be effective and stay relevant. In an effort to prevent bias, this study included member checks with participants to be sure the interpretation of what they said is accurate. This concept of sending the transcription to participants and confirming the data is strongly recommended throughout the qualitative research literature (Maxwell 2013; Roulston, 2010). In addition, whenever participant responses are represented in the data analysis, I acknowledge the context of their words. The data analysis is directly linked back to Chapter 2, leaving assumptions aside and staying grounded in the literature. Finally, document analysis assisted by providing factual, straightforward documents to supplement the interview data.

This case study only describes one case of administrator experiences. Although the findings are not generalizable, they can inform higher education practice and future research related to the topic. Since the study relied on administrator interviews, it is important to note the possibility of participants exaggerating answers, or not telling the whole story in order to position themselves in a positive light (prestige bias). Participants may have recalled information in a desirable way, or they may have forgotten details of situations altogether.
Conclusion

The chapter opened with an overview of the study and the research questions guiding the study. Next, the chapter introduced the research design and methods used to answer the study’s research questions. A qualitative case study using interviews and document analysis was outlined, followed by the rationale for where the research took place and whom the study included. Through purposeful sampling, administrators representing both academic and student affairs units were selected to participate in this study. The institution this study focuses on was selected due to a rapidly increasing student population and recent emphasis on integrative learning (linking in-class and out-of-class experiences). To understand how the research questions are addressed, a data analysis process was outlined. For this study, the data analysis was discussed as a generative process, crafted by categorizing data into general themes. Each research question was addressed within the themes that emerged from the data. The chapter concluded by identifying the risks and benefits of the study, assumption and limitations, and—a critical component to any study—the researcher’s subjectivity. Positioned as a constructivist, personal and professional experiences that shape beliefs and understandings related to the study were revealed that might have influenced the design and interpretation of this study.

The field of student affairs is undergoing pressure to stay relevant as the landscape of higher education changes. Understanding a collective interpretation of the role of student affairs work, how it relates to the role of academic affairs work, the intersections between the two units, and how all of this relates to furthering the institutional mission, is critical for the future of student affairs activity. Limited research exists about using collaboration between university units to advance the institutional mission. This study’s findings contribute to filling that
information gap and reveal what happens inside universities during times of change and how that relates to furthering the institutional mission.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at a large, public research university. The mission of the university studied focuses on advancing the intellectual and social condition of people by providing quality programs in the areas of teaching, research, and services. The data reflect the differences and similarities in both academic and student affairs administrators’ perceptions. The following chapter will examine the themes that emerged throughout the study, guided by the following research questions:

1. How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of student affairs and academic affairs units to the institutional mission?
2. What relationship is perceived between the cultures of student affairs and academic affairs units related to the institutional mission?
3. What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?

Themes

Based on the literature review in Chapter 2 and the data collected, five main themes emerged from the study. The perspectives of various administrators at Highlands University are presented using their own words. This chapter includes the findings and a discussion of the themes as they relate to the research questions. The five themes that emerged in this study are:
A Shifting Meaning of Student Learning

This section discusses administrator’s concern in educating the whole person. After acknowledging the importance of discipline-related learning, administrators spent a majority of time talking about student learning in terms of productive citizenship, tying directly to the section of Highlands University’s mission that discusses advancing the social condition of people. The following subsections are categorized to explore how administrators perceive student learning: educating the whole person, experiential learning, and the learning experience.

Administrators acknowledged that learning happens everywhere. Consequently, they acknowledged that learning happens beyond the classroom.

I think it’s our responsibility to serve students in and out of the classroom because I think higher education is an all-encompassing learning experience. I think learning is a continuous process and students are just immersed in it while they are here. It’s the responsibility of student affairs and academic affairs to serve the needs of students both places. It’s not like when students leave the classroom, or when students go home, learning stops. Being able to learn is having the support to do so. (Kaitlyn Price, staff member)

Students begin to have their “ah-ha moments” when they are exploring things most interesting to them, and “a lot of these moments happen where life happens,” said Dr. Flores. He recognized students are not just attending classes while in college. “They are coming here with their lives,” said Dr. Flores. Dr. Weber agreed and explained students are only in class for three to five hours a day. “They spend so much of their additional time in our space,” said Dr. Davis. “By requiring
a student to live here on campus with us, we are making some assertion that there’s a reason for that…that some development can only happen if you stay on our campus,” continued Dr. Davis. The following section describes the shift toward expanding student learning beyond the classroom and how both academic and student affairs units play a part.

**Educating the Whole Person**

Ashley Braves reflected on the original purpose of higher education. She recalled “way back when” a university’s responsibility was “simply to educate people to build a good society, a better society, a more knowledgeable society.” In today’s market-driven society, administrators commonly associated learning with discipline-related knowledge and skills to be successful in a future career. However, after nodding to the importance of discipline-related learning, administrators spent a majority of time talking about the importance of learning “basic life skills,” “productive citizenship,” and “how to create meaningful contributions to society”—tying back to some of higher education’s original ideals.

I think it’s essential that students learn on two sides. So they learn academically towards their major and their future career, whatever that may be for them. But I also think it’s essential students learn life skills. So they learn how to communicate effectively with each other whether that’s verbal communication, non-verbal communication, email, or [text] messaging. I also think it’s important that students learn the basic skills of time management and how to adequately involve themselves, but not over involve themselves, in organizations and activities around campus. I think that’s important to be successful not only in the workplace, but whatever they do in life. So essentially, to be contributing citizens when they leave campus. (Caroline Reed, staff member)

Even as an academic affairs administrator, Dr. Fuller believed all students, regardless of discipline, can benefit from non-academic related outcomes. Even at a large university, shaping people “who are lifelong learners, who are curious, who know how to learn, and who know how to adapt to change” remain important to her and other administrators. Collectively, administrators also believed college students should learn how to problem solve, work with other
people, learn new information, “find correct information,” access and utilize resources, increase cultural proficiency, and be “mindful of social justice issues.” Dr. Ferguson reasoned, “Since discipline-related skills are changing so rapidly, teaching these other types of skills will prepare students of any major to respond to an ever-changing global society.”

The idea of educating the whole person is a relatively new concept that requires a holistic approach to student learning (Terenzini, Pascearella & Blimling, 1996). Administrators described the “old ways” of student learning as involving lecture-style lessons, presented by faculty, in classrooms, during prescribed time slots. Kaitlyn Price explained most students still come straight from high school with this outlook on learning. She discussed the university’s investment in students both academically and socially as a “whole new world.” One Highlands University academic college adopted a holistic student learning approach into their strategic goals for their student services center. In addition to identifying student learning outcomes, they developed goals for administrators to concentrate on students’ “personal, academic, and social growth.” Fran Collins suggested, “[students] should learn the subject matter that they are here to learn about, but they should also learn the good citizenship piece like knowing how to interact with other people and sharpening their social skills.” With this shift in student learning, Dr. Ferguson believed higher education has the potential to shape “somebody that votes, somebody that runs for the PTA, or somebody that picks up trash in their neighborhood.” However, student affairs administrator Joseph Cook recognized that while this holistic approach to education is “common language” for the student affairs field, “a lot of individuals who have spent their lives zoomed in on their academic field do not naturally think about education in that way.”
Experiential Learning

When asked where learning happens at a university, administrators responded, “everywhere.” Each administrator agreed learning moments are not just reserved for the classroom. Administrators see value of “learning by doing” and they described it as the responsibility of both academic and student affairs units to provide the environment for those learning experiences. As Vivian Douglas said, “That is how you learn—when you are uncomfortable and you can talk through things. I think both academic affairs and student affairs are responsible in providing the space for dialogue.”

While some academic affairs administrators were certain the discipline-related skills remained “bound in classrooms and bound in the curriculum,” all student affairs administrators, and even a few academic affairs administrators, were convinced these skills could be learned beyond the classroom. “Bridging that learning from classroom to community space, or co-curricular space, provides students with the ability to put it into practice and cultivate relationships,” said Anna Tate. Dr. Stephens calls this “widening [the student’s] experience” and says this is “mostly activated in the engagement and interaction out of class.” Due to their roles and the work they do, student affairs administrators viewed experiential learning as essential for providing a “high quality experience for students.” One student affairs central administrator argued, “Until you do, you do not know.” Other student affairs administrators indicated that the practical experiences and relationships developed, as a result of those experiences, are what students recall most upon graduation and what they remember for years to come. They saw this co-curricular space as their direct connection to the academic mission. As Emily Spell said:

I do believe they need to read [the course material] and I do believe they need to hear [from faculty], but I do believe they need to engage in experiences and I think that is where the aha moment comes, that’s where the knowledge is translated into something
that benefits the world—is in that experience. And that experience looks different for all students. (Emily Spell, central administrator)

The Learning Experience

Administrators repeated, “Learning doesn’t just happen to students.” In this current learning model, students are now engaged and involved in the experience. Acknowledging the diverse student population, each administrator clarified the student learning experience is “different for every student.” “I don’t think there is one common experience,” said Dr. Fuller.

Depending on where students are developmentally, some students are coming to college and associating a degree with a successful career path, while others are able to expand their understanding of learning experiences. “I think for those that think of [college] as a pathway to a career, their experience is going to be really different than somebody who is saying how college is the best time because somebody is paying for them to learn and grow,” said Fuller. Dr. Davis explained that getting students to “think beyond the degree” is a challenge. Administrators that reflect with students about their learning experience, prior to graduation, reported students initially mention experiences related to classroom learning or campus satisfaction. “It is only after leaving the university that they comprehend all of the other skills they acquired along the way—the skills they did not realize they were gaining,” said Caroline Reed. Administrators from both academic and student affairs believed students who hold leadership roles and are more involved with campus activities have an easier time making these connections and often see their learning “a little more holistically” than students who simply “let learning happen to them.” Without guidance, students have a difficult time connecting the dots.

