The Professional Lives of Higher Education Center Administrators

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ABSTRACT

In instances where many universities offer off-campus programs in a single locale, a supplier network exists. These supplier networks, or higher education centers (HECs) are beneficial to students and regions where the programs are delivered (Baus, 2007; Peterson, 2007). Few empirical studies have focused on consortium educational environments, such as HECs and most studies of off-campus education have taken an outsider-looking-in approach.

One window into the world of HECs is to examine the professional lives of administrators who work in the HEC environment. Professional life can be explored by eliciting data about work, relationships and rewards (Hirt, 2006; Hirt et al., 2006; Hirt et al., 2004).The purpose of this case study was to examine the professional lives of administrators who work at a HEC.

Data collection included engaging the participants in four exercises where they created social artifacts. Diagrams, graphs, concept maps and drawings are complementary additions to the traditional interview and encourage contributions from interviewees that might not otherwise be obtained (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006; Enger, 1998). Data from the social artifacts were used to customize the semi-structured interview protocol.

Findings indicate that those who work at HECs define their work, in large part, by those who benefit from that work: students, communities, and member institutions. The organizational dynamics that drive the work of HEC administrators are competition, collaboration and balance. HEC professionals view their primary role as being the face of their institution or the Center in the local community. They describe their work as a culminating experience that is both rewarding and challenging. At the core of this work are the relationships that HEC professionals establish and sustain with others. These relationships are defined by resource coordination, advocacy, and appreciation. Findings suggest that institutions would benefit from engaging in greater reciprocity with HEC professionals to include expertise reciprocity, relationship reciprocity, and resource reciprocity. In general, professional life at HECs is rich, varied, challenging, but rewarding.

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The Lord has promised good to me. His word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures. – john newton

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The United States is faced with a college access imperative (Hrabowski, 2007). Yet there are many ways to define college access. Heller (2001) referred to historical definitions that include financial accessibility, geographic accessibility, programmatic accessibility, academic accessibility, and cultural/social/physical accessibility. Researchers may choose among these definitions or create a definition of their own. Despite how one defines college access, research about access has focused on barriers for certain groups. Access barriers exist even though the American higher education landscape has numerous educational options for students.

The postsecondary education structure in the U.S. includes over 4,200 institutions that vary in mission, size, and type and students have more access options than any other national system (Volkwein & Grunig, 2005). Students may attend small private religious colleges, large public research universities or anything in between. Notwithstanding the diversity of college type in the higher education system, access to college is not equal for all students. Equal access to higher education was never part of the nation's original colonial colleges where privilege, exclusion and the opportunity for social mobility was reserved for certain groups (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2006). Those access issues for certain populations have persisted over time. The current literature about college access can be categorized into three groups of people that experience barriers.

Barriers to Access

The first group facing college access barriers includes those who are not adequately prepared for college. Some argue that more individuals are participating in higher education than ever before and that the real access issue is in the preparation of students for higher education

(Adelman, 2007; Lerner & Brand, 2007). Preparation for higher education rests in the K-12 arena. In this environment, there are gaps among population groups that play a role in matriculation to college. Hudson (2003) reported the percentages of high school students by race/ethnicity that received a regular high school diploma on time - a traditional milestone on the path to postsecondary education. Ninety-one percent (91%) of Asian students, 82% of White students, 72% of Black students and 67% of Hispanic students received a regular on-time diploma (Hudson, 2003, p. 1). Preparation is not just about *who* is prepared for college; it is also about *how* they are prepared. In a meta-analysis of college remedial course enrollment, gaps in college graduation rates were directly attributed to preexisting skill differences carried over from high school (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006).

The issue of preparation as a barrier to college access has received the attention of the federal government. For example, the 2006 Report from the Commission on the Future of Higher Education cited preparation as a major obstacle to college access:

> We found that access to American higher education is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers. Substandard high school preparation is compounded by poor alignment between high schools and colleges, which often creates an 'expectations gap' between what colleges require and what high schools produce. (Department of Education, 2006, p. 1).

At the state and institutional level, there are attempts to better connect the K-12 and higher education systems. One such attempt is the American Diploma Project Network, comprised of a coalition of 30 states. The main tenet of the organization is that preparation for college and/or work requires a similar set of skills and expectations. The project involves university faculty who provide high school teachers with their college-level class syllabi and a list of expectations for entry-level college skills. This approach undermines any notion of college versus work tracks in high schools since the project's research suggested employers and university faculty are seeking the same skill sets from high school graduates (Achieve, 2007).

The second group experiencing barriers to college access is students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Some argue that while more students are enrolling in postsecondary institutions, access has taken an unprecedented turn in terms of socioeconomic stratification (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Callen, 2001; Mortenson, 2000). Socioeconomic stratification is not new to debates about higher education. Bowen et al. (2006) discussed the Reynolds study of the early 1920s where wealth and status were major attributes of college students. Still today, those with lower socioeconomic status are less likely than their higher income peers to gain access to college at any time (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007).

The issue of economic status has also received attention in the federal policy arena. The Pell Grant program distributes dollars to low income students enrolled in postsecondary education and currently supports more than 3,000,000 students (Singell & Stone, 2007). Yet because a relationship exists between low income and low standardized test scores, selective universities typically enroll fewer students from low income backgrounds furthering the chasm of college inequity for low income students (Ehrenberg, Zhang, & Levin, 2006; Carnevale & Rose, 2003).

States and institutions are seeking new and innovative financial aid programs, tuition schemes, and community college transfer partnerships to help alleviate the college access barrier for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Ehrenberg et al., 2006). One such program is The University of Virginia's AccessUVa program:

> A financial aid program designed to keep a higher education affordable for all admitted students regardless of economic circumstance. Because access for every academically eligible student is a priority at the University of Virginia, the University has made an annual commitment of $20 million in need-based grants to undergraduates. AccessUVa offers loan-free packages for low-income students, caps on need-based loans for all other students, and a commitment to meet 100 percent of need for every student (see www.virginia.edu/accessuva, 2007).

The third group experiencing barriers to college access is adult learners. Almost 54 million adults in the United States have not completed a four-year degree; these potential students need convenient and affordable access, but they must operate in a college system that focuses primarily on traditional aged (18-24 year old) students (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). The availability of course offerings has been cited as a barrier for adult students. Knapper and Cropley (2000) suggested universities should implement new lifelong learning strategies to impact access barriers, such as part-time educational options for working adults. Additionally, more weekend courses could alleviate some of the attrition problems for adult college students (Wlodkowski, Maudlin, & Campbell, 2002). A study of incentives and barriers to postsecondary education for soldiers cited the lack of course offerings as a major factor in soldiers' perceptions of barriers to postsecondary education (Covert, 2002). Some argue that since adult learners have different course delivery needs, they should be given opportunities to take courses from several institutions and eventually transfer those courses into a single degree program (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). Sissel (2001) conducted three studies that led her to conclude adult students are marginalized, institutionally invisible, systematically neglected, and only at times accommodated by universities because they are viewed as ‘cash cows’ (pp. 103, 113). Overall, the research about adult students and their experiences in higher education demands more attention.

From a federal standpoint, The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) is one of the most influential policy responses that created access to higher education for adult students, also having a tremendous economic impact on a postwar nation (Adams, 2000). More recently, a federal bill called the College Access and Opportunity Act might influence access for adult students (Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoops, 2007):

> H.R. 609 includes proposals that would make it easier for students to gather critical information about postsecondary institutions and would include adult learner data in some accountability metrics. The legislation is a starting point for better aligning higher education accountability efforts with the needs and interests of adult learners (p. 46).

States and institutions have also responded by creating access opportunities for adult students. For example, access was the primary motivation for institutions that use distance learning (Berg, 2002). In addition to distance learning opportunities, universities are seeking ways to improve services to adult students. A study at the University of Central Florida revealed that dedicated support services enhanced the college experience for adult students studying online at a distance from their institution (Greer, Hudson & Paugh, 1998). Purslow and Belcastro (2006) offered a framework for universities to support the rising numbers of adult learners. One element of this framework is to provide relevant and applicable experiences for adult students, such as community based learning, service learning and internships. Another element in the framework is to provide professional development training to faculty in adult learning theory and practice (p. 9). Thus, universities have responded by creating course delivery options for adult students and services for those students enrolled in such courses, actions that fall under the umbrella of off-campus education.

Off-campus education broadens traditional geographic boundaries for institutions by taking the university to the student (Baus, 2007). Defining off-campus education is difficult because it is such an amorphous entity. The nebulous phrase is used interchangeably in literature and in practice with terms like continuing education, extended education, distance education, external degree programs, and outreach. The Commission on Colleges in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), a regional accreditation agency for colleges and universities, defines extended units as all centers, branches, campuses, or other sites of a degree-granting institution at which postsecondary degree or non-degree work is offered (2006, p. 1).

The role of off-campus education in higher education is to expand the reach of the university. Its origin rests in meeting the workforce training and economic development needs of an industrially depressed nation (Journal of Education, 1931). Off-campus education has evolved over time to provide learning opportunities for individuals who might not otherwise attend traditional universities. Working parents who were unable to move, teachers who needed recertification, and industrial workers needing on-site training have all been served through off-campus education. Today, universities offering off-campus education opportunities do so in concert with localities in effort to increase access, promote economic development and meet market demands. Off-campus education affects economic development when regions experience economic growth. Bowen (2007) referred to the impact of higher education on economic development as increasing a region’s knowledge base.

Many scholars have linked higher education with economic development (Burr, 2006; Florida, 2006; Freeland, 2004; Kumar Nurayan & Smyth, 2006; McMullen, Mauch, &

Donnorummo, 2000; Zaglul & Sherrad, 2006). Over time, economic language has become a part of the higher education dialogue. Students are consumers and universities are marketers when institutions are linked to the economy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Linking higher education to the economy creates an interesting framework for a discussion of access. Some view off-campus education initiatives as the product of local, grassroots efforts to undertake programs that are responsive to the needs of the state (Patton, 1975). In areas where students (consumers) have little geographic access to universities (suppliers), off-campus education offers access to higher education. In some instances, more than one supplier answered the demand of consumers. Where multiple institutions deliver off-campus academic programs in a single locale, a supplier network might be said to exist.

One type of supplier network in the management literature is a leveraged learning supplier network. Such networks develop from a need to improve supply chain performance where there is relatively low buyer power and few resources. Its mission is to work together to enable each member to optimize its competitiveness in a win-win environment. Leveraged learning networks rely upon a facilitator that is independent and can respond to all members' needs (Stuart, Deckert, McCutcheon & Kunst, 1998).

Higher Education Centers

Leveraged learning supplier networks exist in the higher education landscape in situations where many institutions operate separately to deliver programs at a single site. This creates a smorgasbord of educational opportunities, offered in one location, for consumers who may not otherwise leave their geographic region to attend college. These supplier networks are called higher education centers (HECs). Students cite the proximity, flexible scheduling options, and peer-to-peer relationships as the benefits of study at a higher education center (Baus, 2007).

These education consortia enrich the lives of faculty, students, staff, and the cultural life of the region in which they are situated (Peterson, 2007, p. 108). Overall, however, studies about the perceptions of off-campus education have elicited quality concerns.

In the early stages of my study, a HEC staff member referenced the lack of understanding about HECs in the way on-campus colleagues have viewed their off-campus counterparts working in off-campus education, “They [on-campus colleagues] seldom know we exist. If they do, we are something of a second class citizen to the on-campus professors, students and administrators.” The literature supports this perception.