“Us and Them”

The academic and student affairs units at Highlands University work together to achieve the institutional mission through different lenses. Caroline Reed explained academic and student
affairs as operating in “split roles” where academic affairs is working on their components—“the teaching and research pieces of the mission”—and student affairs is working on “the services for students.” Collectively, administrators acknowledged both units ultimately want to see students be successful.

Administrators describe a scene where responsibilities and initiatives ultimately belong to “one division or the other” and “day-to-day activities are separate and not very reliant on each other to function.” As a result, the academic and student affairs units tend to operate in silos and are rarely on the same page. Kaitlyn Price said there is not much interaction between the units and admitted that she and her colleagues operate in their “own world” and do not “cross over” very often. “It’s like an ‘us and them’ thing,” echoed one administrator after another. This attitude permeated when administrators were asked to discuss their unit’s narrative, how they perceive the other unit, and the relationship between both units. The following subsections assist in illustrating the “us and them” relationship: the narrative of the academic affairs unit, perceptions of the academic affairs unit, the narrative of the student affairs unit, assumed perceptions, perceptions of the student affairs unit, the relationship, and lack of information.

The Narrative of the Academic Affairs Unit

The academic affairs unit is described as carrying out the primary function of the institution. “It’s where the faculty and the courses reside,” explained Dr. White. The unit is led by chief academic affairs administrators and made up of 12 academic colleges and schools. Many administrators were quick to point out that each college is organized differently, calling the academic affairs unit “somewhat siloed” and “pretty decentralized.” Paige Alexander, who has worked in academic affairs for more than 15 years, said she has yet to find an academic department that has the same policy and procedure on anything. Another longstanding academic
affairs administrator said the unit is far more decentralized than other campuses she has been on, describing the colleges as “little kingdoms.”

While there may be little in common across colleges, all administrators agreed the academic affairs unit operates on rigid policy and procedure to accomplish items such as advising, course registration, course delivery, academic misconducts, suspension, graduation, and more. In fact, it’s the policy and procedure-driven culture that Dr. Adams says slows down the progress is needed to “keep up with the rapid advancements going on in almost every field.” Chrystal Tickles, a staff member who began her higher education career in student affairs and now works in an academic college, said the procedure-driven culture made it harder to connect with students personally. Alexis Jones, an academic affairs administrator, said they were known as “the serious people.” Several academic affairs administrators described their role as “eight to five.”

Adding to the narrative of a disjointed unit, academic affairs administrators expressed differing viewpoints on the unit’s internal relationships and willingness to innovate. Chief academic affairs administrator, Dr. White, proclaimed a wonderful relationship between the administration, faculty, staff, and students. “There’s a lot of interaction between those groups,” he said. However, Faith Madden described a different perspective, saying the unit does not effectively communicate information from one level of the organizational chart to the next. Dr. White also described the academic affairs unit as “forward-looking,” contrasting with Alexis Jones’ perception that the unit is “a little antiquated and set in how it’s always been done.” Dr. White’s role is to steer the entire academic affairs unit towards the mission. His role demands prompt responses from others and grants him access to administration, faculty, staff, and students. On the other hand, Madden and Jones have roles that do not come with the same
benefits. Therefore, their day-to-day experiences are different and they do not feel as informed or empowered to create.

**Perceptions of the Academic Affairs Unit**

When asked to describe what she knows about the academic affairs unit and how it contributes to the institutional mission, Dr. Davis explained, “We know [students] on the social side and [academic affairs] knows them on the academic side,” Overall, student affairs administrators recognized academic affairs as instrumental in fulfilling the mission in a more “academic, research-based” way. When coming up with their answer, it almost seemed like student affairs administrators were playing a word association game, blurring out terms such as, “teaching,” “credit hours,” “research,” “faculty,” and “classroom.” Like academic affairs administrators, student affairs administrators used the word “procedural” to describe how the academic unit operates. Before attempting to explain what they knew, there were several pauses and stutters. Some student affairs administrators were quick to admit they knew very little. “I don't necessarily have a lot of in-depth knowledge of what goes on in the classroom other than what I saw as a student,” said Fran Collins. They described their knowledge of the academic affairs unit as “limited,” but they did recognize the unit as “a very important component.” Students are in class every day and Dr. Flores saw “everyday access” as a major advantage for academic affairs units when working toward student success.

Two student affairs staff members shared a unique understanding of the academic affairs unit. They felt their engagement on university-wide committees and work with academic curriculum gave them an advantage over their student affairs colleagues. Anna Tate explained most of her colleagues do not understand the role of faculty “beyond talking to a room of 300 people.” She claimed most student affairs administrators do not fully understand the various
responsibilities of faculty or what goes on in the classroom. Emily Spell agreed and added her student affairs colleagues are “unaware of the machine it takes to run an academic college.”

I thought academic affairs was professors—the people that are teaching the knowledge. And I just recently learned that it is just as much of a machine as we have over [in student affairs]. They’re all these people that are in the machine to support the faculty too. (Emily Spell, central administrator)

The Narrative of the Student Affairs Unit

The student affairs unit focuses on the co-curricular student experience. As Dr. Adams said, “Student affairs sees the environment outside of the classroom as an opportunity to educate.” Student affairs is led by chief student affairs administrators and made up of several specialized departments focusing on areas like leadership and service, campus recreation, judicial affairs, parent programs, campus housing, and more. At Highlands University, the student affairs mission is to “maximize student learning,” and each individual department executes the mission differently through unique programs, events, and communication efforts.

“Student affairs touches on a lot of different areas and we all have a prism that we look through,” explained Maria Rose. Joseph Cook described his unit’s role as connecting students with resources, available both on and off campus, that encourage students to persist through school and focus on their education. This “on and off campus” responsibility contributes to the “24-7” reputation of the student affairs unit.

When characterizing their unit, student affairs administrators described a comprehensive division made up of several departments with their own agenda to enhance the student learning experience. However, even with separate agendas, many student affairs administrators emphasized collaboration within the unit to achieve departmental goals. One reason for such collaboration was the pressure for student affairs departments to “do more with less” at a “rapidly growing” Highlands University. Joseph Cook stated even during times of feeling
“stretched,” student affairs administrators operate with a lot of passion, care, and concern for students.

A couple of student affairs administrators described their unit as “evolving,” but they chose this descriptor for different reasons. Dr. Davis used “evolving” when she was talking about the unit “keeping up” with the growing number of students at the university. When Dr. Johnson used “evolving,” he was referencing the evolution towards a siloed, bureaucratic unit—an environment he says was not the case just five years ago with past leadership. However, most student affairs administrators did not characterize student affairs this way. Emily Spell had an opposite perception of the unit, saying “we are no longer narrowing and siloing ourselves from each other, and so I feel like student affairs is holistic and collaborative.” Dr. Johnson’s outlying viewpoint may be a symptom of the extensive leadership changes at Highlands University. While a majority of chief administrators have been hired within the past three years, he remains one of the few longstanding chief administrators.

Assumed Perceptions

A lot of what student affairs administrators believed about themselves was shaped by how they believe the academic affairs unit perceives them. “In student affairs, we talk about academic affairs thinking we don’t do anything and how they don’t need us,” said Emily Spell. Ashley Braves expressed similar thoughts, saying the academic affairs unit does not view the student affairs unit as “necessary” or “crucial” to the student experience. Several student affairs administrators wrestle with the idea that their unit is only seen as “where all the events and activities happen.”

I was in a meeting with some academic partners and they made jokes that they were glad that us student affairs administrators could take time away from popping popcorn,
blowing up balloons, and having a party. Even if they didn’t mean it, it all plays into the stereotype. (Emily Spell, central administrator)

Student affairs administrators believe there is a prevailing thought on the academic side that “student affairs people are large event planners focused on keeping students out of trouble.” Joseph Cook reflected on his career in housing and how he and his colleagues were treated as “dorm mommies” and “dorm daddies.” This rhetoric becomes self-talk perpetuating the idea of an “us and them” mentality.

**Perceptions of the Student Affairs Unit**

Some of the comments made by academic affairs administrators about the student affairs unit directly aligned with what student affairs administrators suspected. However, some comments illustrated the perception of the student affairs unit as not entirely what student affairs administrators assumed. When discussing the personality of the student affairs unit, several academic affairs administrators used the term “student affairsy.” They explained this coined term encompasses the student affairs unit’s “high energy,” “outgoing,” “pep-rally” mentality. “I feel like, from an academic affairs standpoint, student affairs is seen as the fun, goofy people,” said Alexis Jones. But in the same breath, academic affairs administrators suggested the “student affairsy” reputation is what makes student affairs administrators “more approachable” than academic affairs administrators. Several academic affairs administrators admitted and envied student affairs administrators having “the ability to cultivate more meaningful relationships.” While they could admit student affairs administrators “know students,” some questioned how much student affairs administrators actually know about academic coursework and what students are doing in the classroom.
Like student affairs administrators about the academic unit, some academic affairs administrators had little knowledge about the student affairs unit. All administrators agreed the student affairs unit “deals with everything outside of the classroom.” However, many academic affairs staff and central administrators claimed they “just don’t know a whole lot” to develop a thorough perception of the unit.

With student affairs, I do not have much contact with them as I would like to. I would say I don't know a whole lot about what they are doing to accomplish the mission. But I know little bits and pieces about what's going on. (Faith Madden, staff member)

The volume of knowledge about the student affairs unit increased when speaking to academic affairs administrators who had previous professional experience in student affairs. A greater knowledge was also evident in academic affairs administrators who serve in roles where it was necessary to have a university-wide scope, or have spent several years at the university. Kaitlyn Price, who previously served in a student affairs position at another institution, confessed the relationship between students and the student affairs unit “can sometimes have a larger effect on educating them than the traditional academic experience.” Dr. Fuller reflected on how the student affairs unit has a more significant role in higher education today.

I think it’s a very different model today than when I entered the academy 21 years ago. We would have never thought of student affairs. I just didn’t even know what that division did. I assumed they did the dorm and the Greek life. I didn't understand as a junior faculty member and even as a department chair and to some extent as a dean—I didn’t get that. I didn’t get that view until being over here and understanding how that area can help. (Dr. Fuller, chief administrator)

Dr. Fuller is now a chief academic affairs administrator and resides in the Crawford Building, the main university administration building comprising the offices of university-wide upper-level administrators. In her role, she often considers the big picture and interacts regularly with chief student affairs administrators to discuss issues and make decisions. Paige Alexander has been at
Highlands University for more than 15 years in academic affairs, but has always had a vested interest in the student services component.

After as many years that I have worked, I have a better understanding of the student affairs unit. I have so much respect for the student affairs aspect on campus because I think they do a lot more than what the faculty give them credit for. (Paige Alexander, central administrator)

Dr. Ferguson acknowledged most people have a vague understanding of the student affairs unit. He attributed this vague understanding to the shifting paradigms the field has experienced over time. From student services, to student development, to student learning, to student success, Dr. Ferguson explained the evolution of the field through different models. In the student services framework, the unit focused on “literally, providing services.” Then, administrators started focusing on emotional and physiological changes in a student, resulting in the student development approach. Next, he explained the student learning approach. By attaching student-learning outcomes to any effort, “student affairs was trying to tell the academic side they could do [student learning] just as well as [academic affairs] can.” According to Dr. Ferguson, the student learning approach was “fighting fire with fire.” “A math test is always going to provide you a better assessment of a student learning outcome than me asking a perception of how you feel about what you’ve gone through a program,” he said. Now, the field is focused on the student success model, which he called “holistic.” This model draws attention to integrating inside and outside-of-the-classroom experiences.

The Relationship

When asked about the current relationship between academic and student affairs units, most administrators responded they were unsure. Faith Madden was disappointed she does not hear anything from student affairs. From what she knew, academic affairs does not share much information either. “So I would guess there’s not much of a relationship,” she concluded. “I am
not sure what all happens,” said Alexis Jones about the two units working together. Similarly, Vivian Douglas replied, “I don’t really know for sure.” Like Jones and Douglas, Kaitlyn Price also confessed she “is not sure of the current relationship.” This uncertainty remained evident throughout the interviews. In order to characterize the relationship, the participants needed information, and it was clear they had very little.

When put on the spot, both academic and student affairs administrators were hard-pressed to come up with an example of a current program, event, or curriculum that serves as an example for linking inside and outside-of-the-classroom learning.

I don't feel like I can say there is a big strong example, I don't like that I can't think of anything. And I don't know if that's because I don't know or it's not happening. Either way, it's not okay.  (Faith Madden, staff member)

A similar story was shared by many staff and central administrators across the board. Even the chief administrators that work together regularly struggled to come up with any concrete examples. At first, they responded quickly to the question and said examples of collaboration are happening “on a daily basis.” However, when pushed, the same administrator that replied, “gosh, there are a lot [of examples],” paused to think for quite some time. He eventually discussed frequent phone conversations, solving student issues, and university-wide committee work as examples of integrating work. Dr. Fuller, Dr. Stephens, and Dr. Flores, all chief administrators, indicated they mostly work with their colleagues in the other unit “when there is trouble” and on a “when needed” basis. Dr. Stephens explained, “It's not an ongoing relationship where we are talking together and planning together. It's more like when he needs me, he calls me and when I need him, I call him.”
Lack of Information

A consistent message from both academic and student affairs administrators is that they “don’t know.” Administrators worried “not knowing” leads to misinformation, misunderstanding, little or no appreciation of others, or an inability to articulate a perception at all. Overall, it was clear administrators are aware of the other unit. Beyond that, it is challenging for them to develop a meaningful understanding when they are only interacting with people in “their side of the house.” However, students interact with both “sides of the house” every day and it is likely they do not know the difference between the two. Student affairs staff member Caroline Reed shared about her experience when she taught a first-year seminar course.

I think a student thought just as much of me as they did their economic professor. They didn't know I didn't have the same title. I may not have considered myself a faculty member, but the student's don't know the difference. (Paige Alexander, staff member)

Like students, Maria Rose concluded academic and student affairs units “are not all that different.” Alexis Jones agreed, saying, “In reality, there are a lot of ways the two [units] are similar and ways they are different. And each side can grow from the differences.” According to Kaitlyn Price, administrators do not always recognize the overlap. These areas of overlap are critical opportunities for relationships.

Academic Affairs as the Primary Function

I think it’s the purpose of the university, whether a 2 year or 4 year, public or private, we exist to for students to get degrees so they can move on to larger things, and it's unspoken because I think it is such an obvious component of the purpose of the institution. (Faith Madden, staff member)

Student affairs would not exist without academic affairs. This is how administrators understand it across the university. “Obviously, academic affairs units are the formal educators,” said Dr. Flores. Without hesitation, Dr. Flores’ student affairs colleagues agreed. According to each administrator, the academic affairs unit is the primary owner of delivering the academic
mission, “which is, obviously, the main mission of the university,” explained Dr. Johnson. He continued by describing academic affairs as the “essential purpose of the university” and clarifying the reason student affairs exists is “because faculty members had to do everything.” “And, now, student affairs professionals can run the day-to-day so the faculty can do their original job,” he said.

I think, on most campuses, the academic affairs area is seen as the area that is there to fulfill the mission. Even when I go back and look at teaching, research and service, the reality is that these three pillars are all about the faculty. So if that’s the center of the university, I would have to say that academic affairs is the primary agent to reach the mission. (Dr. Ferguson, chief administrator)

Many administrators declared academic affairs as the most significant unit in terms of fulfilling the institutional mission because “ultimately, the students are here to learn the subject matter and earn a degree.” Although Dr. Fuller recognized learning can happen beyond the classroom, she argued “the learning function rests in academic affairs.” “If we had to pull out one unit to keep, it would be academic affairs,” she said. Joseph Cook pointed out no one questions the classroom portion of higher education. Faculty, teaching, and classroom time—those remain primal. This section discusses academic affairs as standing spotlight among other university units and then addresses the idea of reaching across units to accomplish collaboration.

Academic Affairs Standing Spotlight

Illustrated as the largest division on campus, the academic affairs unit is recognized by university administrators as “the core,” and by external audiences as “the university.” “Everybody knows that part of Highlands University,” said Fran Collins. “Perhaps, second to that, if anybody thought about another division of the university, it would be athletics,” chuckled Dr. White. He did not consider student affairs as the next most recognized unit. While the academic affairs unit stands spotlight, there is confusion about where student affairs stands. Dr.
Fuller describes a past where student affairs professionals were seen as the “second-class citizens,” next to faculty, that just took “any scraps that they could get.” However, she said, “This scene is no longer at Highlands University.” Dr. Adams shares a similar outlook, describing student affairs as “a real partner in the academic enterprise.” However, he recognizes his personal perspective has not been taught or communicated across campus. “I still think there is some sort of feeling of second-class citizenship among student affairs professionals,” he said. These feelings were confirmed when two student affairs staff members reflected on hearing academic affairs colleagues use terms such as “party planners,” “fixers,” and “extra,” to describe their work. ChrystalTickles reported overhearing an academic colleague say, “The fluff of student affairs is not necessary.”

According to Dr. Davis, this notion of hierarchy plays out in how she approaches her work.

I think there is a power dynamic in how faculty is viewed versus how student services staff is viewed, and you have to understand your role in that. I think that our contributions are equal, but I think our standing is complementary. You have to understand where you sit on the totem pole and you have to learn to work within that. (Dr. Davis, central administrator)

Her role relies on people from academic and student affairs units to serve beyond their assigned duties. However, when she communicates with both groups, her expectations are different. From her lens, faculty do not prioritize the “extra” commitments, so she does not “push” her requests and “takes what [she] can get.” On the other hand, with student affairs administrators, she expects more engagement and response and feels more comfortable making, or repeating, requests. She made a notable comment regarding her recent Ph.D. achievement and how that has impacted her relationship with faculty. “Now that I’ve earned my Ph.D., their whole perspective
of who I am as an administrator shifted. It opens up doors with some faculty that I just couldn’t get before,” she explained.

**Reaching Across**

Administrators overwhelmingly concluded that the student affairs unit must “reach across” to the academic affairs unit in order to initiate collaboration. This strengthens the position that academic affairs serves as the core unit. When pushed to explain why the student affairs unit carries more responsibility to reach across the aisle, administrators explained the academic unit does not rely on the student affairs unit and would be less likely to reach out.

To achieve what they need to achieve to be successful, faculty members don’t have to reach out [to the student affairs unit]. But to achieve what student affairs wants to achieve, they really need to reach out [to academic affairs]. (Dr. Adams, chief administrator)

They also pointed out the student affairs unit is “at risk” with budget cuts.

I think as resources become more limited, that we have to figure out how to quit operating in siloes. I feel if money gets cut, the first response for cuts would be toward student affairs. So student affairs will have to make themselves more valuable by putting themselves out there more with academic affairs. (Emily Spell, staff member)

According to administrators, integrating student life into the classroom is believed to get more “traction” than asking the academic affairs unit to reach out to the student affairs unit. Chrystal Tickles said her past experiences have led her to believe asking academic affairs to “make the first move” would only result in resistance. “Having the academic pull is beneficial, but achieving it is the hard part,” said Vivian Douglas.

By “embedding what student affairs is doing in the classroom,” Anna Tate explained how the student affairs unit becomes essential and no longer “optional.” Administrators suggested student affairs programs should connect to students’ majors, courses, and employment or
leadership roles. These experiences can turn into opportunities for students to begin thinking about “all of their experiences in totality.”