The earliest form of off-campus education dates back to the 1800s in the form of correspondence courses. Those working in the traditional academy viewed such courses as lucrative business opportunities that were educationally inferior (Tracey & Richey, 2005). A study of incentives for participation in off-campus education found that faculty felt off-campus programs weakened the academic integrity of the university and that students in these programs were less qualified (Patton, 1975). Although faculty were receptive to innovative degree options that provided greater access for non-traditional students, program quality was the greatest concern among faculty regarding off-campus education (Johnson, 1984). The concerns about the quality of off-campus education programs resulted in policy responses.

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) recommended that universities adopt policies to insure all graduate programs (on or off campus) were equal in quality (Scully, 1977). By 1984, all six regional accrediting bodies had some set of requirements for academic programs that were delivered off-campus (Kuhns & Martorana, 1984). More recently, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, the American Federation of Teachers and the Council for Higher

Education Association have published guidelines for best practices to maintain the academic rigor of courses delivered online (Wang, 2006).

Although no study has directly assessed the academy's perception of HECs, it is reasonable to suggest that HECs may endure the same type of academic skepticism as off-campus education in the postsecondary community. Interestingly, most of what has been written about off-campus education has explored how those on traditional campuses view the entity and no study has examined the perceptions of administrators who work in the field. This "outsider-looking-in" approach ignores the voices of those working in the field and reveals a gap in the literature; how do those who work in off-campus education view their work. One way to explore the perceptions of those who work in this setting is to examine the professional lives of administrators in a HEC.

Studies about the professional lives of administrators in higher education include types of work, relationships, and rewards for these practitioners. The professional life of a student affairs administrator depends upon the type of institution at which one works (Hirt, 2006). For instance, student affairs work at liberal arts colleges (LACs) is multi-tasked, service-oriented and student-centered; the LAC environment encourages creativity and risk-taking (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneiter, 2004). Student affairs practitioners working at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) refer to their work as positively rewarding, highly stressful and slow to change. The themes that emerge from workers at HBCUs include a lack of resources, a sense of duty to students, and a feeling of racial uplift (Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). The nature of relationships for academic administrators has also been studied.

In the book, *The Academic Dean: Dove, Dragon and Diplomat* (Tucker & Bryan, 1991), the authors describe the many relationships academic deans must develop and maintain. For example, the relationship between an academic dean and president revolves around ceremonial activities, fund-raising, and recruiting. The relationship between the dean and chief academic officer pertains to building trust, setting goals, communicating, presenting a budget request, bringing about change, resolving conflict, recruiting new faculty members, and obtaining advice. The relationship between the academic dean and other deans are both cooperative and competitive. Academic administrators must also maintain relationships with external constituencies, staff, parents and students (Tucker & Bryan, 1991) and these relationships must be maintained in ever-changing environments (Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001).

This ever-changing academic environment has several driving forces. Institutions exist in a market-driven, commercialized, and competitive environment (Gilde, 2007). They also exist in a global economy where collaboration is part of success (Freidman, 2006). Thus, the forces of competition and collaboration surround the academy. In response to these forces, new organizational structures have emerged in higher education (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Tiechler, 2007).

Research is needed to understand these new collaborative organizational structures in higher education. HECs have their impetus in access and economic development and the external forces of competition and collaboration surround them. A study that gives voice to those working in the HEC environment will also provide information about the internal organizational forces that sustain these environments.

Statement of the Problem

In summary, access is a multifacted topic and presents many areas for study. The dialogue about access in the literature references barriers for three groups of people. The first group facing an access barrier is students who are not adequately prepared for higher education

(Adelman, 2007; Lerner et al., 2007; Attewell et al., 2006; Hudson, 2003). The second group facing an access barrier is students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007; Singel et al., 2007; Bowen et al., 2006; Ehrenberg et al., 2006; Astin et al, 2004; Carnevale et al., 2003; Callen, 2001; Mortenson, 2000). Third, adult students face access barriers to college (Pusser et al., 2007; Wlodkowski et al., 2002; Covert, 2002; SREB, 2002; Sissel, 2001; Knapper et al., 2000). The barriers to these three groups have received federal, state and institutional attention.

The federal government, states and institutions have responded to the access barriers of preparation, socioeconomic status, and age through policy and programmatic responses (AccessUVa, 2007; Achieve, 2007; Kazis et al., 2007; Singell et al., 2007; DOE, 2006; Adams, 2000). One institutional response to the access barrier for adult students is through offering courses, programs and services to adult students through off-campus education (Baus, 2007; Berg, 2002; Greer et al., 1998). Off-campus education not only provides access to adult students, but also provides economic benefits to the university and region where programs are delivered (Bowen, 2007).

The economic benefit of higher education has been noted (Burr, 2006; Florida, 2006; Freeland, 2004; Kumar et al., 2006; McMullen et al., 2000; Zagul, 2006). Because the language of economics has become part of higher education dialogue, students have at times been called consumers and universities marketers or suppliers (Slaughter et al., 2004). In instances where many universities offer off-campus education programs in a single locale, a supplier network exists. These supplier networks, or higher education centers (HECs) are beneficial to students and regions where the programs are delivered (Baus, 2007; Peterson, 2002); however, very few studies exist in the literature that focus on HECs.

In general, research relating to perceptions of off-campus education revolves around outsiders' perceptions (Tracey et al., 2005; Johnson, 1984; Scully, 1977; Patton, 1975). No study has explored the perceptions of those working in the field of off-campus education; specifically, no research has explored the perceptions of those who work at a HEC.

One window into the world of HECs is to examine the professional lives of administrators who work at HECs. Professional life can be explored by eliciting data about the nature of work, rewards and relationships (Hirt, 2006; Hirt et al., 2006; Hirt et al., 2004). Such a study would plow new territory and contribute to the body of knowledge related to work in off-campus education and consortium environments such as a HEC.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to examine the professional lives of administrators who work in these organizations. This is an initial inquiry into professional life at HECs. For the purposes of this study, professional life was defined as the nature of work and relationships. Specifically, two research questions guided this study:

1. What organizational forces drive the work of HEC administrators?
2. How do HEC administrators describe their professional lives (work, relationships, and rewards)?

Definitions

Higher Education Center (HEC) was defined as a single site, managed by an independent administration, where two or more universities/colleges offer baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate programs.

Home Institution was defined as a traditional institution that delivers academic programs at a HEC.

Institutional Administrator was defined as an administrator physically located in an HEC, but who works as an employee of the home institution.

Center Administrator was defined as an administrator physically located in an HEC who works as an employee of the center.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for future practice, research and policy. In terms of practice, three major constituencies might benefit from these results. First, the findings provided professors in higher education programs information about HECs and the nature of administrative work at these centers. Faculty members might use the results to design courses or infuse current courses with information that would better prepare graduate students for management, teaching, or research in an educational consortium environment.

The second constituency that might benefit from the results of this study is administrators working in HECs. The results provided an operating definition of a HEC and an overview of the history and mission of one such center. Current HEC administrators might use the results from this study to seek out other HEC administrators for the purpose of creating a community of discourse. Currently, there is no formal professional association for HEC administrators. The results from this study might be used as a catalyst for creating a professional association dedicated to dialogue, practice and research related to HECs.

The third constituency that might benefit from the results of this study is business and education leaders considering a HEC for their region. This study provided detailed information from administrators about the nature of work and relationships for those working in a HEC. These results might be used to shape grassroots efforts and formative partnership agreements in the development of a HEC.

The present study also served as a catalyst for additional research. I explored one HEC in an effort to gain a holistic understanding of a single HEC situated in the higher education landscape. HECs have emerged in different ways and for different reasons, however. Future research could explore alternative cases of HECs for the purposes of comparing and analyzing centers across cases.

Another opportunity for future research is a historical analysis of HECs, operational models and how they have impacted access in the higher education landscape over time. Such a study would situate the present study in a broader frame and create a larger perspective on HECs.

This case study explored the professional lives of HEC administrators. Additional studies could investigate the professional lives of faculty teaching at a HEC in order to gain a better understanding of faculty work in an educational consortium environment.

A fourth opportunity for additional research is a study about students at HECs and learning outcomes for those students enrolled in HEC programs. Such a study would increase the information related to the college student experience and learning outcomes.

Finally, this study was significant in terms of future policy. The results from this study provided insight into HECs and the nature of work that takes place in a HEC. Policymakers might use the results from this study to shape policies when establishing HECs.

This study may be useful for policymakers interested in innovative ways to meet the demand for economic development through access to higher education. The results from this study provided data about work in a HEC. These data might be used by policymakers to consider future support of access to higher education through HECs.

Finally, this study was significant for policymakers concerned with local, grassroots efforts that influence educational opportunities. These results offered insights related to the relationships between HEC administrators and home institutions. These data might be used to shape the content of organizational and operational policies between home institutions and HECs.

Delimitations

The present study also had some initial delimitations. The first dealt with the sample. A single case was the sample for this study. It is likely that other HECs are organized differently and the nature of work for administrators working in other HECs might have differed from those involved in this study. As with all case studies, transferring findings to other settings must be done very cautiously.

A second delimitation of the present study was the selection of HEC administrators. Administrators in this study were selected if they were designated by the Executive Director as “active” participants on site at the HEC. It is possible that less active administrators could have provided additional data that might influence the findings of the study.

Finally, the data in this study were collected using self-reported answers through interviews and activities with the participants. This may be a delimitation since respondents may not always be candid when self-reporting. Data collected through some other means might have differed from the self-reported data.

Despite these limitations, the study was important because HECs have been neglected in the literature. Understanding the nature of work at HECs afforded educators and policymakers an opportunity to learn more about HECs and the people who work there. Finally, the present study served as a catalyst for additional research relating to HECs.

Organization of the Study

This case study is organized around six chapters. Chapter One introduces the purpose for conducting the study, topic, significance and impact of the study. Chapter Two presents the context and setting for the study. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology and includes the sample selection process and procedures used for data collection and analysis. Chapters Four and Five are written in journal article format. The fourth chapter presents an article about beneficiaries and organizational dynamics driving administrative work in a HEC. The fifth chapter presents a journal article about work and relationships. The sixth chapter provides a conclusion for the study.

CHAPTER TWO

Setting

This chapter contains a description of the setting for the study and includes three sections. The first section describes the mission of the Center and its development. The second section describes the region before and after the Center's inception. The third section explains the employment arrangements within the Center.

Mission and Development of the Roanoke Higher Education Center

This case study was conducted at the Roanoke Higher Education Center (RHEC) in Roanoke, Virginia. The RHEC mission is:

> …to foster economic development by expanding access for the people of the Greater Roanoke region to workforce development, technology training, higher education programs and the use of conference facilities through partnerships with public and private institutions, agencies, civic groups and the business community (RHEC, 2007).

In 1997, the Roanoke Higher Education Authority (RHEA) was initiated by Virginia Senate Bill 1180. The purpose of this bill was to expand access to higher education in the region by providing adult and continuing education and degree-granting programs through partnerships with the Commonwealth's public and private institutions of higher education (SB 1180). RHEA was designated as a political subdivision of the Commonwealth. The Virginia General Assembly delayed funding RHEA, however, until data from an overarching needs assessment were presented. The General Assembly charged the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) with conducting the needs assessment. The assessment focused on program needs, collaborative issues, ownership, and management issues (SCHEV, 1997).

The SCHEV study provides valuable insight into the educational conditions of the region and the context surrounding the origin of RHEC. The authors of the SCHEV study concluded:

1) With the available in-the-service-area programs and the proximity of several of the Commonwealth's major public educational institutions, there is no credible evidence that strongly supports the creation of a new, 4-year degree-granting public institution within the RHEA service area.

2) There is ample evidence to indicate that the RHEA should constitute the RHEC as a body that coordinates and promotes the existing postsecondary education programs – both for-credit and not-for-credit – available in the area. While little evidence was obtained to indicate duplication inefficiencies, a central coordinating body could ensure such problems do not exist and that various other levels of cost efficiency are realized.