I would say over the years we’ve battled to say who is more important, but at the end of the day, academic affairs comes first and we are a complementary part of the process. Now, I think you can’t have one without the other. They are both equally valuable. It’s not as much as a chicken or the egg conversation as people think to be because the classes and academic affairs world comes first. And I do think it is becoming more and more important to work together on things and not do our complementary work in two separate worlds, which I think certainly is common. (Dr. Ferguson, chief administrator)

**Prioritizing Collaboration at the Top**

The President saying it mattered. If he said there is value of both academic and student affairs to his team—whether there is an intrinsic value or not, value was just given. There a lot more collaborations I want to do, but I am very cautious to step out. But if an executive said this is what we want, then people are going to step out because you will feel very supported in that. We have to hear them say it matters. (Emily Spell, central administrator)

Administrators from both academic and student affairs units found upper-level administrators responsible for promoting and facilitating collaboration across units. According to administrators, upper-level administrators include the president, the provost, and associate and assistant vice presidents and provosts. Upper-level administrators are captured in the study’s chief administrators group. Administrators acknowledged that priority, accountability, and resources come from the top and, as a result, chief administrators must initiate the environment for collaboration. As described by Chrystal Tickles, chief administrators “have a seat at the table” and “can make something happen.”

The key players are everybody in the Crawford Building. I think it has to be something that is backed all the way up the organizational chart—your president, your VPs. They would have to believe in collaboration as a priority. The priorities and values have to be set. The resources have to be there to start putting plans into place. (Joseph Cook, central administrator)

Joseph Cook explained the expectation for collaboration is initiated and supported at the top. Ashley Braves suggested once the expectation is set, “people will follow along when they see
more peers doing it.” The following subsections discuss the role of upper-level administrators in collaboration: collaboration as a priority, accountability, resources, and collaboration at every level.

**Collaboration as a Priority**

The data revealed inconsistencies regarding collaboration as a current priority of upper-level administrators. Chief administrators from both academic and student affairs units described their relationship across units as “strong” and “collaborative.” Dr. Ferguson credited their successful relationship with one another to “putting in the effort to make it pretty good.” Cited in the student affairs unit’s four strategic priorities, language about collaborating with academic affairs was included as a part of the fourth priority. Dr. Ferguson explained collaboration across units is a priority between him and his chief administrator peers. Most chief administrators agreed with Dr. Ferguson and felt they had already established a collaborative university.

When chief administrators discussed this “collaborative relationship,” they only spoke about scenarios where they work with other chief administrators. When asked about the current relationship between academic and student affairs, Dr. Weber mentioned a “good relationship” with his counterpart. Dr. Fuller stressed the vice president for student affairs and the Provost work “really closely together on virtually everything.” Dr. White echoed these sentiments, calling the units “collaborative partners” and then went on to discuss individual relationships with chief administrator peers. They all described frequent interactions with each other to discuss issues, talking “three or four times a week” and meeting “on a monthly basis.” Unique to this group of administrators, is their proximity in physical space and access to one another due to their place within organizational chart—they are just a hallway or a phone call away. “We are walking down the hall to deal with things,” said Dr. Weber. Dr. Fuller said she picks up the
phone and calls the vice president for student affairs whenever she has a question or needs to resolve an issue. They illustrated a communicative and accessible environment. Dr. White directly discredited the idea of “separate divisions” and said it is not even something he thinks about. “There are none of these artificial walls or boundaries,” he said.

Dr. Weber hesitated to admit that relationships might not look the same for staff, central administrators, and even some chief administrators. “Uh, I mean…you know…there are some that work across units more frequently than others and some that never have worked with other units,” he said. As a chief administrator, Dr. Adams confessed they could do a better job of coordinating collaboration efforts across the lines of those executing the day-to-day work. Central administrators and staff did not perceive collaboration as a priority among chief administrators. Alexis Jones asserted, “The President, the Provost and other upper-level administrators have never been particularly concerned with collaboration because it has no impact on them.” She continued by pointing out they work at a much higher level and have every resource at their fingertips. Ashley Braves shared Alexis’ concern saying, “They have no concept of the ground level needs and issues that collaboration would solve.” “I don't know that a relationship between academic and student affairs is always a priority [for administrators] or at the forefront of their minds.” Emily Spell also identified a gap in executive support. She described the lack of institutional support for collaboration as a “real barrier.”

They have never said that they valued working together. If upper-level administrators do not see the value of [collaboration], then I just wonder how they expect those of us that are working on the ground to see the value in it. (Faith Madden, staff member)

Faith Madden drew conclusions from what she has not heard, and Fran Collins admitted she simply does not know what the President’s desire is when it comes to collaboration. She did not rule out that collaboration may be a priority; but if it is, she does not know. Others, like Braves,
Adams, Jones, Madden, and Collins, described feeling “so disconnected” from upper-level administrators and perceived their concerns as a mystery.

**Accountability**

Even though some describe a strong relationship for collaboration across academic and student affairs units, most administrators still do not recognize collaboration as a part of the culture. “If we really want to talk about educating the whole student, we would be rewarding these partnerships across academic and student affairs. It doesn’t even have to be huge,” said Dr. Adams. Several other administrators mentioned faculty and staff are not incentivized or held accountable to collaborate. They emphasized until these ideals of collaboration and relationships show up in places like the mission, strategic plan, and tenure and promotion criteria, it would not be taken seriously. They agreed if the campus is serious about collaboration, then the “system needs to change.” Ashley Braves proposed focusing assessment efforts on collaboration could be “a great motivator for change.” Dr. Stephens talked about the importance of focused assessment efforts related to the mission.

In order to accomplish the institutional mission, you must evaluate it accurately and be confident you are moving in the right direction. To evaluate it means to empower it. So if I never evaluate it, you could argue that nobody would take it seriously. If you evaluate for $x$, you can be pretty sure they are going to be doing $x$. (Dr. Stephens, chief administrator)

Administrators determined the campus relies on chief administrators to empower the mission and determine what is being evaluated, and the chief administrators agree with this responsibility. “My position is responsible for making sure that all we do aligns with the institutional mission and our strategic plan,” said Dr. White. While everyone was clear about the roles and responsibilities of chief administrators, some administrators questioned the execution. Although chief administrators may value collaboration personally and integrate it into their daily
work, it is most important those values become incorporated into campus-wide efforts in order for expectations to be known and clear.

Me just talking about [collaboration] every time I get the chance doesn’t mean it happens because I don’t do that work every day. I need other people to do that work and implement these kind of [collaborative] frameworks into what we are doing…It’s got to be in the President and Provost speeches, it’s got to be in the language and mission and vision and core values, and it’s got to be in the strategic plans. It’s got to be in all these things. (Dr. Ferguson, chief administrator)

The university-wide efforts, mentioned by Dr. Ferguson, then become the blueprint for units within the university to determine priorities and action items. “Once expectations are established and made clear, they need to be part of the strategic planning for the divisions, the colleges, and the units within student affairs,” said Dr. Adams. He recommended supervisors set specific goals for collaboration related to the university-wide expectations and hold their area accountable. Fran Collins said this kind of strategic planning would make collaboration “integrated into our daily work as a priority.”

**Tenure and promotion.** Tenure and promotion surfaced as a “roadblock” for collaboration and an issue “upper-level administrators should re-think.” Paige Alexander talked about her experience when approaching faculty for ideas and assistance in her student services role. She explained that faculty assistance with out-of-class student engagement opportunities “doesn’t fit within their promotion and tenure process.” “It doesn’t really help them (pause) and they’re not incentivized to do it,” she said. Dr. Adams commented on the tenure and promotion criteria and his perception of how it is approached.

So it’s teaching, research, and service. But the reality is it is RESEARCH, teaching, (pause) and service. And so service is largely being on committees in their department or college. Their service is not necessarily serving on my task forces in student affairs. (Dr. Ferguson, chief administrator)
With a heavy emphasis on research, and little credit given to service activities, faculty tend to focus most of their time on research efforts. “So we’ve got to change what we reward if we believe in it,” said Dr. Adams.

**Resources**

Upper-level administrators were recognized as key players in collaboration because of their access to resources. “A lot of people would agree that we need more resources,” said Kaitlyn Price. She explained the desire for upper-level administrators to recognize the need for partnerships across campus. “Only when they buy in to the importance of these partnerships can they provide the resources to create them,” she said. Dr. Weber agreed he and his chief administrator peers are “responsible to provide the resources to support student-learning efforts.” In addition to money, facilities, and supplies, chief administrators were also identified as having access to and influence on the faculty and staff. For example, Dr. Davis thinks if anyone can break through to the faculty about the importance of collaboration, it’s the chief administrators—the people who are shaping the environment where faculty research, teach, and serve. In addition, chief administrators sit from a “perch” high enough to make connections and call attention to opportunities for collaboration.

I also see the role of administration of connecting people. Perhaps faculty and staff in one college have a really neat idea about something to do. From my perch, I can say that's a great idea and I've heard similar ideas from other colleges and some [colleges] have actually started on it. And, so then I can get people together…and then it's not just something we are going to do in one college, we can do it more campus-wide because I've connected the people. At times I am a matchmaker, I think. (Dr. White, chief administrator)

Collaborating with the academic affairs unit is a part of the student affairs unit’s strategic priorities. The priority reads, “Collaborate with academic affairs and other campus partners to...”
best utilize fiscal and human resources.” This language prioritizes the benefits of financial and staff support from cross-unit collaboration.

Collaboration at Every Level

The findings reflected that relationships across units are not the only relationships important to collaboration. The data revealed a gap between each layer of the organizational chart, resulting in major feelings of “the unknown” between staff and chief administrators, specifically. “So there isn't a whole lot of innovation and collaboration between upper administration and the people who are actually down in the trenches,” said central administrator Alexis Jones. Dr. Ferguson said they “talk a lot about collaboration at the top.” Dr. Davis noticed that talking, but not doing, happens a lot when you get to higher-level administrator roles. Dr. Ferguson acknowledged talking is not enough. “While the discussion is happening at the top, to be effective, it certainly has to be felt at every level,” he said. Deep collaboration that results in change cannot happen unless there is a “passion and desire for [collaboration] at every level of the organization,” he said.

I think [collaboration] starts with conversations, and some plans, some ideas happening and then getting those ideas to administration and persuading them that this stuff is important. I keep going back to the upper administration and how important they are in all of this. (Chrystal Tickle, staff member)

All administrators agreed there is “more room for collaboration.” They also agreed leaders from both academic and student affairs units are instrumental in influencing collaboration at every level.

An Institutional Approach

Without question, both academic and student affairs administrators agreed student learning is important—both inside and outside of the classroom. This “beyond the classroom” learning outlook requires everyone at the university to play a part of the “continuous” and
“immersive” learning experience. “It’s on all of us,” said Maria Rose. Every administrator stressed that, in order for the university to be most effective, student learning cannot “lie in the hands of one person.” “It really does take a village to graduate someone,” said Paige Alexander.

Everybody. That’s why we are here. Every position that exists on this campus has something to do with educating the students that are here. That could be somebody who is cleaning the residence halls. That could be somebody who is maintaining the grounds. That could be a faculty member or a staff member, or even a student staff member who is a [resident assistant]. The people that cut the grass are creating the environment. We are trying to create an environment that students want to be at. What it looks like, the condition of the buildings, and so on…it all contributes. You could randomly pick any department on campus and almost immediately connect a dot as to what role they play in educating students. (Dr. White, chief administrator)

Like Dr. White, many administrators listed every campus employee they could think of when discussing the collective responsibility in the student learning experience—all mentioned the custodial staff. Kaitlyn Price explained everyone, regardless the unit, has “an obligation to use teachable moments to enact learning that takes place on campus.” Not only is everyone responsible to facilitate student learning, but they also must hold students accountable to develop from each experience. “I think that is where the curricular academic components and developmental student affairs components come together in collaboration,” said Caroline Reed.

The following subsections outline the barriers that make an institutional approach challenging and some strategies to overcome those barriers.

**Barriers**

In order to achieve an ideal institutional approach described, there are some campus-specific barriers administrators must overcome. Highlands University administrators identified these barriers as size, time, schedules, and leadership changes.

**Size.** When talking about the challenges of an institutional approach, many administrators voiced concern about the growing size of Highlands University. Administrators explained the
“huge” university has “blown up” over the past ten years, resulting in “growing pains” for everyone on campus. Even administrators who have not witnessed the growth in its entirety agreed the institution’s size “works against” them, especially when it comes to collaboration. Working together toward a common goal at a large institution is challenging because there are several moving parts. “Sometimes understanding what everybody else is doing and working towards can get lost and [the institution] can become very fractured,” said Anna Tate. She described a scenario where various campus units are working in their own direction and the one common thread, the institutional mission, has become an afterthought.

Dr. Ferguson explained the pressure he feels as a chief administrator to “get the message out to lots of different people.” However, communicating through organizational layers and across streets and buildings is problematic. While talking about a recent student affairs initiative, Dr. Flores admitted to only sharing the information internally because “it was easier.” Administrators explained that, as the student population increased, the university met demands by expanding the physical campus. Units are spread out across a “bustling campus” and, as a result, they have become “very individualized and siloed.” Cross-campus relationships are more challenging than ever because “you can go days, weeks, months, or years without seeing some people on campus,” said Vivian Douglas.

**Time.** Administrators at Highlands University consistently mentioned time as a limited resource and barrier to collaboration. It takes time and effort to communicate information, hold a meeting, learn about other units, build relationships, and unify goals and priorities—all components administrators said were necessary to establish a true institutional approach. Another necessary component: everyone at the university needs to be involved. However, administrators representing all layers of the organizational chart reported they are regularly “busy” and have
“no time” for anything beyond their daily responsibilities. They explained everyone’s day is centered on their personal agenda and to-do list, and that adding an element of collaboration is perceived as “extra.” Chrystal Tickles said holding a meeting with campus partners “isn’t even all that easy.” Finding a common block of time is just one of the challenges of working together. Once people finally get together, it is rare for anyone leaving the meeting to commit to any action items. She said everyone is waiting for someone else to “make the first move.” Emily Spell revealed, “We all think our jobs are the most time consuming jobs in the world. No one works harder than us.” “People are trying to keep their heads above water, and [collaboration] probably gets pushed aside a lot because of the urgent things on our to-do list,” explained Joseph Cook. Dr. Flores admitted he is faced with this scenario on a daily basis. “I mean, to be honest, I have a hard enough time getting business of units that report to me done, let alone reach out to folks that are not in my organizational area,” he said. Administrators worried this “I’m too busy” attitude perpetuates campus-wide silos and institutional mission drift.

**Operating on different schedules.** One reason the academic and student affairs units are rarely on the same page is because they are rarely in the same place together. More so, they are sometimes not even on campus at the same time. Timing and the academic calendar are what Dr. Adams believed to cause major tension between the academic and student affairs units. He explained the student affairs unit operates on a year-around calendar. The faculty, on the other hand, operate in “a very different world” and begin focusing on their research as soon as the school year ends. This mismatch creates a “physical barrier” for student affairs administrators to forge academic partnerships anytime over major breaks in the academic calendar. “Some faculty don’t even check their email during that time,” he said.
New leadership. Administrators repeatedly mentioned the surge of new leadership as a barrier to collaboration. Within the past three years, Highlands University hired a new president, provost, and a majority of the vice president positions. “Nearly every major university leader is new and they are still just figuring all of this out,” said Dr. Davis. This time of transition created feelings of “uncertainty” and “instability” for administrators, campus-wide. As the new regime began working to develop strategies on how to move their individual units and the university forward, administrators were awaiting anxiously to hear the plan.

Institutionally, we’ve been in flux because we’ve had all these new people. The challenge would be trying to realign. Nothing is very well outlined in terms of where we are going and what we are going to be doing because it’s new and people are waiting to see how it formalizes. (Dr. Davis, Central Administrator)

Dr. Davis described the difficulty to remain mission-central during a time of ambiguity. Regardless, Emily Spell stressed, “everybody is doing the best they can with where they know their part should be, but not necessarily with a greater vision.” Administrators are operating in survival mode without any big-picture strategy in mind. This behavior intensifies the narrative of a university operating in decentralized silos.

One specific leadership position change was mentioned multiple times as significant when considering the relationship between academic and student affairs at Highlands University. Dr. Johnson explained the previous vice president for student affairs also served as the vice provost, anchoring “one foot in academic affairs and one foot in student affairs.” One administrator was certain student affairs became “more integrated” in the academic mission because of this dual leadership position. Three years ago, the position was vacated and restructured as one vice president for student affairs. Any vice provost responsibilities were distributed to newly developed assistant vice provost positions. This quickly became what Dr. Ferguson called a “what belongs to whom” issue, creating another area of uncertainty for
academic and student affairs units. He said ever since the dual position split, he and his student affairs colleagues are still finding tasks and responsibilities that no longer make sense to exist in their unit. Dr. Fuller experiences the same challenge within the academic affairs unit. Chief administrators that assumed their roles within the last three years did not seem concerned that this leadership restructure would interfere with cross-unit collaboration. These chief administrators are part of the new regime. However, several staff, central administrators, and even a few chief administrators did worry this leadership shift would extinguish the momentum to integrate the two units. One chief administrator described what he witnessed over the past 20 years as “positive progress” toward integrating the academic and student affairs units. Now, he said, “It’s definitely much more separate because the VP [of student affairs] has nothing to do with academic affairs.” Emily Spell and others worried “student affairs voices” will get left out altogether.

**Strategies to Achieve an Institutional Approach**

Despite the barriers that make integrating everyone’s work a challenge, administrators were able to identify strategies to set the stage for an institutional approach. These strategies include keeping the mission in mind, building relationships, sharing stories, and creating the environment.

**Keep mission in mind.** In order to activate the institutional mission, administrators expressed the importance for everyone on campus to work together and keep the “mission in mind”.

I think that it is important for myself and my colleagues to remember what exactly the university’s mission is. Familiarize yourself with it and reflect on how you fit into the bigger picture. The mission is what drives the university. (Chrystal Tickles, staff member)
However, not everyone knows or understands the mission, creating a setback in the institutional approach. During the study, several administrators, from all layers of the university, had trouble developing responses to questions related to the institutional mission. After long pauses and attempts, some administrators were able to respond after reviewing the university mission statement document several times. Chrystal Tickles stressed the mission can only be a shared focus if everyone in the organization is familiar with it. Dr. Ferguson suggested the best way to “keep people on mission” is to deconstruct the institutional mission statement into its simplest terms and communicate that message. Highlands University administrators agreed their message is to “facilitate student learning.” Chrystal Tickles suggested this message should trickle down from upper-level administrators, through the divisions, the departments, and to each individual university employee. Once everyone understands the common goal, a collective effort to achieve the mission can begin.

**Build relationships.** Administrators believed building relationships is necessary to developing an institutional approach. Alexis Jones remarked, “The simple idea of putting a face to a name is important for this collaborative work. Many of the relationships described across Highlands University began at the grassroots level. Faith Madden reported most of her cross-campus relationships were built through colleagues and mutual friends. Dr. White said he treasurers the “candid connections” he makes with “outside colleagues” before and after meetings and at campus-wide events. “As connections are made on an individual level, people take the time to stop and realize what we do in our world,” said Joseph Cook.

According to administrators, insight about how other units contribute to the bigger picture creates greater opportunity to reach across and accomplish work together. For example, Dr. Johnson proposed that if the student affairs unit knew more about what and who was
available to them on campus, they could “spend less money on getting people from all over the country to come in and speak to [them].” He claims the unit is looking outside of the organization before ever looking inside to achieve goals. In addition to being a financial drain, this behavior further perpetuates the mystery and division between units. Ashley Braves shared a successful example of collaboration with an academic college to manage a residential living-learning community. She said the relationship works because there is a “mutual desire” and a “mutual goal” to create a residential, academic atmosphere. Braves explained simply approaching a goal with “common desired outcomes” has helped her and her partners recognize that they “need each other” and that the result is “more powerful” with each unit’s unique contributions. Maria Rose was proud of her office’s partnership with an academic college to set up virtual mock interviews, preparing students for future internships and jobs. Rose’s office tapped into a desire her office and the faculty share—student employment. She said the possibilities for collaboration strengthen when outcomes are “mutually beneficial.”