3) While Virginia Western Community College is certainly the largest player in offering not-for-credit programs, there are many others that must be considered – and coordinated – in creating a successful 'one stop shopping' concept for workforce development activities within the RHEA service area (pp. 16-17).

Participating RHEC institutions were encouraged to collaborate on the delivery of credit and non-credit programs through shared administrative functions and resources (including the facility), coordination of marketing and information provision, and the development of academic policy related to course transfer. The RHEC would serve as the coordinating and brokering entity for the institutions (p. 18). The authors of the SCHEV study recommended that the administrative functions of the RHEC be budgeted separately and include the cost of center administrators, support staff, brokering activities, and essential administrative functions (p. 20). Participating institutions would pay for all direct costs of programs and courses, a fair-market rental cost for space, and the costs of essential center services. Private institutions would not receive any special state support for delivering programs at the center. Public institutions would adhere to standard state policies (p. 21). The financial responsibility for the operation of the RHEA and RHEC was to be jointly shared by participating localities and the state (p. 24).

Soon after the SCHEV study results were reported, a group of business, civic and educational leaders from the Roanoke area went into action. This group organized earlier under the name of “Destination Education,” to advocate for the Center with SCHEV, the governor’s office and the General Assembly. They received letters of intent from organizations wanting to deliver programs at the RHEC. Ten institutions and two workforce training organizations submitted letters of intent. In addition to the letters of intent, the group also received numerous letters of endorsement and support for the RHEC.

In both a fiscal and symbolic endorsement of the RHEC, the Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System withdrew a $6.8 million building budget request that year. The budget request was to build a facility on the campus of Virginia Western Community College, also located in Roanoke. The Chancellor yielded plans for a capital community college project in support of the $9 million request to fund the RHEC.

An administrator at the RHEC reflected upon these moments in the center’s history as the “most bi-partisan grassroots support of education I have ever seen.” More than 70 business, education, and community leaders were pooling their influence and resources to make RHEC a reality. The same administrator told a story about a prominent Roanoke businessman who used his pilot's license and personal airplane to fly members of Destination Education to Richmond, the state's capital, to lobby the governor and legislators for RHEC funding.

During this time, Norfolk Southern Railroad donated a building to the Roanoke Foundation for Downtown, Inc. This building had once been used as the site of the company's headquarters. Although it was in need of major renovation, the building was considered prime real estate due to its downtown Roanoke location. The Roanoke Foundation for Downtown contributed the building to the Higher Education Center project.

RHEC supporters were thrilled when then Governor George Allen included the $9 million RHEC funding request in his budget with the addition of $7.2 million in historic tax credits and $2.5 million from the city of Roanoke. In 1998, an architectural firm was selected to plan the renovations of the Norfolk Southern building. Construction began in October 1999. The RHEC opened its doors to students in August 2000.

Roanoke Before and After the RHEC

Virginia's ninth largest independent city in 1997, Roanoke was on the verge of economic growth. Opened in 1983, the "Center in the Square," a major cultural attraction, was the catalyst for further downtown revitalization. In 1997, the city's Outlook Roanoke Strategic Plan was in its early stages and downtown revitalization was under way. The residents in the Roanoke area were also entering a time of economic prosperity. For example, in 1997 at the time of the SCHEV study, the per capita income for the Roanoke Metropolitan Service Area (MSA) was $23,801 whereas in all of Virginia it was $26,307. Up until 2001, the per capita income percent increase in the Roanoke MSA lagged behind the overall percent increase in Virginia. Since 2001, this measure has outpaced the Virginia average in percent change (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2007).

The economic upturn in Roanoke included forward-thinking ideas like revitalizing the downtown area and expanding educational opportunities through the RHEC. It is likely that no individual project caused the growth; however, the synergy created by multiple projects launched Roanoke into a new era.

Information from the SCHEV needs assessment study can be used as a baseline to show both change in RHEC over time and to provide context for the current conditions of education in the region. For example, at the time of the SCHEV needs assessment, 10 member institutions were identified as potential participants in the consortium. In the fall of 2007, the RHEC had 14 member institutions: Averett University, Bluefield College, Ferrum College, Hampton University, Hollins University, Jefferson College of Health Sciences, Mary Baldwin College, Old Dominion University, Radford University, Roanoke College, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Virginia, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and Virginia Western Community College (see www.education.edu/programs). Two institutions were approved as new members during the months of data collection for this study: James Madison University and Nova Southeastern University.

The 10 potential partner institutions, per the SCHEV study, were delivering 22 undergraduate programs and 18 master's programs in various locations throughout the Roanoke area. For example, institutions were delivering programs in public schools and in local businesses. Today, the RHEC creates a space where all programs are housed within one physical plant. In the fall of 2007, the 14 partner institutions were delivering 59 undergraduate programs, 46 master's programs, 1 doctoral program, 42 certificate programs, and 66 other adult learning opportunities (RHEC Continuum, Fall 2007, p. 2). In addition to program growth, state funding to RHEC has grown over time.

Authors of the SCHEV study indicated state funding adequacy at a level of $250,000 for the RHEC during 1998-2000 (SCHEV, p. 20). In the 2006-2008 state budget for the RHEC, adequacy was determined to be $1, 287, 000 (RHEC, 2007). This is an indicator that legislators recognized the value of this type of educational model. Fundamental to this recognition is an understanding that there is need and demand for educational programs in Roanoke. The need and demand is reflected in the number of people that have accessed programs at the RHEC. The RHEC Strategic Plan states that since the center opened its doors in the fall of 2000, more than 2,700 people have completed programs at RHEC (2007).

The vision of Virginia Senate Bill 1180, to expand access to higher education in the Roanoke Valley by providing adult and continuing education and degree-granting programs is being realized through the RHEC. One administrator referred to the role of the RHEC as "instrumental in developing an educated workforce in Roanoke and thereby making a positive contribution to the economy and this community that has experienced incredible growth."

Employment Arrangements in the RHEC

The RHEC is both a consortium of universities and an entity unto itself. Therefore, it presents a unique employment arrangement. There are two categories of employees at the Center.

The first category of employees is RHEC staff and administration. These individuals are paid by RHEC funds and are considered public employees because of the political subdivision status of the RHEA. The duties of these employees include, but are not limited to, brokering, coordinating programs and events, scheduling classrooms, sponsoring conferences, providing building maintenance and security, and offering general student services such as the staffing the Center's library and the Center's career services office.

The second category of employees is individuals paid by member institutions, grants, or other organizations and agencies. These individuals have office suites located within the RHEC and their employers lease space from the RHEC. The duties of these employees include, but are not limited to, program marketing, recruitment, classroom scheduling, and serving students that attend their classes and/or events. Few of the academic programs offered at the RHEC are duplicate programs. An administrator referred to the collegial environment that exists. For example, if one institutional representative cannot meet the needs of a prospective student, it is likely that the student will receive advice about another institutional member at the RHEC that might offer the student the program he/she is seeking. However, these relationships are at times competitive since each participating member must recover the cost of its individual program operations.

Finally, it is important to note that members of the RHEC administration provided written documents and engaged in several conversations that contributed to this chapter. These documents and conversations provided valuable information for situating RHEC in context. I am grateful to these individuals for their willingness to openly share documents and experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter contains a description of the methodology used to conduct the study. The purpose of this case study was to examine the professional lives of administrators at a higher education center (HEC). It was an initial inquiry into the perceptions of those working in off-campus education, specifically administrators that work at HECs. For the purposes of this study, professional life was defined as the nature of work and relationships. Specifically, two research questions guided this study:

1. What organizational forces drive the work of HEC administrators?
2. How do HEC administrators describe their professional lives (work, relationships, and rewards)?

The sections of this chapter include the rationale for conducting a qualitative study, selection of participants, data collection, data quality, data analysis, and representation of results. Each section provides additional details related to that section, such as my positionality, quality, dependability of the study results, and rigor of methods.

Rationale and Assumptions for a Qualitative Design

The rationale for a qualitative design was influenced by the research purpose and my paradigmatic assumptions about research. The research purpose is the first, most obvious consideration that impacted my decision to use a qualitative design. Charmaz (2006) advocated that the research problem should shape the methods one chooses (p. 15). The purpose of this study was to discover the nature of work and relationships for administrators working at the Roanoke Higher Education Center (RHEC). A qualitative design occurs in a natural setting and presents a rich, thick description (Denzin, 1989) of the phenomena through the eyes of the participants (Creswell, 1998). A qualitative approach allowed me to incorporate contextual information while also expressing the stories of the participants from their individual vantage points (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study, a qualitative approach enabled systematic, but simultaneous data collection and analysis while also providing the flexibility to be open to the emergence of new ideas along the way (Patton, 2002). The tension between flexibility and structure in qualitative research has been noted (Hatch, 2002). While structure was sought through systematic data collection, there was also the need to have flexibility to accommodate any additional information that emerged throughout the study.

A case study design was selected as the most suitable qualitative tradition for the purposes of this study. Researchers who investigate case studies examine a setting bounded in time and space and provide contextual and extensive information from many sources (Creswell, 1998). My understanding of the setting, access to the participants, and the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning over time spent with the participants facilitated a rigorous case study design. The study was bounded by time (four months) and by place (RHEC) and multiple data sources were utilized (social artifacts and interviews).

Second, my paradigmatic assumptions about research impacted the rationale for a qualitative design. The worldview of a researcher shapes the way he or she approaches the selection of research procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These paradigmatic dispositions - epistemological (how one knows) or ontological (how one defines reality) – influenced the rationale for a qualitative research design. My paradigmatic dispositions are grounded in constructivism; that discovery and learning is constructed through prior knowledge, interpretation, and experiences (Bruner, 1973; Piaget, 1973). Paradigmatic leanings and bias related to the discovery process can be “bracketed” or “controlled for” in both qualitative and quantitative designs so that data are not unduly influenced or transformed by personal bias. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach most accurately constructed the professional lives of RHEC administrators using an “insider-looking-out” perspective.

Role of the Researcher

I work on-campus for Virginia Tech, a member institution at the RHEC. Three years prior to conducting this study, I worked as a university site director at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center (SVHEC) in Abingdon, Virginia. Thus, I was familiar with the structure, setting and general operational environment of HECs. It is important to note, however, that I had very little contact with the administrators at the RHEC prior to the study. The center context, administrative styles, and personalities of the participants were developed through relationships with the respondents established throughout the duration of this study.

Prior knowledge and experience working in a higher education center facilitated trust and participatory debriefing. This enhanced the rigor of the study. The general nature of off-campus education and the relationships between HEC administrators and home institutions was understood. Conversationally, I referenced my experience with participants and that provided credibility to researching administrative work in a HEC. Prior experience in the HEC setting also helped because I understood the terminology of participants. For example, I did not have to ask the definition of a member meeting because I knew from experience that these were meetings where all institutional administrators met monthly with the Center staff to discuss programs and new initiatives. As a former Center colleague, I believed my relationships with the participants as a researcher in their work setting was enhanced by my prior experiences in a similar setting. Conducting research in a setting familiar to the researcher frequently occurs in qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

When exploring the feasibility of this study, I contacted an administrator at the RHEC to talk through the purposes of the research and to investigate his willingness to participate in the study. This administrator spoke of the void in current literature on HECs and the widespread lack of awareness regarding HECs in the higher education landscape. His willingness to participate was anchored in a desire to initiate a body of scholarship surrounding higher education centers. He indicated that he felt his colleagues at the Center would be willing to participate in the study for similar reasons. This conversation illuminates the need for additional studies of HECs and why the present study plows new, unexplored territory: a hallmark of qualitative research.

Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling method and criterion sampling procedures were used to select the participants for the study. Purposeful sampling means that participants who could provide the richest data for the study were selected. Criterion sampling enhances the rigor of a study (Patton, 2002).

There were two criteria for selecting the informants. First, the Center administration must have designated the institutional participants as “active” administrators. This was important since the richest data would come from institutional administrators who were visibly engaged in the postsecondary activities of the center and who regularly attended monthly program meetings. Less active administrators, especially those that might not work on site at the RHEC, would be unable to provide the richness of data needed for this study.

The second criterion for selecting the sample was to include only those administrators that had primary postsecondary administrative responsibilities, such as serving as their institutional representative or engaging in activities such as resource allocation, administrative support to faculty or students, and marketing credit-bearing college programs to the RHEC community. This was important because there were administrators working at the Center that performed other duties (e.g., paying bills, facility maintenance, non-credit workforce development) and these administrators would likely report very different work experiences that were not directly related to the purpose of this study.

A purposive sampling method was utilized to select the sample. After meeting with the Center administration to explain the purposes of the study, a staff member provided two rosters. The first roster listed all Center staff (those paid by the Center funds) with names and titles. Using the two criteria above, four administrators (Center administrators) out of four eligible met both criteria and agreed to participate. The second roster listed key contacts and administrators paid by other institutions such as site directors and administrators of other projects with salaries paid by agencies or grants. Nine administrators (institutional administrators) from the roster of 21 total key contacts met the criteria and agreed to participate.

In total, 13 administrators met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The participants were accessed in several ways. First, the Center administration was willing to grant access to the RHEC and provided two staff rosters with names of active site directors. Second, I attended a monthly program meeting where the potential participants were gathered. I explained the purposes of the study and answered questions about the study. In addition to signing an informed consent form, those who agreed to participate completed a contact information sheet that included gender, race/ethnicity and number of years working at the RHEC as well as general contact information questions (e.g, name, email, phone number, best time to reach). Third, I used email and phone to describe the social artifact exercises and arrange an interview time. Finally, email was utilized to access the participants to confirm interview times and send the interview transcript for review.

Data Collection

The research proposal was routed to the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. A copy of the IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A. Drafts of all instruments used to obtain data in this study (social artifact exercises and interview protocol) were reviewed by experts in the field of higher education or educational research and evaluation. The instruments were revised based on comments and suggestions from these individuals.

Pilot Study

Two administrators at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center (SVHEC) participated in a pilot study and completed the social artifact exercises. The data from the pilot study were used to refine the exercises and to develop a list of the mostly commonly mentioned rewards of working in HEC. The data obtained from the pilot study were not used in the RHEC study.

Social Artifact Exercises

Social artifacts are letters, documents, photographs, or personal representations that help qualitative researchers learn more about the personal experiences of the participant (Creswell, Hansen, Clark, & Morales, 2007). Researchers in educational settings have used social artifacts to gather data (Siegel, 2001; Isaacson & Wilson, 1996; North Carolina Vocational Education Study, 1988). Diagrams, graphs, concept maps, and drawings were complementary additions to the traditional interview, encouraging contributions from interviewees that might not otherwise be obtained (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006; Enger, 1998).

The purpose of the social artifact exercises in this case study was to engage the participants in information sharing through graphs, charts and concept maps. These data supplemented the traditional interview format. Since three of the four social artifact exercises were the first form of data collection and were completed prior to the interviews, I engaged in systematic analysis across and within participants to customize the interviews. This created a more robust and individualized interview format. This study presented participants with the opportunity to create four social artifacts that informed the purpose of this research.

The first two social artifact exercises elicited data about the nature of administrative work at the RHEC. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with the days of the week down the left margin. They were asked to write or outline their typical activities next to each day, referring either to their calendars or by recalling their own experiences to synthesize the essence of a typical work week. This Weekly Workload Activity (Exercise 1) also provided preliminary data about the nature of relationships because administrators mentioned some of the groups of people with whom they work when completing the exercise.

A basic graph plot was on a second sheet of paper. On this graph, the horizontal axis was labeled, “yearly timeline” and marked by month, beginning with August. The vertical axis was labeled “workload level”, with “low” at the bottom and “high” at the top of the vertical axis. The participants were asked to graph a line that represented their workload levels throughout the year, drawing peaks where the work was particularly heavy, stressful or increased. This Yearly Workload Timeline (Exercise 2) provided useful information about the nature of administrative work throughout the year. The weekly workload activities and yearly workload timelines were compared to see if patterns emerged. The administrators were asked in the interview to explain certain peaks to find out more about the types of activities in which they engage. This exercise also provided indirect information about the rewards of working in a HEC since administrators were asked in the interviews to explain particularly stressful/high workload volume times and whether those times were rewarding. Copies of Exercises 1 and 2 appear in Appendix B.

The third social artifact exercise (see Appendix C) elicited data about the nature of relationships for HEC administrators. The participants were given a piece of paper with a circle in the middle. The word, “you” was written in this circle. They were asked to draw a concept map using circles and names inside those circles to demonstrate the individuals and groups that they have a relationship with in their line of work. This statement was left vague and open-ended. Just as important as the groups that the administrators mentioned in their concept map were those that were not mentioned. This Relationship Concept Map (Exercise 3) provided valuable information. The concept maps were used in the interviews to talk more about their relationships – both those that were mentioned and those that were not mentioned. Indirectly, this exercise also provided data about the nature of work for administrators since relationships with individuals and groups often occurred in the process of carrying out work.

The fourth social artifact exercise for this study was conducted during the interview and elicited data about the rewards of working in a HEC. In the pilot study, participants were asked to list the rewards of working in a HEC. The ten most commonly mentioned rewards by pilot study participants were used to create index cards with the following phrases: (1) attractive, inviting facility, (2) autonomy, (3) collegial decision-making, (4) creative opportunities, (5) help support others, (6) money, insurance, benefits, (7) safe, secure workplace, (8) the HEC is supportive of me, (9) variety of daily challenges, and (10) working with people. In the RHEC study, the participants reviewed the rewards listed on these ten index cards. They were also given five blank cards and asked to write five additional rewards they personally experience in their work. When these self-generated cards were ready, the participant was asked to put all 15 index cards in order from most important reward to least important reward. This Ranking Rewards (Exercise 4) provided the participant with the opportunity to engage in a metacongnitive exercise that resulted in reflection about the rewards of their work. This exercise also elucidated data about relationships with others as inherent in rewards; for example, working with faculty colleagues. Finally, the exercise generated many robust interview discussions about work relationships and rewards.

Interviews

In addition to the social artifact exercises, a second form of data collection was a round of interviews with the participants. Each interview was scheduled for an hour and a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized (Appendix D). Using the data from the first three exercises, each participant's interview protocol was customized. There were five sections of the interview protocol. The first section of the interview protocol was the "Information" section. This section provided the opportunity to ask a few questions to supplement the original demographic information sheet with more information about the participant. For example, this section included the question, "Tell me about your history with the RHEC."

The second section of the interview protocol was labeled "Work." The participants were asked about their weekly and yearly workload activities. For example, they were asked to explain certain peaks on the yearly timeline and whether those times were rewarding. They were asked to review the typical weekly activities and if they would change anything about their response in retrospect. Also in this section of the interview, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the past week and asked whether the documented typical week in the exercise was an accurate reflection of the past week's activities.

The third section of the interview protocol was titled, "Relationships." The participants were given their concept map and asked if there was anything they might change. They were asked specific questions about relationships, both those that were on the map and those that were not. For example, they were asked about their relationships with home institutions (institutional administrators) or member institution colleagues (Center or institutional administrators).

The fourth section of the interview protocol was labeled, “Rewards.” This section began with the Ranking Rewards exercise. After the participants ranked the 15 cards, they were asked specific questions about the rewards. They were also asked whether or not this activity had elucidated additional thoughts about the rewards of working in a HEC environment.

The final section of the interview protocol was labeled, “Reflection.” The respondents were asked a final open-ended question, “If you could tell me one thing about the nature of work, relationships and rewards at the RHEC, what would it be?” This final question allowed the participant an opportunity to elaborate, explain or add anything they wanted to the information they provided in the exercises or interview. The interviews were concluded by telling participants that they would be receiving a verbatim transcript of their interview. They could mask any part of the interview that they felt might reveal their identity and insure that the transcript accurately conveyed our conversation.

In summary, each interview was a collegial conversation crafted around the individual data submitted from the social artifact exercises. Each interview systematically elucidated data about the nature of work, rewards and relationships. The customized semi-structured interview protocol allowed the flexibility and freedom to follow the many different pathways offered by each person’s conversation.

All interviews in this study were audiotaped (with permission of the participant) and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were kept, along with the audio tapes, in a locked file cabinet at my residence. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. All identifying information was masked in the interview transcriptions.

Transcriptions were coded with the appropriate matching participant pseudonym. Each administrator received a copy of his/her interview transcription through email to review and insure that the transcript accurately reflected what he/she intended to convey and that identifying information was appropriately masked. No substantive changes were made in the transcription verification process.

Data Quality

Two general methods were used to ensure data credibility. The first was to develop exercises and interview questions that specifically related to the research questions (Anfara & Brown, 2002). The second approach used to ensure data quality was the verbatim transcription of all interviews. Creswell (2003) stated that first and foremost, the researcher needs to ensure that the rights, needs, privacy and consideration for the participants should be addressed since research is always obtrusive (p. 201). Sharing the verbatim transcriptions with each interviewee was part of providing due consideration to the participants (Creswell, 2003). This approach provided participants with the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the information provided and mask any identifying information.

Analysis

Data analysis for this study was iterative, systematic and emergent. The analysis was iterative because the analysis from the exercise data was used to build the analysis of the interview data. Data from the three pre-interview social artifact exercises were the first items of analysis. Each exercise sheet was coded individually. Second, the codes for each exercise were compared and contrasted between participants to look for emerging patterns or differences. The audit logbook was used to record analytic memos including notes about interview probes, research decisions, and codes emerging from the interview data.

Data analysis was also systematic. Excel spreadsheets were used to log the codes for each exercise. For Exercise 1, each day of the week was entered down the left-hand column and the participant pseudonym was across the top of the spreadsheet. After the daily activities were entered, some activities stood out as thematic. This analysis was taken up a level by creating a weekly summary spreadsheet. All activity themes were listed down the left-hand column and the participant pseudonyms across the top. The purpose of the summary sheet was to take the weekly detail by day and to synthesize it into an overall weekly activity summary. In this summary, the spreadsheet demonstrated the number of times each participant referenced a certain activity code for a typical week. Finally, the data from Exercise 1 was used to customize the interview protocol. For each participant, the interview protocol was adjusted to ask specific questions about the activities that were mentioned and those activities that were not mentioned.

A similar approach of data analysis was utilized when comparing the timelines in Exercise 2 and the concept maps in Exercise 3. The timelines and concept maps were coded. The sections of the interview protocol were customized to ask specific questions related to the data from these two exercises.

When the analysis from these first three exercises was complete, a customized interview protocol had been created for each participant. In general, the exercise data informed the interview protocol that included standard questions, but also had individualized probes for the interviews.

The data from Exercise 4 was analyzed by entering the self-generated rewards along with the 10 pre-existing card labels down the left-hand column of an Excel spreadsheet and the participant pseudonyms across the top of the spreadsheet. The numbers 1- 15 were placed in each column to represent the rank order of the card by the participant. Each reward was summarized.

The rewards with the lowest score converted to those with the highest ranking (since participants were asked to rank the rewards highest to lowest). Reviewing the summary, it was easy to identify whether certain rewards clustered together. The rewards were compared and contrasted to locate differences and to establish overarching themes.