**Share stories.** “I think stories reach people,” said Paige Alexander. When asked for recommendations on how to integrate the work of academic and student affairs units, administrators repeated the idea of communicating stories. They argued sharing their stories lead people to recognize the value of their work and draw connections to potential collaborations. Administrators suggested “full understanding” only comes when storytelling is a “two-way street” and both units are willing to take the time to share and listen. They determined the stories shared should include what units do, why they do it, why it is valuable, and how it connects to others. Faith Madden recalled a time the student affairs unit compelled her using this technique. “It was a really positive experience in the sense of I knew what to expect. Their communication
laid out what they were asking for, why they were asking, and why it was of value to their student population,” she said.

Dr. Weber expressed these stories should be a “continuous articulation of how [units] contribute to student learning.” Many agreed sharing a story once is not enough and repetition is key. Paige Alexander said the strategy to gaining an institutional understanding is expanding communication efforts “beyond the people your unit is serving.” She went on to explain units often focus communication efforts toward their main target audiences and easily overlook sharing information or stories with colleagues within the same university. Despite how effective Alexander believes storytelling to be, she cautioned not everyone would listen or “buy-in” right away. She and other administrators emphasized the significance of reaching people one by one. Alexander said by breaking through to just one person that is not familiar, “understanding and partnerships are likely to unfold from there.”

Create the environment. According to administrators, Highlands University should focus on “creating more opportunities for conversation.” Recognizing time as a barrier, Dr. Flores and Kaitlyn Price talked about how they need more time to meet and talk with people in different units in order to “understand various roles and better serve students.” Rather than relying on organic interactions, Dr. Flores suggested formalized time with campus partners. Faith Madden explained that, when trying launch new collaborations, the best practice is to find ways to bring people together to have an opportunity to learn about each other and idea share.” Maria Rose recalled a situation where she was in a university-wide meeting with representatives from both academic and student affairs units. “I feel like in these short hours, we learn so much about what people are doing and what their concerns are,” she said. Dr. Davis agreed time set aside for conversations about what everyone is doing “really helps.”
Administrators mentioned “creating environments” as an important component in the student learning experience and something to which campus administrators, faculty, and staff all contribute.

I’ve learned that within the first six weeks of being on campus, having a positive interaction with somebody is going to change a student’s learning experience, social experience, and possibly be the reason they persist at the institution. So I would say anybody in any position on campus that is impacting the student feeling safe, comfortable, and in a place where they can be free to learn. (Fran Collins, staff member)

Administrators, faculty, and staff are a part of creating these environments whether they know it or not. Dr. Weber worried some people do not always know they have a role in this. He expressed, “Everybody doesn’t know so that’s why we’ve got to communicate to them—that they are part of that process.” “So really, when you get down to it, every employee should have this sense that they are in some way educating future generations,” said Dr. White. He noted he cannot accomplish the contributions of his unit alone and must delegate to empower “very important” collaborative work.

**Conclusion**

Using the institutional mission statement as the center for the discussion, this chapter presented administrator perceptions and experiences through five themes related to the relationship between the academic and student affairs units: a shifting meaning of student learning, “us and them,” academic affairs as the primary function, prioritizing collaboration at the top, and an institutional approach. To meet the institutional mission, administrators agreed graduates should become “well-rounded citizens of the world.” They acknowledged student learning is no longer reserved for the classroom and both academic and student affairs units have a responsibility in expanding the learning experience beyond the classroom. When discussing the narrative of their respective unit and perceptions of the other unit, administrators maintained an
“us and them” attitude. Overall, this attitude stemmed from the “unknown” about the other unit. The level of knowledge was greater for administrators who fell higher on the organizational chart and served longer at the institution. Despite the varied degrees of knowledge, all administrators recognized the academic affairs unit as the leading unit in activating the institutional mission. As a result, administrators determined that, to align with the mission, the student affairs unit should reach across and initiate a collaborative relationship with the academic affairs unit. Administrators found upper-level administrators responsible for promoting and facilitating this collaborative relationship across units. Upper-level administrators were identified as instrumental because they determine priorities, hold others accountable, and have access to resources. The relationships across units were not the only relationships that proved important. The relationships between each layer of the organizational chart were also found to be critical for collaboration to permeate at each level. Finally, it was established that, in order to accomplish the institutional mission, everyone must be involved. Administrators identified barriers to achieving an institutional approach and strategies to overcome them. The final chapter will analyze the data presented with an interpretation of the results, implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future practice and research.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to explore the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at Highlands University. The data collected for this qualitative case study reflected the perceptions of nine academic affairs administrators and 13 student affairs administrators at Highlands University. The administrators were characterized as chief administrators, central administrators, and staff, representing multiple organizational layers from both units. Document analysis was used as a supplementary tool to answer the research questions. Using the institutional mission as the center of the conversation, the data analysis captured administrators’ perspectives on the contribution of academic and student affairs units, the relationship between the two units, and strategies to develop collaboration. As a result of the study, leaders in higher education will better understand how to navigate the unique cultures of academic and student affairs units and maximize a collaborative partnership between the two.

The data reflected administrator perceptions of academic and student affairs units and their work to accomplish the institutional mission. Five themes were developed from the data.

1. A Shifting Meaning of Student Learning
2. “Us and Them”
3. Academic Affairs as the Primary Function
4. Prioritizing Collaboration at the Top
5. An Institutional Approach
The following chapter further analyzes the data presented in Chapter 4 and provide an interpretation of the results, implications for practice, reflections, and recommendations for future practice and research.

**Research Questions**

1. How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of student affairs and academic affairs units to the institutional mission?
2. What relationship is perceived between the cultures of student affairs and academic affairs units related to the institutional mission?
3. What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?

**Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question 1**

*How do organizational administrators perceive the contribution of student affairs and academic affairs units to the institutional mission?*

When Highlands University administrators were asked to discuss their work in relation to the institutional mission, their responses narrowed down to one main idea—a focus on student learning. Administrators agreed everyone at the university is responsible for student learning. This means both academic and student affairs units have a shared responsibility. Contrasting Whitt, Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, Mcdonald, and Wells’ (2008) finding that said academic and student affairs administrators do not agree on what it means to educate students, administrators at Highlands University defined education similarly. They explained education as transmitting knowledge and skills related to a student’s discipline and their personal development. In fact, most administrators spent a majority of time addressing the personal development component
and emphasizing the part of the mission that challenges the university to “advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the state, the nation and the world.” In order to facilitate this type of learning, educating of the whole student is becoming a shared purpose between the academic and student affairs units. By investing in students academically and socially, administrators at Highlands University execute a holistic approach to student learning.

Administrators determined student learning happens everywhere, both inside and outside of the classroom. Moving learning beyond the classroom widens the opportunities for student learning experiences. Matching what the literature describes as the traditional roles of each unit, administrators acknowledged the academic affairs unit for contributing the in-class, discipline-related learning and the student affairs unit for anything that happens outside of the classroom (Hirt & Robbins, 2016). As Bess and Dee (2008) and Birnbaum (1988) explain, academic and student affairs units operate as subsystems, fulfilling different tasks with their individual characteristics and relationships.

Corresponding with Engstrom and Tinto’s (2000) findings, administrators believed classroom activities take precedence to out-of-class activities. Administrators from both units perceived academic affairs as the primary unit of the institution. They explained most people associate the university with the functions provided by the academic affairs unit. The academic affairs unit is where the faculty and courses reside, and where education and research are celebrated. Birnbaum (1988) explained the academic affairs culture is comprised of several disciplines with their own individual cultures. Similarly, academic affairs administrators described their unit as siloed and decentralized, where academic colleges operate individually and contribute to the institutional mission in unique ways.
Student affairs administrators recognized the importance of the academic affairs unit in fulfilling the institutional mission. It was apparent this understanding shaped the way student affairs administrators interpreted their role at the university. They described their work as complementing what happens inside of the classroom. When done effectively, student affairs work can enhance the overall student learning experience. However, since its existence in the early 1900s, the field of student affairs has endured several responsibility shifts, contributing to the instability and misunderstanding of the unit’s identity. From student services, to student development, to student learning, to the current student success model, the way the unit is relied on is continually changing. Like the academic affairs unit, the student affairs unit is made up of several departments that accomplish the mission differently. Unlike the academic affairs unit, student affairs departments collaborate together to achieve their unique goals.

Student affairs administrators have little confidence academic affairs administrators view their work as necessary or crucial to the student experience. They explained their history has led others to perceive student affairs administrators as the people who host campus events and serve as chaperones in the residence halls. However, some academic affairs administrators saw beyond the historical stereotypes and recognized student affairs as a unit that can develop meaningful relationships with students. Although they were able to recognize some contributions of student affairs, academic affairs administrators questioned student affairs administrators’ knowledge of what happens in a classroom and how an academic unit operates.

Throughout the study, it was clear administrator perceptions were not fully developed. A major takeaway from the study was the deficit in knowledge each unit had about the other. The lack of knowledge about each other resulted in a lack of knowledge about how units contribute to the institutional mission. Barriers such as large institution size, administrators’ demanding
schedules, operating on different timetables, and significant top-level leadership changes all contributed to why administrators at Highlands University knew very little about what was happening on their very own campus. Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) explain that people have a limited perspective of the entire organization because they focus their time and attention on only one part. This explanation came to life through the words of both academic and student affairs administrators as they described operating within a silo, knowing or inquiring very little about the other unit.

The level of understanding about the other unit was different across administrators based on their role and time spent at the university. For example, if a student affairs administrator’s role was designed or encouraged to serve alongside an administrator in academic affairs, they showed greater understanding of the academic affairs operation. Additionally, the longer an administrator served at the university, the more time they had to develop an understanding. Even so, the overall understanding of each unit was basic and perceptions about their contribution to the institutional mission remained surface.

All administrators acknowledged room for collaboration and described an ideal scenario where both academic and student affairs units work together to provide a seamless student learning experience, inside and outside of the classroom. In order to create this immersive learning experience, they determined each person, even custodial staff, must commit to playing a role in the student learning experience. This data supports Dale and Drake’s (2005) conclusion that the responsibility for student learning cuts across classrooms, disciplines, departments, and divisions.
Research Question 2

What relationship is perceived between the cultures of student affairs and academic affairs units related to the institutional mission?