The transcripts from the interview were coded individually for themes about work, relationships and rewards that verified the data analysis from the exercises. After each transcript was coded, they were re-coded a second time. The second coding was used to cluster codes into the three categories of work, relationships and rewards. Third, the data analysis spreadsheets were used to identify themes by participant and across participants. Binders were used to file the transcripts and Excel spreadsheets in a separate section for each participant. The data were revisited several times to confirm themes. Direct quotes were pulled from the transcripts that supported the emergent themes.

In summary, the data describing the professional lives of higher education administrators were analyzed in an iterative, systematic and emergent way. In addition to the spreadsheets, interview transcripts, and audit log, a list of quotes from the participants provided thick, rich descriptions of work, relationships or rewards using the language of the participant. This rigorous analysis led to reasonable conclusions grounded in the data.

Trustworthiness

Several approaches were used to confirm the dependability of study results, or the trustworthiness of this study. The first approach was the constant comparative method (Guba et al., 1994) to systematically and carefully compare data. As part of the constant comparative method, careful attention was paid to any event of negative cases, or instances where data from one source contradicted or served as a negative example of a code, category, or theme emerging from the data. In appropriate instances, the discovery of a negative case led to a letting go of a code. However, in most instances, the constant comparative method confirmed codes and themes emerging from the data.

Second, an audit trail of all thoughts, ideas and analytic memos kept track of all decisions about procedures (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). This occurred throughout the duration of the study in both data collection and analysis. A notebook was kept virtually at all times and thoughts, reflections and decisions were jotted down as they came to mind. The audit trail became a cookie crumb trail that demonstrated, albeit at times sporadically, data saturation, findings and conclusions. The written audit trail also demonstrated how a reflection one day became an iterative analysis the next and how the iterative analysis that day emerged into an overarching thematic representation of the data several weeks later. The audit trail was also an important source of information when debriefing with expert reviewers overseeing this study.

Another approach used to assure the dependability of study results was triangulation. Triangulation is a validity procedure in qualitative research where multiple data sources are used to form themes in a qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). When collecting data, the social artifact exercises and interview transcripts were used to triangulate data and confirm themes that were emerging along the way. Codes were compared and contrasted codes and written reflections, insights and thematic descriptions documented patterns that emerged from the triangulation of data. Expert review was utilized during data analysis to confirm themes.

Finally, a confirmability matrix (Anfara et al., 2002) was used to verify the themes from the data. The matrix was developed using Excel spreadsheets. All themes were anchored in the number of times a participant referenced the code or category. A general rule of thumb in the analysis was to have at least three references to something before it became a theme; however participants expressing an emphatic viewpoint, even if only once, were carefully considered in the confirmability process. Using these spreadsheets, the relationships between codes and themes demonstrated that all conclusions were anchored in the data.

Presentation of Results

The results from this study are presented in the form of two journal articles, one presented in Chapter Four and the other in Chapter Five. In Chapter Four, the manuscript focuses on the organizational forces driving work in a HEC and reports on data from two of the four social artifact exercises and the interviews. Background information about the RHEC (from Chapter Two) is presented and the manuscript elucidates the nature of work in these supplier networks, called HECs. The manuscript utilizes thick, rich quotes from RHEC administrators that describe the nature of work in a HEC and reinforce the findings. This manuscript will be submitted to *The Review of Higher Education*, a refereed publication of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

In Chapter Five, the manuscript focuses on the work and relationships of HEC administrators and reports on data from three of the four social artifact exercises and the interviews. The purpose of this manuscript is to present the nature of work and relationships for professionals working in an educational consortium environment, such as a HEC. Data are presented in quotes from the participants that support the findings. This manuscript will be submitted to *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education,* a refereed publication of the Association for Continuing Higher Education.

The journal articles are written in first person plural format. Joan Hirt served as junior author for each article.

CHAPTER FOUR

Manuscript One

Several forces have coalesced over the past two decades to create a knowledge economy where collaboration and competition are critical elements for success (Freidman, 2006). Higher education has not been immune from these forces. Competition and collaboration have created an academy that functions more like private industry (Gilde, 2007; Slaughter, & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter, & Rhoades, 2004). These same forces have led to the emergence of new organizational forms, including higher education centers in which multiple institutions share resources and facilities to offer educational programs in areas underserved by traditional colleges and universities.

While competition and collaboration reflect the external forces that have created higher education centers, little is known about the internal dynamics that sustain these centers. In this case study, we explored the internal organizational forces at one such setting, the Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC), through the lens of administrators who work there.

Background

Globalization has driven many organizational changes in education (Stomquist, 2007; Teichler, 2006). It is the impetus behind an increasingly competitive environment for universities (Lefrere, 2007). In fact, some argue the system of higher education is becoming more like a private, market-driven industry in search of entrepreneurial ways to deliver educational goods while also turning a profit (Slaughter, & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter, & Rhoades, 2004). As Rhoades (2006) has noted:

> Academic capitalism is not simply a matter of entrepreneurial colleges and universities seeking to generate more revenues in tight financial times. It’s a matter of these not-for-

> profit institutions behaving more like private enterprises, as the relationship between public and private entities shifts….This is not privatization. It is a shift of public subsidy to entrepreneurial activities, especially in new economy realms (p. 385).

Paradoxically, these skyrocketing levels of competition have been juxtaposed against increasing demands for collaboration. Freidman (2006) challenged readers to consider the competitive intensity of the global environment but to recognize that the true winners are those who will be able to orchestrate collaboration (pp. 280-281). Educational institutions operating in a global economy should spend fewer resources competing against one another and more resources in collaboration with each other (St. George, 2006).

As institutions of higher education have been pressured to be both more collaborative and more competitive, they are increasingly engaged in initiatives that blur boundaries between the public and private sectors. This has resulted in the emergence of new organizational structures (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Tiechler, 2007) and led scholars to speculate about those structures. Tiechler (2006) posited the concept of "expansion and diversification" to explain the increase in the number of structures in higher education. Alternatively, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that coercive isomorphism explains how institutions have changed in response to external pressures from governments, agencies, and the marketplace. To be successful, institutions mimic their external forces (DiMaggio, & Powell, 1983).

One of these new organizational models is the higher education center (HEC). A HEC is a facility, managed by an independent administration, where two or more institutions deliver baccalaureate and/or post-baccalaureate programs. Institutions may also offer other credit (e.g., associate, certificate) and non-credit courses. To some degree HECs are simply the latest iteration of institutional efforts to expand access to higher education. The delivery of academic programs away from a traditional campus environment has been called many things in the literature, such as, extended education (Patton, 1975), external degree programs (Johnson, 1984), continuing education (Kapper & Cropley, 2000), and distance education (Tracey & Richey, 2005). In general, research relating to off-campus education revolves around outsiders' perceptions of these endeavors and reveals skepticism, misgivings, and concern about the quality and rigor of off-campus academic programs (Johnson, 1984; Patton, 1975; Scully, 1977; Tracey, & Richey, 2005).

HECs are unique educational entities. For example, although there are professional associations for those who work in distance education, extended education, and continuing education there is no national association for those who work at HECs. Likewise, researchers have studied other forms of extended education (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green, & Lara-Alecio, 2007; Ghezzi, 2007; Rix, & Twining, 2007; Samarawickrema, & Stacey, 2007). There have been a few publications related to the building design of what some call higher education centers, but these centers appear to be extended facilities for a university or community college (California State Postsecondary Education Commission, 2002; Design Cost Data, 2003). There is no evidence in the literature that empirical studies have explored HECs. In fact, so little is known about HECs that often those who work on the main campus of an institution that is a partner in a HEC are unaware of this partnership. Thus, these entities exist in relative isolation.

In general, then, while the external forces (competition and collaboration) that led to the emergence of HECs are evident, (Gilde, 2007; Tiechler, 2006) much less is known about the internal dynamics that sustain these organizations. These dynamics can be explored by eliciting data about the nature of work for those inside the organization (Hirt, 2006; Hirt, Amelink, &

Schneiter, 2004; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). No study has explored the perceptions of those working in HECs. The purpose of this case study was to examine the organizational dynamics of one HEC through the lens of administrators who worked there. Participants included Center administrators (those who worked for the HEC) and institutional administrators (those who worked for a member institution). One overarching question guided the study: What organizational dynamics drive the work of those at a HEC?

The Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC)

The Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC) is a pseudonym for one HEC. In 1997, the senate in MHEC's state established the Metropolitan Higher Education Authority (MHEA). The purpose of MHEA was to expand access to higher education in the region by providing adult and continuing education and degree-granting programs through partnerships with the state's public and private institutions of higher education. Participating institutions were encouraged to collaborate on the delivery of credit and non-credit programs through shared administrative functions and resources (including the facility), coordination of marketing and information dissemination, and the development of academic policy related to course transfer. The MHEC would serve as the coordinating and brokering entity for the partner institutions. Participating institutions were to pay for all direct costs of programs and courses, a fair-market rental cost for space, and the costs of essential Center services. Private institutions would not receive any special state support for delivering programs at the center. Public institutions would adhere to standard state policies. The financial responsibility for the operation of the MHEA and MHEC was to be jointly shared by participating localities and the state (SCHEV, 1997). Thus, the MHEC is both a consortium of universities and an entity unto itself.

In 2007, 14 institutions (public and private) were members of the MHEC. These institutions offered 59 undergraduate programs, 46 master's programs, 1 doctoral program, 42 certificate programs, and 66 other adult learning opportunities. Since the MHEC opened its doors in the fall of 2000, more than 2,700 students have completed programs at the Center. During the four months of data collection for this study, the MHEC board of trustees approved two additional institutional members: one large public university and one private college. This, then, was the context in which our study took place.

Method

A case study design was selected as the most suitable qualitative tradition for purposes of this study. Researchers who investigate case studies examine a setting bounded in time and space and provide contextual and extensive information from many sources (Creswell, 1998). The study was bound by time (four months) and by place (MHEC) and multiple data sources were utilized (social artifacts and interviews).

Site

The site for this case study was selected using a purposeful sampling method. The MHEC has more institutional partners than any other HEC within the seven states that utilize the HEC model defined by this study. The MHEC serves both an urban and rural population of students. Finally, the Executive Director of the MHEC advocated for research regarding HECs and provided documents and access for this study.

Participants

A purposeful sampling method and criterion sampling procedures were used to select the participants for the study. There were two criteria for selecting the informants. First, the Center Executive Director must have designated the institutional administrators chosen for the study as "active." Not all institutional members of MHEC had an active presence at the Center. This was important since the richest data would come from participants that were visibly engaged in the postsecondary activities of the Center and who regularly attended monthly program meetings with Center staff. The second criterion for selecting the sample was to include only those administrators who had primary postsecondary administrative responsibilities, such as serving as their institutional representative or engaging in activities such as resource allocation, providing administrative support to faculty or students, or marketing credit-bearing college programs to the MHEC community. To select Center administrators, we conferred with the MHEC Executive Director and examined rosters of Center staff to select those individuals who had programmatic (as opposed to facilities, maintenance, or clerical) responsibilities for the Center. Four Center administrators (out of four eligible informants) and nine institutional administrators (out of 14 qualified informants) met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

The majority (11) of respondents were Caucasian. Eight participants were female; five were male. Most (8) respondents had been working in education for 15 years or more and had worked at the Center five to seven years. About half (7) of the participants were younger than 50 years of age while the remaining respondents were older.

Procedure

Data were collected through social artifacts and interviews with participants. Social artifacts are letters, documents, photographs, or personal representations that help qualitative researchers learn more about the personal experiences of the participant (Creswell, Hansen, Plano Clark, & Morales-Escoto, 2007). Researchers in educational settings have used social artifacts to gather data for many purposes (Siegel, 2001; Isaacson & Wilson, 1996; North Carolina Vocational Education Study, 1988). Diagrams, graphs, concept maps, and drawings are complementary additions to the traditional interview, encouraging contributions from interviewees that might not otherwise be obtained from interviews (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006; Enger, 1998).

Two social artifact exercises were utilized in this case study. Participants completed them prior to the interviews and they supplemented data elicited from the interviews. The first social artifact exercise was to chart a typical weekly activity log. Informants listed what they did each day during a typical week. In the second social artifact exercise, the participants were asked to graph a concept map of their relationships. They were given a sheet of paper with a circle in the middle that represented them. They drew additional circles, each representing a group with whom they interacted. Circles closer to the center circle represented groups the respondent interacted with more frequently while those farther from the center reflected groups with whom the respondent interacted less frequently.

Using the data from the two social artifacts, each interview protocol was customized to explore specific areas for discussion. All interviews were audiotaped (with permission of the participant) and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol and social artifact exercises elicited data about the MHEC and the organizational dynamics that drove the work of participants.

Several steps were taken to ensure data credibility. First, exercises and interview questions were designed that specifically related to the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Second, each interview was transcribed verbatim and shared with the respondent. Sharing the verbatim transcriptions with each interviewee was part of providing due consideration to the participants (Creswell, 2003) and provided participants with the opportunity to ensure accuracy of the information they conveyed. Additionally, experts reviewed the exercise and interview protocols and a pilot study was conducted at another HEC and those data were used to refine the interview and exercises protocol. Finally, all results in this study were peer reviewed.

Analysis

Data analysis for this study was iterative, systematic and emergent. Codes for the social artifacts and interviews were compared and contrasted across participants to look for emerging patterns and differences. The constant comparative method was utilized to identify themes and supporting categories (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). An audit logbook was used to record notes and analytic memos (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). Codes from the social artifacts and transcripts were clustered into categories. Categories were then developed into overarching themes related to the organizational dynamics at the Center.

Findings

Two organizational dynamics emerged from the in-depth analysis of interviews and social artifacts. The first revolved around who benefits from the work of the MHEC administrators.

1) The work of the higher education center administrators benefits the community, students and member institutions.

Administrators working in the MHEC have a clear picture of who benefits from their work. Overall, they identified three primary beneficiaries: economic development for the community, adult students through access to education, and member institutions through various incentives.

Economic Development for the Community

One constituency that benefits from the work of MHEC administrators is the community, which gains economic development benefits. Administrators described the advancement of education in the community as a positive influence on economic development:

> The Promise [Metropolis] Initiative alongside the city of [Metropolis] and [Metropolis] City Public Schools is where we've leveraged our university resources, working with my colleague who is very engaged in community development work.

Another institutional administrator noted a collaborative degree program in engineering that is less about which institution gets credit for the degree and more about providing education in a high-need area that has an economic impact:

> But even the degree stuff is starting to change. The cooperative engineering that we do with other engineering schools which is an economic development kind of function and supported by the state because whoever you take 50% of your coursework through is who you get your degree from…just amazing stuff.

Working with corporate partners was another way that administrators described the way their work benefits economic development in the community. One institutional administrator elaborated:

> What I'm most excited about is, what energizes me is the telephone call that comes from the [Metropolis] Regional Chamber that says, "Hey, we have a business that's looking to relocate here and they want to know about corporate training opportunities or non-credit opportunities or can we get some faculty members at the table to greet them to let them know the engineering expertise that we could help with their manufacturing processes."

These findings support prior studies that have documented the economic benefits of higher education. Burr (2006) concluded that one way to build the economic base in rural communities is through science degree programs offered by state colleges. Florida (2006) asserted that companies in search of creative talent purposefully locate in university communities because these areas are ecosystems of creative, talented and entrepreneurial people (p. 27).

Indeed, causality tests have concluded that a more educated workforce acts as a stimulus for more investment in higher education (Kumar & Smyth, 2006). Thus, the theme of economic development for the community is found elsewhere in the literature and our findings expand that theme by highlighting how MHEC plays a role in such development.

Finally, administrators reported that their work benefits not only the economic development of the collective (i.e., community), but also the economic benefit of individual students:

> If you see a single mother of three kids who finally gets her bachelor's degree and lands a job making five or ten thousand dollars a year more, that could only be just incredibly rewarding to know that you were able to help somebody.

Thus, administrators at the MHEC believe their work provides economic benefits to the collective and to individuals. That economic development is predicated upon the educational access that the MHEC offers.

Access for Students

Every administrator in the study referenced their work as beneficial for creating access for students. This theme was so prevalent in the language of administrators that their commitment to access outweighed their institutional or organizational commitments. In other words, administrators at the MHEC are more concerned with offering students access to the academic program they need and less concerned about serving their own institution's priorities.

For example, an institutional administrator spoke of her guiding philosophy and called it, "purpose over politics". She said, "that's the reason I tell students, it doesn't matter to me sometimes if you come to my university or not. But promise me that when you leave my office, you will [enroll in some program]."

The MHEC provides access to lifelong learning – from high school completion (GED) to doctoral programs - for K-12 students to adults ages 50 and over. MHEC administrators were convinced that such access was a primary benefit of their work. “I just like being able to represent a facility, a center that offers programming that provides access to lifelong learning no matter where an adult is in his or her experience. I really, I value that.” In fact, for many, working in a HEC was congruent with their personal philosophy about the role of education:

> I really believe in lifelong learning and what’s so wonderful about the center is that you’ve got people earning their PhDs sitting next to someone earning a GED and the synergy that it creates and the knowledge that, I can go on, I can do more and I can do it right here.

In addition to creating access, many of the administrators conversed about the varied needs of adult students. An institutional administrator who also taught classes at the Center said, “So it’s that understanding of adult learners and their busy lives being parents of four children and working on degrees and that kind of thing. We know we need to be flexible and accessible.”

Clearly, the administrators feel their work directly benefits adult students and their access to education. These findings resonate with other studies. Both Baus (2007) and Peterson (2007) noted that higher education centers create access for students and also benefit the regions they serve. Adult students need part-time educational options and lifelong learning strategies (Knapper & Cropley, 2000) but traditional institutions have systems that are geared toward the traditional-aged (18 to 24) full-time student (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). The opportunities and programs at the MHEC demonstrate programmatic strategies that benefit adult learners. There are also institutional benefits associated with the work of MHEC administrators, however.

Incentives for Institutions

When addressing the benefit of the MHEC to their institutions administrators differed in their opinions depending on their institutional affiliation. Those who worked for smaller, private, liberal arts institutions discussed the financial incentives the Center offered their institution:

> And often, regional offices, adult ed, continuing ed, whatever you name you give it, are seen as cash cows…often, if things are slipping a little bit at the mothership, enrollments, or costs are going up, they're looking to these other programs to bring in the funds to support the whole program.

Another institutional administrator for a small private echoed this sentiment:

> And I can understand the budget side of it because for my institution, the adult degree programs are pretty close to half of what they're doing on campus and that's scary because the campus needs to do more, to grow. And our budget here is trying to carry them.

On the other hand, institutional administrators who worked for larger, public institutions spoke about more altruistic, mission-related incentives for their institutions. These included the opportunity to collaborate with business and/or educational constituents in the community:

> So I would say that we are probably an anomaly in this building because everyone else is looking at doing the associate degree, the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral programs. Not that that's not very important to us…it is part of our work…but my daily work is looking at the university's assets through a very different lens and that's through outreach and engagement.

The Center administrators also spoke about what they perceived to be the benefit for member institutions. The image incentive, or being recognized as a partnering member in this innovative educational environment, was important for institutions. A Center administrator stated, “I think everybody knew the Center was going to be amazing. They [referring to a small private institution] had an opportunity to become a member and they did.”

These findings illuminate the work of previous scholars. Some, like Sissel (2001), have concluded that the financial benefits for institutions are the only reason traditional universities have accommodated adult students, a notion that was contradicted in this study by those who talked about outreach, engagement, and image incentives. Others have argued that innovative initiatives in higher education are only sustained when they are both compatible with the goals of the university and profitable for the university (Levine, 1980; McMullen, Mauch, & Donnorummo, 2000). Buys and Burnsnall (2007) found that there are many benefits associated with the engagement in university-community partnerships. Those sentiments were confirmed in this study.

In summary, the three groups that benefit from the work of the MHEC administrators are the community, students and member institutions. These groups exist in symbiotic relationships with each other. For instance, a student benefiting from access may also contribute to the economic development in the community upon completing a program. An institution that benefits from image incentives may also benefit from the successful adult student who becomes a financial contributor to the university. A graphic representation of who benefits, how, and the symbiotic relationships between beneficiaries is provided in Figure 1.

While this first organizational dynamic addressed those who benefited from the work of MHEC administrators, the second theme focused on the three forces that drove their work.

2) The organizational forces that drive the work of the higher education center administrators are collaboration, competition, and balance.

As an educational consortium, the façade of collaboration at the MHEC is evident as soon as one walks through the doors of the building. The Center literature and kiosks in the facility display a "together we are here" theme. Germane to the study, however, was to identify organizational forces beyond the façade or to probe whether the administrators engaged in collaboration beyond merely sharing a facility. In addition to conducting interviews and collecting social artifacts, there were several opportunities to observe the organizational force of collaboration. One was at the monthly program meeting where Center and institutional administrators sat around a table and discussed a policy for new institutional members. After the institutional administrators voiced concerns about the policy, Center administrators agreed that there should be an opportunity for more discussion. Clearly, the effort of the whole was driven by collaboration among the parts. Another opportunity to observe collaboration was at a holiday gathering. The institutional administrators contributed to the meal in the same way they provide education, each bringing their favorite potluck dish to share. The Center administrators provided most of the "staples" like the plates, napkins, and drinks. These observations of collaboration confirmed the theme that was prevalent in the interview and social artifact data.

Collaboration

The MHEC is an academic consortium of independent institutions collaborating to share students, facilities, scholarship and best practices. Several of the administrators referenced a shared student mentality in the Center. "We have found that being in the higher education center, if we do not offer a certain program that a student would want, we will refer them to another institution. The other schools do the same."

Whereas marketing could be viewed as competitive in nature, another institutional administrator described the student-sharing concept related to marketing and collaboration:

> But if you talked to the student about what their needs are and not only what their interests are, but what their needs are, it is to be hoped that your school has something that would fit into that. But if not, then you don't try to make it work through some kind of elaborate sales job. But rather, you say, and you have enough knowledge of the other schools to be able to say, I can't talk about it in detail, but let me show you what [names another university] is doing and here is the site director's number and you might want to call them because I think they can do a better job than we can do.

In addition to collaborating to share students for academic programs, Center and institutional administrators share facilities and resources. A Center administrator described the classroom credit pool where the Center rents unused classrooms and splits the revenue with the member institution.

Resources are also shared by hiring staff who work for several programs:

> So the dean at [names another university] and I established the 5th floor consortium. We hired … two wage employees…paid by [names six universities]. And what we did was figure out how we were going to use these people on the weekends and then we would pay in so much…we shared job descriptions and keys.

The institutional administrators also collaborate on issues. As one noted, "I do know how to network and if there's a concern that I don't think that maybe my institution has the leverage, then I will go to my colleagues at one of the larger universities." Another institutional administrator added, "And if there are issues or concerns for their students, we're really kind of locked into one another. You know who your go-to people are because they share similar experiences."

Finally, MHEC administrators collaborate to share best practices and scholarship:

> We kind of use each other for best practice ideas. It’s a very collegial, professional group…Two years ago, we launched a lifelong learning program for seniors in this region…So I invited seven people to sit down at the table with me and I said…I would like to use our faculty members from our universities to come and to facilitate day-long kinds of experiences…And our first launch included nine institutions here…We administer it through my university, but all of us, we have a contract, a business plan.