There is a mixed understanding of the relationship between academic and student affairs units at Highlands University. While some administrators from both units reported a strong and stable relationship between the units, others were quick to determine no relationship at all. Some administrators felt they “don’t know enough” to offer any perspective about the relationship. As Kezar and Lester (2009) identify, cross-unit partnerships prove difficult because of departmental silos and bureaucratic administrative structures. These challenges were apparent at Highlands University.

Administrators that did not perceive a strong relationship between the academic and student affairs units used “us and them” language in their responses. Many administrators described their day-to-day work as specialized and isolated, rarely crossing paths with other units and only having time and concern for their own responsibilities. This busy culture administrators illustrated perpetuates the behavior of sticking to their own world and getting absorbed in their silo. When the organization is distracted in silos, partnership is not a priority and mission drift is likely (Jones, 2007).

Upper-level administrators were the exclusive group who identified a strong relationship between the academic and student affairs units. During data analysis, the upper-level administrator group emerged from the chief administrator category. These particular administrators work together in the main administration building and serve the university centrally. Both academic and student affairs upper-level administrators attributed their success in accomplishing the mission to their partnership with the other unit. Due to their role within the
organizational chart and proximity to one another, their access and exposure to each other resulted in personal relationships and regular interaction. Interestingly, a majority of the upper-level administrators characterized the relationship between the units by their personal relationships with colleagues and counterparts. Many staff and central administrators admitted knowing very little about the relationship between the academic and student affairs units, alluding the relationship most likely started and stopped with top-level administrators.

The conflicting cultures of academic and student affairs units contribute to the estranged relationship between the units. Administrators characterized the academic affairs unit as primarily focused on teaching and research, utilizing processes and procedures as tools to accomplish their work independently. On the other hand, the student affairs unit was characterized as providing special attention to the care and well being of the whole student, approaching their work in collaboration within the unit. These cultural differences result in differing daily priorities and opposite work styles. Administrators consistently referenced the nature of the student affairs unit as a 24-7 operation and the academic affairs unit as 8:00 – 5:00. In addition, they pointed out many people within the academic affairs unit follow the academic calendar and concentrate on research or special projects over the summer. This is not the case for student affairs administrators who are always “on.” These operational differences result in mismatched schedules and timelines. Intensifying this, the study found that administrators do not understand each other enough to recognize and navigate these differences.

Top of mind for student affairs administrators is the perception their unit sits second to the academic affairs unit. This perception comes from the shared understanding the academic affairs serves as the core unit of the university and connects directly with the institutional mission. This shared understanding may also contribute to administrators’ belief that the
The academic affairs unit does not need the student affairs unit to accomplish daily operations. True to the definition of a loosely coupled organization, the student affairs unit does not technically need the academic affairs unit to accomplish everyday tasks either. However, the student affairs unit likely needs the academic affairs unit as partners in accomplishing mission-central work. All administrators agreed collaboration across both units is beneficial, but the commitment level of each unit varied. In order to maximize the relationship between academic and student affairs units, administrators determined student affairs administrators must reach across to the academic affairs unit to initiate collaborative efforts. Agreeing with Sandeen (2011), administrators found it necessary for student affairs administrators to define their place within the institutional mission and align their work with the curriculum.

**Research Question 3**

*What strategies can be used to develop collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units in order to achieve the institutional mission?*

Administrators identified a variety of strategies to steer academic and student affairs units toward a collaborative, mission-centered direction. They overwhelmingly agreed collaboration should be initiated at the top. Like Kezar (2005) found, upper-level administrators were perceived as valuable for setting priorities and garnering urgency. Ultimately, upper-level administrators have the influence to make something important or unimportant. Administrators mostly used language aligning with Bess and Dee’s (2008) planned change model when considering how upper-level administrators should approach collaboration. According to administrators, initiating collaboration should be a strategic process that moves through the organization from the top down. They emphasized the importance for upper-level administrators
to communicate the mission widely by promoting the visibility of the mission, using the mission as an anchor in strategic planning, and delivering mission-central messages across campus.

Administrators acknowledged effective collaboration takes everyone at the university working together with a mutual enthusiasm and purpose. As the literature captured, administrators recognized the institutional mission statement as the tool that brings everyone together by setting priorities and providing direction for the university. Administrators identified that keeping the mission in mind and considering it in daily work is instrumental in cross-unit collaboration. First, administrators must be familiar with the mission, understanding what it says and what it means. Although they recognized the mission as a valuable tool, the findings suggest some administrators are unclear about what the mission says or how their role directly relates.

Some administrators felt if the university truly prioritized collaboration, then language promoting collaborative activities should be incorporated directly into the university’s mission statement, policy, processes, and procedures. Administrators specifically mentioned the need to change the way tenure and promotion is evaluated. Currently, faculty are not incentivized to collaborate and include others in their work. Supporting Kuh and Whitt (1988), Kezar and Lester (2009), and Lane (2007), administrators described the current evaluation model as promoting individual initiatives and achievements. Administrators suggested universities should change the way faculty and staff are evaluated by integrating collaboration into the rubric when evaluating teaching, research, and service. This change creates motivation for faculty to work with others to accomplish goals.

Administrators commonly mentioned the importance of leveraging relationships when building cross-unit collaborations. Some relationships, among academic and student affairs administrators, were attributed to personal friendships and mutual friends. Other administrators
developed cross-unit relationships by serving on university committees, working alongside counterparts, or being across the hall from each other. Whether the relationships were originated as friendships or professional connections, they proved valuable in terms of having contacts and connections across campus. Some administrators reported their only understanding of the other unit was because of a relationship.

In addition to building relationships, administrators explained how storytelling promotes collaboration and develops understanding across units. Daft (2005) explains stories as narratives used to communicate the culture of the organization. In this case, academic and student affairs units each have a story to tell. According to administrators, sharing stories often and across organizational layers is essential when communicating a message in a complex organization like Highlands University. Many expressed, by understanding the story, or culture, of the other unit, administrators discover how another unit can contribute to their work. Additionally, storytelling clarifies the mystery and ambiguity perceived by administrators about how academic and student affairs units operate.

Administrators found both academic and student affairs leaders responsible for creating the environment for collaboration. When talking about how to enhance collaboration, several administrators seemed unsure about where to start. Administrators said they would be more compelled to collaborate if there were formalized opportunities to connect with people from both academic and student affairs units. Administrators were encouraged by the times they unexpectedly connected with others during formal university-wide meetings. They believed more chances for this type of connection could improve understanding of the other unit and ultimately identify possibilities for collaboration. The data suggest more time with campus partners would have to be directed and supported by upper-level administrators. With
Administrators feeling stretched and responsible to elevate their area, upper-level administrators must be willing to shift expectations and ultimately redefine success.

Administrators ultimately determined the academic affairs unit is the core function of the university. The student affairs unit was perceived as a complementary function that expands upon the student academic experience. Administrators determined the work of the academic affairs unit relates directly to the institutional mission. They also believed students ultimately attend college to take advantage of what the academic affairs unit has to offer. As a result, both academic and student affairs administrators find it necessary for the student affairs unit to reach out and align with the academic unit in order to initiate collaboration.

**Implications for Practice**

This study provided a comprehensive look at how administrators at one institution described the roles of academic and student affairs units and the state of their relationship. Although the findings represent a limited number of administrators at one university, the perceptions can provide direction as other universities consider how to lead collaboration. In addition, understanding the barriers for collaboration allows universities to consider potential challenges and make strategic decisions. Similarly, the strategies for collaboration introduced by administrators can be implemented at other institutions. Of course, implementation may look different depending on institutional type and culture. The following section will outline implications for practice based on the study’s findings.

In addition to providing insight about the ambiguous relationships across academic and student affairs units, the data also revealed information about disjointed relationships within units. Specifically, these disconnects were apparent between the vertical levels of the organizational chart, from chief administrators down to staff. Administrators consistently
mentioned what the literature suggests as a key strategy in setting the stage for collaboration—understanding each other’s reality (Berquist, 2005). Many said this understanding could be communicated through consistent and frequent storytelling. However, communicating a consistent story about one unit is difficult when the stories within that unit are fragmented.

To be the best collaborative partners, administrators should not only focus on the relationships and understanding across university units, but they should also focus on aligning individual units vertically. Chief administrators must have a constant pulse on what the central administrators and staff in their units know and perceive. Administrators at the top level proclaimed collaboration as a personal priority. They explained their strong personal relationships with other top administrators enabled a collaborative approach to their day-to-day work. However, they cannot assume the same desires and bonds bleed through at every level of the university. Especially at large institutions, an upper-level administrator’s personal commitment to collaboration is not enough. Relationships across the top layer are not enough. In order to most effectively achieve the mission collaboratively, every layer of the university must value collaboration and incorporate it into their daily work. Upper-level administrators can include all layers by communicating the vision for collaboration widely, giving regular updates on any progress or setbacks, and soliciting feedback (Kotter, 1995).

Next, academic and student affairs administrations should have frequent contact to better inform perceptions and strengthen understanding of the role each unit plays in achieving the institutional mission. The findings revealed administrators from both units know very little about each other. Administrators should consider the gaps in knowledge about their respective unit when determining what to focus on when sharing their story. Additionally, they should begin sharing their story at the onset of any new hire within academic or student affairs units.
Embedding the idea of collaborative relationships early on may enable collaboration to become a cultural norm. For example, sharing the stories of each unit during the employee onboarding process creates the initial introduction of cross-unit relationships as a priority and sets a standard for moving forward. A collaborative onboarding experience also provides the opportunity for creating personal relationships that can later become professional networks. These efforts should be continued throughout an administrator’s career by providing opportunities to share and hear units’ stories in professional or social contexts.