Collaboration, or working across traditional boundaries defined by program, department, or university, is a well-documented organizational dynamic in higher education. Researchers investigating what makes collaboration successful concluded that there must be benefits for all engaged parties (Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007). Collaborations between schools and workplaces aid the transfer of learning from one setting to another, for example (Konkola, Tuomi-Grohn, Lambert, & Ludvigsen, 2007). However, collaboration at the MHEC is unique in two important ways. First, resources are not typically shared across institutions in traditional college and university settings. Indeed, as Rhoades (2006) argues, the academy has become increasingly competitive as resource pools have shrunk. Students, facilities, and innovative ideas all represent limited resources that traditional institutions have actively sought to garner and have fiercely guarded once they have secured them. At the MHEC, however, sharing these resources is a driving organizational force. Second, there is a shared belief that collaboration benefits all parties involved in an action. That belief trumps actions that benefit a single institutional member. This inter-institutional collaboration, grounded in awareness of the larger good, is rare at traditional colleges and universities but is the norm at MHEC. This is not to suggest that collaboration is the only force present at the Center. Indeed, the culture of collaboration co-exists with a sense of competitiveness.

Competition

There is rivalry at the MHEC. Several institutions have competing programs. Two institutions even share a lab space and offer their nursing classes across the hall from one another. Additionally, the public institutions and the MHEC compete for funding from the state. But that competition is described as healthy, natural, and market-driven:

> So people who are here as members from the beginning can pretty much do whatever they want. It's really market-driven. So we do have three MBA programs, but most people figure, they base their efforts on what they think the market will bear. And if there's enough of a demand for more than one program, we just don't consider that duplication.

Competition also occurs when institutions bring new programs to the MHEC. A Center administrator offered this example:

> I think some of our members saw competition there. We only had one PhD program in the building until we brought [new institutional member] on board and they brought nine. And our job, the mission of the Center is to expand educational opportunities, that's just the bottom line. And we certainly don't want to bring programs in that are in conflict and we don't want programs that are going to create unnecessary competition…I think it upset the [large member universities] of the world. I think they felt threatened because they could have done it. But they could have done it six years ago, five years ago.

It was also evident that the larger institutions may exert more competitive weight because of the sheer amount of resources their universities have or the amount of space they lease from the Center. However, those working for the larger institutions were not perceived to negatively use that weight to their competitive advantage. An institutional administrator from one such larger institution stated:

> And working for a big university, sometimes it's like the 200-ton pink elephant in the room. It's been fun to kind of balance that and let others know that they're just as valuable and can make contributions to create economic vitality for others in the region.

A smaller institutional administrator confirmed that competition was a healthy force between the large and smaller institutions:

> I don't sense any competitive angst on anyone's part…so I'm always concerned, is somebody going to undercut us, but I think we're all still each unique…We decided, let the market determine that. That was one thing we wanted in place because we knew there were going to be people competing. And I think it's been really very healthy. We sort of sense that some of the other institutions kind of figured out what we were up to because we've been the longest player in the adult learning field from anyone else. So in that sense of competition, we feel like we may have lost some students occasionally to other people doing things sort of like we were doing it. But, it's never been adversarial that I'm aware of. I've just never sensed any friction or conflict with any other colleagues at other institutions or the facility.

In fact, on some issues, competition is "acceptable":

> The people that are overtly competitive are not as appreciated by their colleagues as those that are much more, at least on the surface, collegial. Now, I can't give you any examples of someone that seemed to talk softly, but did something else. But certainly people have their own ad campaigns and when you read the advertisement, it makes it sound as if they're the only game in town. But that's marketing, that's okay.

In addition to competition for programs, the public universities compete with the MHEC for state funding. A Center administrator seemed to appreciate the need for this form of competition:

> I wouldn't call it competitive so much as understanding that member institutions' priorities are their own and their priority of the higher ed center is to the extent that the higher ed center is helpful to them. But, you know, when it comes right down to it, they've got to look out for their own institution, particularly the public institutions in terms of funding.

At first blush, it might seem that the forces of collaboration and competition at the MHEC might create a constant tension, yet that was not the case. A third organizational force mediated that tension - balance.

Balance

Center administrators are independent facilitators that must delicately balance the interests of the collective as a whole against the individual interests of each institutional member. The institutional administrators spoke very highly of the Center administrators:

> They're [Center administrators] wonderful people to work with, they've been very kind to my college. Because most of the other schools are very well-known. We're a small little school.

When asked how important it is for the Center administration to act as an independent facilitator, both Center and institutional administrators agreed that independence was of critical importance:

> I think it's [the Center administration] very independent and I would really frown upon it being associated with one institution. I think that would be a big mistake because there

> would be a lot of posturing going on at the table and I think other institutions such as mine would really balk at that.

Another institutional administrator added, “Pardon the expression, but I think you’d bastardize it if the higher ed center was in some way an institution’s facility that other people were coming in and leasing. I think the whole thing would fall apart.”

The Center administrators referenced the type of balance required in their positions. When asked if each institution had equal weight with the Center administration, responses were equivocal. One Center administrator replied:

> I think that’s our goal. I don’t know if it always happens that way in reality. We have some of our members, just by virtue of what they do, the number of programs, the number of students, that probably carry more weight.

Another Center administrator countered, “We can be a referee of sorts, but even at that, the place really runs on a free market system.”

Regardless of any ambivalence on the part of Center administrators, the role they play is viewed as providing balance for member institutions. This theme of balance is found elsewhere in the literature, specifically the literature related to supply chains. In the late 1990s, scholars studied supply-chain networks in which large manufacturing consumers needed to enhance the performance of their suppliers, but lacked the power to do so. An independent consultant was hired to facilitate and coordinate a supplier network. Each supplier in the network competed and collaborated to offer their best products to a manufacturer, but not all of the suppliers offered the same product. Instead, the consumer had a diverse array of product types choose from and each supplier maximized its own product competitiveness, based on the consumer demand (Stuart, Deckert, McCutcheon, & Kunst, 1998).

This same concept translates readily to the higher education market. A leveraged learning supplier network can develop when a large consumer [e.g. a metropolitan area] is faced with a shortage of higher education suppliers. The consumer (the metropolitan area) wants to improve supply chain performance (access to higher education) but lacks the power to leverage the necessary improvements. The leveraged learning supplier network depends on a consortium of independent suppliers (i.e., colleges and universities) who share resources and experiences; the goal is to work together so that each consortium member maximizes its competitiveness. The consortium utilizes an independent facilitator (HEC administrators) to balance member needs and to share information among the membership.

Similar to the leveraged learning supplier network, the MHEC depends upon an independent facilitator to balance competition and collaboration. An institutional administrator said, “They [Center administrators] try very hard to make everybody feel welcome…because everybody’s driven differently. I think they’re driven to keep everybody here happy, give them what they need.”

In summary, the organizational forces driving the work of the MHEC administrators are collaboration, competition, and balance. Collaboration is evident in that administrators share students, facilities, scholarship and best practices. Competition is ignited by programmatic and funding issues. Balance is the mitigating force between collaboration and competition

Discussion

The study was important because it provided a baseline and plowed new territory; a hallmark of naturalistic inquiry. HECs exist across the higher education landscape. A state-by-state review revealed seven states utilizing the HEC model employed in this study (i.e., multiple institutions sharing a single facility in a unit managed by an independent party): Colorado, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia. Maryland and Virginia have more than one HEC. However, readers wishing to transfer these findings to other HECs should do so with caution. One element of case studies is that their settings provide information-rich detail (Patton, 2002). The findings from this study are anchored in the context of the MHEC. Because HECs have emerged at different times and for different reasons, it is important to consider the organizational context surrounding each of the Centers.

Nevertheless, our findings might inform future research, practice, and policy. To start, studies of other HECs might be undertaken in order to expand on this study. For example, another HEC in the same state as MHEC did not originally embrace a free market concept. In fact, for several years, member institutions at this other HEC were prevented from offering duplicate programs. Research is needed that explores how original operating policies at HECs influence the organizational forces that drive those entities.

Another future investigation might explore collaborative organizational structures in higher education and their impact on collaborative learning environments. Collaborative learning environments positively impact cognitive and affective development, and increase openness to diversity among students (Cabrera, Crissman, Bernal, Nora, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 2002; Cabrera, Nora, Bernal, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1998). Researchers could explore whether collaborative organizational structures like those evident at the MHEC lead to collaborative learning environments for students.

In terms of practice, our findings provided an overview of the unique forces driving the work of administrators in one HEC. Center administrators might use our findings as a catalyst to create a professional association or a special interest group in an established association dedicated to dialogue regarding collaborative organizations such as HECs. Administrators and faculty considering collaborative degree programs might also benefit from the findings of this study. Stein & Short (2001) discussed the many barriers that exist in the development of collaborative degree programs; some of those barriers were accreditation issues, institutional red tape, and turf concerns. HECs could be ideal fodder for collaborative degree programs. The notion of balance that was a prevailing organizational dynamic at the MHEC might inform those struggling to develop collaborative degree programs.

Findings from this study may be used in policy discussions about competition and collaboration between and among states and institutions. These discussions are especially appropriate for the higher education policy arenas of access and economic development. Our results support the advancement of collaborative organizational structures in education.

In conclusion, external forces of competition and collaboration led to the emergence of the MHEC and these same forces are evident in the organizational dynamics that sustain the Center. To now, competition and collaboration have been perceived by administrators as healthy and productive as long as they are mitigated by balance in the form of an independent Center administration. That sentiment, however, might be shifting. Several institutional administrators expressed concerns about the future; specifically, a drift to a profit focus, “So I just feel like right now they’re [Center administrators] driven more with trying to make a profit and I know that has to do with their assessments.” Any such concerns could be attributed in part to state budget cuts that were pending at the time of data collection, but they also demonstrate the tension in organizational forces when collaborative academic missions are balanced against competitive financial conditions.

As the academy has responded to external forces, creative “boundary-blurring” solutions have emerged. The MHEC is an example of one organizational solution that mimics the external forces of competition and collaboration. Similar to the institutional administrators' concerns about the sustainability of the Center, many in higher education remain skeptical about the sustainability of collaborative initiatives. Yet, both administrators and their institutions are engaged more frequently in collaborative organizational settings. This is the new landscape of higher education where external organizational forces have pushed educational leaders across new organizational boundaries and those leaders must navigate a terrain defined by competition and collaboration.

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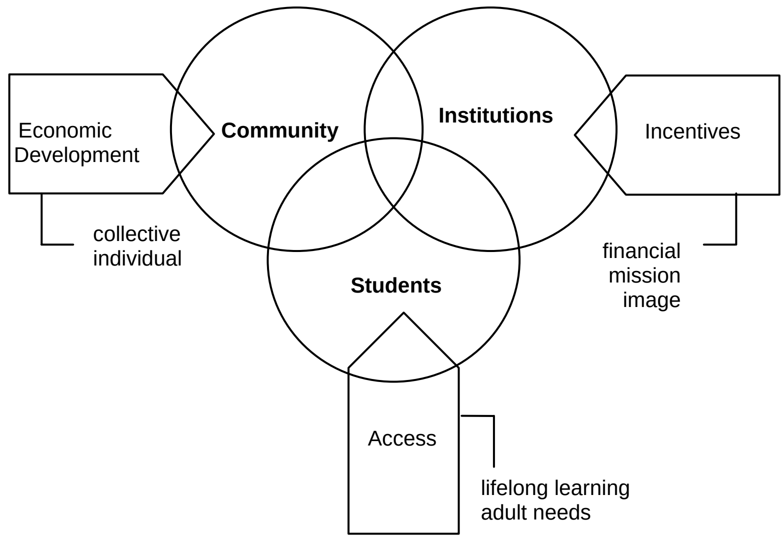
Figure 1. Beneficiary Symbiosis



CHAPTER FIVE

Manuscript Two

"I am blessed to have the opportunity to work here. I get to rub shoulders with some great folks each and every day. It's a good place to be. I have landed on top of the wedding cake and I'm not coming down."