Another way for administrators to better understand the contribution of academic and student affairs units is by examining the university as, what Wheatley (2005) calls, a total system. By doing this, administrators become more familiar with what other units provide to the mission and how they can be relied on. To solve an institutional problem or ignite institutional change, administrators should start by looking at the problem or change with the total system in mind. With this approach, issues that can impact units across the university are being worked out collaboratively rather than in one unit or the other. Each unit can find their unique role in the solution or process and directly serve university-wide efforts. This approach also promotes the idea of getting everyone involved, having all voices represented, and creating entry points for units to directly serve the institutional mission. Similar to Daft’s (2005) findings, the academic and student affairs units can serve the university best once they fully understand the university as a whole.

Finally, as academic and student affairs administrators concentrate on accomplishing their unit’s goals, administrators should do so cautiously and avoid mission drift. External distractions and everyday tasks can lead administrators to stray away from the original mission, strengthening the academic and student affairs silos. Administrators should remain vigilant,
frequently checking their work against the mission, or, according to the study’s findings, ensuring their work contributes to the student learning experience. Academic and student affairs administrators should focus on a shared responsibility for student learning and identify where their work overlaps in the pursuit to accomplish this shared purpose. Particularly for student affairs administrators, taking advantage of these overlaps can position the unit directly with the core unit of the university. At a large institution like Highlands University, administrators should take Kezar and Kinzie’s (2006) advice and focus on a few collaborative programs rather than trying to accomplish multiple. In an environment where administrators already feel stretched and uninformed at times, putting time and energy in a few collaborative efforts can be more effective than expanding efforts.

Reflections

The findings in this study were limited to the experiences of 22 administrators who were strategically identified and agreed to participate in the study. The data can only be as expansive as the experiences and understandings of the administrators included in the study. However, the qualitative study included in-depth accounts of administrators’ experiences and understandings, providing a rich illustration of academic and student affairs units at Highlands University. Even so, the findings may not be generalized to all Highlands University administrators or other institutions of higher education.

The study captured administrators’ perceptions about the academic and student affairs units at their university. Although I took measures to protect administrator identities, administrators still may have practiced caution while responding. They may have been worried about being too truthful and revealing institutional imperfections, or being critical of friends and colleagues. Some administrators may have embellished their responses because of positive
personal relationships, or used the interview time as an opportunity to express what they desire rather than the current reality. On the other hand, some administrators may have been over critical, using the interview time as a platform for venting frustration.

A few surprising findings came from the study. One unexpected finding was simply the limited examples of collaboration at Highlands University. While, I was not sure of the breadth or depth of the examples they may provide, I expected there to be examples. What I found was, beyond some personal relationship illustrations, administrators from both units struggled to come up with a clear example of a collaborative program, event, or curriculum. Another noteworthy finding was the amount of administrators that were unfamiliar with the institutional mission. To ensure all participants were up-to-date with the institutional mission statement, I brought and shared a copy of Highlands University’s mission statement with each participant before the interview began. This ended up being more necessary than I thought because many administrators had to read, reread, and keep the document in front of them throughout the duration of the interview.

Most notable of the findings was the idea that communication across academic and student affairs units and understanding of one another stopped at the top of the organizational chart. Any cross-unit action appeared to only happen between upper-level administrators who were in broader roles and closer proximity and access to each other. This left the remaining layers of the organizational chart in the dark. With everything happening at the top, communication and understanding within individual units is weak. This led to an unexpended finding about the importance in aligning the units vertically first in order to set the stage for cross-unit collaboration. Only when there is alignment within the units can a consistent story be communicated and understood.
Implications for Research

Based on the findings of this study, there are four areas recommended for further research. First, additional research including faculty perceptions should be investigated. The findings revealed faculty have a major influence in what collaboration looks like between academic and student affairs units because they control access to the classroom. Academic affairs administrators referenced faculty as being too occupied by their teaching, research, and service obligations to care about or engage in the collaboration conversation. However, these are the institutional members that must buy in to developing opportunities that link in and out-of-class experiences together. Understanding their perceptions would improve research on this topic.

Second, research that includes the student voice would further develop this topic. For administrators, accomplishing the mission meant accomplishing student learning. Throughout the study, they often wondered what the students would say about the work of academic and student affairs units. Hearing from the students would provide insight into what their expectations are of each unit and how units can work together to accomplish a seamless student learning experience.

A third area of suggested research is to further examine the fragmented relationships between layers of the university, specifically within units. Understanding the dynamics of these vertical relationships could help administrators determine how to work as a cohesive unit, sharing a consistent story, and creating understanding among others about what their unit does and how it contributes to the institutional mission.

The final recommendation for further study is to compare the perceptions of administrators at Highlands University with perceptions of administrators at other large public
research universities. The findings would further determine what perceptions are specific to the institutional culture versus what perceptions are common across the institutional type. From here, administrators could learn from other universities about what to avoid and what to adopt when building collaboration into their institutional culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between academic and student affairs units and what this relationship means for furthering the institutional mission at a Highlands University. The study represents a small sample of administrators at a single institution, but supports the idea of maximizing a collaborative partnership between academic and student affairs in achieving the institutional mission.

The study reflects the perceptions of 22 administrators representing multiple layers of the academic and student affairs units. Although the same institutional mission guides them all, each administrator shared unique perceptions about the roles of and relationship between academic and student affairs. Their perceptions were influenced by their professional role and where it fell on the organizational chart, proximity to colleagues in the other unit, how long they worked at the university, and if they had any previous experience working in the other unit. How administrators understand the roles of and relationships between academic and student affairs is significant because they are instrumental in directing the university toward collaborative efforts.

Administrators determined both academic and student affairs units are responsible for facilitating student learning, but the units’ unique cultures and characteristics lead them to accomplish this responsibility in different ways. Despite each unit’s commitment to accomplishing the mission, every administrator acknowledged the work of the student affairs unit sits secondary to academic affairs. While all administrators found it important to integrate
the work of academic and student affairs units, the overall relationship between the units remains unstable. The findings prove an equally deficient understanding between both units of what the other is and how they contribute to the institutional mission. Given this reality, administrators recognized major “room for collaboration.” Specifically, in effort to align with the primary functions of the university, student affairs administrators saw collaboration as a way to position themselves in the academic arena.

Creating a culture of collaboration that permeates across campus units can be difficult. Understanding the role that each unit plays in the process can make it more manageable. This study provides leaders in higher education a better understanding of how to navigate two distinctive units and develop a collaborative partnership. Specifically, this study supports the idea that cross-unit collaboration may be necessary to accomplish the mission during times of change. For student affairs, collaborating across units could be the difference between relevance and getting left behind.
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APPENDIX A

STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for sharing your time with me today and participating in this interview project. My name is Litsa Orban Rivers and I am a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Alabama. I am conducting a study on experiences of administrators in relation to collaboration between university units and the advancement of the institutional mission. Based on your position and experiences, you were selected to share your insights on this topic. Over the next 45 minutes, I will ask you some questions about your experience in higher education, particularly with academic affairs and student affairs work. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question during this dialogue, you are welcome to pass on the question. If you need a break, please let me know. I am using an audio recorder to record this interview. I will also use a pseudonym in my interview transcript so your identity will remain confidential throughout the research. Do you have any questions or concerns? If there are no questions, let’s get started!

1. Please state your name and describe your role at the institution and how it aligns to the institutional mission.

2. What does it mean to achieve the institutional mission?

3. What do you think is essential for students to learn during their college experience?

4. How would students describe their learning experience at this university?

5. Who at the university is responsible for facilitating student learning?

6. How would you characterize the student affairs unit at this university?

7. Tell me what you know about the academic affairs unit and their work to fulfill the institutional mission at the university.

8. How would you describe the make-up of institutional committees and task forces on this campus?

9. Explain the universities’ responsibility to serve students both inside and outside of the classroom.

10. Tell me about a time when you have interacted with the academic affairs unit in your current role.
11. Tell me about the current relationship between academic affairs and student affairs at this institution.

12. Are there barriers for collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs? If so, what are they?

13. Can you identify a current university program, event, curriculum, etc. that would serve as an ideal example of linking curricular and a co-curricular experiences? If so, what makes this example ideal and unique?

14. What are your recommendations for integrating inside and outside of the classroom learning? Who are the key players involved?

15. Is there anything I haven’t asked that is relevant to this topic that you would like to share?
APPENDIX B

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for sharing your time with me today and participating in this interview project. My name is Litsa Orban Rivers and I am a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Alabama. I am conducting a study on experiences of administrators in relation to collaboration between university units and the advancement of the institutional mission. Based on your position and experiences, you were selected to share your insights on this topic. Over the next 45 minutes, I will ask you some questions about your experience in higher education, particularly with academic affairs and student affairs work. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question during this dialogue, you are welcome to pass on the question. If you need a break, please let me know. I am using an audio recorder to record this interview. I will also use a pseudonym in my interview transcript so your identity will remain confidential throughout the research. Do you have any questions or concerns? If there are no questions, let’s get started!

1. Please state your name and describe your role at the institution and how it aligns to the institutional mission.

2. What does it mean to achieve the institutional mission?

3. What do you think is essential for students to learn during their college experience?

4. How would students describe their learning experience at this university?

5. Who at the university is responsible for facilitating student learning?

6. How would you characterize the academic affairs unit at this university?

7. Tell me what you know about the student affairs unit and their work to fulfill the institutional mission at the university.

8. How would you describe the make-up of institutional committees and task forces on this campus?

9. Explain administrators’ responsibility to serve students both inside and outside of the classroom.

10. Tell me about a time when you have interacted with the student affairs unit in your current role.
11. Tell me about the current relationship between academic affairs and student affairs at this institution.

12. Are there barriers for collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs? If so, what are they?

13. Can you identify a current university program, event, curriculum, etc. that would serve as an ideal example of linking curricular and a co-curricular experiences? If so, what makes this example ideal and unique?

14. What are your recommendations for integrating inside and outside of the classroom learning? Who are the key players involved?

15. Is there anything I haven’t asked that is relevant to this topic that you would like to share?
April 25, 2017

Litsa Rivers
ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 17-OR-148, "Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and the Institutional Mission: A Case Study"

Dear Ms. Rivers:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on April 24, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

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