A higher education center (HEC) is a facility, managed by an independent administration, where two or more institutions deliver baccalaureate and/or post-baccalaureate programs. Institutions may also offer credit (e.g., associate, certificate) and non-credit courses. Educational consortia such as HECs positively impact the lives of faculty, staff and students and the cultural life of their region (Baus, 2007; Peterson, 2002). However, no empirical study has explored the professional lives of administrators who work in an educational consortium setting such as a HEC.

Exploring the professional lives of those working within a HEC environment offers a gateway to understanding the work environment from an insider-looking-out vantage point (Hirt, 2006; Hirt, Amelink, & Schneiter, 2004; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). In this case study, we examine the professional lives of administrators at the Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC), a pseudonym for one HEC.

Background

One of the most influential factors that contributes to the professional life of a higher education administrator is the institutional setting in which he or she works (Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Sarros, 1999; Hirt, 2006; Reason & Gmelch, 2003; Tucker & Bryan, 1991; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001). Institutional environment influences the nature of work and relationships for both student affairs and academic affairs professionals. In student affairs, institutional environment determines the nature of work and relationships. For example, administrators at liberal arts colleges credit the environment for cultivating professional lives defined by community and creativity (Hirt et al., 2004). Administrators at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) believe their institutional setting provides the opportunity to engage in challenging work that also contributes to racial uplift (Hirt et al., 2006).

The professional lives of academic administrators (e.g., deans) are also influenced by their institutional environment. Academic administrators cope with stressors that are directly attributed to their institutional environments (Gmelch et al., 1999). The institutional environment viewed through the lens of demographic variables (e.g., enrollments, mission) influences the work of those who have financial or budgetary responsibilities (Layzell & Lyddon, 1990). Academic administrators work within ever-changing institutional environments and they adapt to these changing environments to survive (Wolverton et al., 2001).

Institutional environment also impacts other elements of professional life. For example, academic administrators at public institutions are expected to cultivate and maintain relationships with local and state political officials (Tucker & Bryan, 1991). Those who believe they “fit” within a certain institutional environment also believe their relationships with colleagues have the greatest impact on that “fit” (Reason & Gmelch, 2003).

Although scholars have studied the professional lives of administrators working within traditional institutional environments (e.g., liberal arts colleges, historically Black colleges and universities), no study has explored the professional lives of administrators who work in an educational consortium environment like a higher education center (HEC). A HEC is a supplier network of institutions that offer access to academic programs in a single facility located in a region that is underserved by postsecondary education.

The positive economic benefit of advancing higher education in an underserved region is well documented. Districts that have access to higher education enjoy increased economic development (Bowen, 2007; Burr, 2006; Florida, 2006; Freeland, 2004; Kumar Nurayan & Smyth, 2006; McMullen, Mauch, & Donnorummo, 2000; Zaglul & Sherrad, 2006). However, those on conventional college and university campuses have demonstrated varying levels of understanding about (and support for) programs that are delivered away from a traditional campus, like those at a HEC.

Faculty and administrators at traditional universities who engage in off-campus educational activities do so because they are either financially or altruistically motivated to create access for students who are otherwise unable to attend classes on a customary campus (Johnson, 1984; Patton, 1975; Sissel, 2001). Despite these incentives, many in the traditional academy have misgivings about the academic rigor and quality of off-campus programs (Patton, 1975; Scully, 1977; Tracey & Richey, 2005). Interestingly, studies of off-campus education have taken an outsider-looking-in approach; no empirical study has examined how administrators working in the field view their work.

Therefore, the need for our study was threefold. First, research is needed to understand the professional lives of administrators who work in educational consortium environments. Our findings will serve to inform the growing number of higher education professionals engaged in collaborative work in consortia settings. Second, research efforts are needed to give voice to professionals who are working in the field of off-campus education. This is important because the literature indicates that many on-campus colleagues remain either unaware or unconvinced (Pusser, Brenneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007) of the importance of off-campus program delivery despite the valuable contributions to access and economic development such programs provide (Baus, 2007; Peterson, 2007). Finally, this study is important for HEC administrators. The HEC administrators in our study wanted to engage in scholarship dedicated to creating additional awareness about these Centers.

Thus, the purpose of this case study was to explore the professional lives of administrators working in the Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC). One overarching research question guided this case study: How do HEC administrators describe their work?

Setting

This case study was conducted at the Metropolitan Higher Education Center in Metropolis, USA. The MHEC mission statement is:

> …to foster economic development by expanding access for the people of the Greater Metropolis region to workforce development, technology training, higher education programs, and the use of conference facilities through partnerships with public and private institutions, agencies, civic groups, and the business community (MHEC, 2007).

In 2007, the MHEC was comprised of 14 public and private member institutions that were delivering 59 undergraduate, 46 master’s, 1 doctoral, 42 certificate, and 66 continuing education programs (MHEC Continuum, Fall 2007, p. 2). During the four months of data collection for the study, the MHEC board of trustees approved two additional member institutions, one private institution and one public institution. In addition to a growing institutional membership at the MHEC, state funding levels have also risen. The original state funding level for the Center was $250,000 during 1998-2000 (SCHEV, p. 20); the 2006-2008 state budget for the MHEC was $1,287,000 (MHEC, 2007). This, then, was the context for which our case study took place.

Method

Charmaz (2006) asserted the most important factor in shaping a study's design is the research purpose. The purpose of this case study was to explore professional life at a HEC through the lens of those who work there. Because so little is known about HECs, a case study design was selected as the most suitable qualitative tradition. A case study allowed us the opportunity to obtain and include contextual, information-rich detail (Patton, 2002) and to explore phenomena through the eyes of the participants (Creswell, 1998). Case studies are bound by time and space and utilize multiple data sources (Creswell, 1998). This study was bounded by time (four months) and by place (the MHEC) and multiple data sources were utilized (social artifacts and interviews).

In addition to the research question, the worldview of researchers influence the way they approach a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). One of our major considerations for this study was that prior research related to off-campus education has not given voice to the professionals who work in the field. A qualitative design, specifically a case study, was the most natural and holistic way we chose to give voice to our participants.

Case and Participant Selection

The MHEC was selected as the case for this study because it was the HEC identified in the national HEC landscape to have the most member institutions. Additionally, the Executive Director of the MHEC offered support for our study by way of access to the site and by providing several documents that were critical to advance this research.

The MHEC is a consortium of traditional post-secondary institutions and an entity unto itself. This poses a unique employment arrangement with two types of administrative employees. The first is an institutional administrator, or a person who is employed by a member institution and works at the MHEC. The second type is a Center administrator, or someone who is paid by Center funds.

The participants for the study were selected utilizing both purposive and criterion sampling procedures. Purposeful sampling is a technique used to purposefully select participants that can provide the richest data for the study. Criterion sampling enhances the rigor of a study (Patton, 2002) and allows researchers the ability to identify and select participants that meet certain criteria. There were two criteria for selecting the participants in the study. First, the Executive Director of the MHEC must have identified the administrator as “active”. This means that only those visibly engaged in the activities of the Center (e.g., regularly attend Center meetings) were selected. This was important because not all of the administrators affiliated with the MHEC have an active, visible presence within the Center. The second criterion for selecting the sample was to include only administrators who had primary postsecondary administrative responsibilities such as serving as their institutional representative or major supervisory or resource allocation responsibilities. This was important because administrators with other duties (e.g., facilities, maintenance, clerical) also work at the MHEC.

To select the administrators, we conferred with the MHEC Executive Director who provided two rosters. The first roster was a list of institutional administrators who worked in the HEC for a member institution. Nine institutional administrators (out of 14 qualified) met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The second roster was a list of Center staff who work for the Center and were paid by Center funds. Four Center administrators (out of 4 qualified) met the criteria and agreed to participate. The majority of respondents had been working in education for 15 years or more and had worked at the MHEC five to seven years.

Eight participants were female; five were male. The majority (11) of participants were Caucasian with about half (7) younger than 50 years old.

Procedures

Two procedures for collecting data were utilized in this study. The first was to engage the participants in the creation of social artifacts. Social artifacts include objects and drawings that help qualitative researchers understand more about their participants (Creswell, Hansen, Plano Clark, & Morales-Escoto, 2007). In this study, we utilized four exercises to engage our participants in the creation of social artifacts that would inform the development of a customized interview protocol which was the second procedure for the study.

The four social artifact exercises were: listing a weekly chart of activities, graphing a yearly workload timeline, drawing a relationship concept map, and creating and ranking the rewards of working in a HEC. For the weekly activity chart, participants listed all of their work activities during a typical week. For the yearly workload timeline, participants were asked to draw a line to represent the level of workload (high to low) for each month of the year. For the relationship concept map, participants were given a sheet of paper with a circle in the middle that represented them. They were asked to draw additional circles on the concept map to represent those with whom they have relationships. For the ranking rewards exercise, participants were asked to generate and rank the rewards of working in a HEC.

The data from the social artifact exercises were utilized to customize the semi-structured interview protocol for each participant. The interview protocol included five sections: Information, Work, Relationships, Rewards, and Reflection. Each section of the interview provided an opportunity to elaborate or expand upon the data provided in the social artifacts and also allowed us to obtain additional information about the participant. For example, it was during the "Information" section that many participants shared their career paths or philosophy about working in education. During the "Reflection" section, participants were asked to leave us with a "take-home nugget." This question frequently provoked thoughtful silence that often resulted in a rich summary of their experiences working at the MHEC.

Trustworthiness

The authenticity of the data was confirmed through several steps. The social artifact exercises and interview questions were developed with the research questions in mind (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Additionally, expert review and a pilot study were utilized to refine the exercises and interview protocol. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and the transcript was shared with the participant. This allowed participants the opportunity to verify the information they provided. Furthermore, all results in this study were peer reviewed.

Analysis

We used the constant comparative method (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) to analyze the data and to systematically compare data across and within participants. Emerging patterns were identified through the systematic coding of all data. The movement from codes to categories to overarching themes related to the research questions adapted from Anfara et al., (2002) is demonstrated in Table 1. An audit logbook was utilized to record analytic memos (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). Finally, data were triangulated from the multiple data sources to form overarching themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These themes related to the nature of work and relationships for HEC administrators.

Findings

The HEC administrators talked about their professional lives in two major ways. First, they described their work activities and how they engage in and feel about their work. Second, they described the many relationships that are at the core of their work, most notably their relationships with on-campus and community colleagues. Their specific work activities were collapsed into three overall themes: serving as the face of the institution or the Center in the local community was the first theme. The participants described the personal traits and characteristics that they felt equipped them for their work. Many offered stories about their career paths, describing their work at the HEC as a culminating experience, the second theme in the findings. The third theme was that participants believe their work is both challenging and rewarding.

Work: The Face in the Community

All of the administrators in the study referenced their work as serving as a representative of the Center (Center administrators) or their institution (institutional administrators) in the local community. Depending on their organizational affiliation, this meant different things to different participants.

The Center administrators described their work as the *face of the Center.* The work activities that fell under this category were: serving on local boards, attending chamber of commerce and other community events, networking with community business and educational professionals, and being the mouthpiece for the Center and its opportunities to the local community. One Center administrator spoke of being the “ear to the ground’ in the community so that he could bring new program ideas back to the institutional administrators.

The institutional administrators described the nature of their work as being the *face of their institution* in the community. Their work activities were described as marketing and promoting the programs their institution offered, meeting with students and community members who were interested in those programs, and coordinating facilities and resources to deliver programs. A participant shared:

> I take great pride in being the single individual in [Metropolis] that is supposed to be a representative for [the university]. It gives me great pride on most days. That is a really big responsibility and it's also a privilege because you get to be the face that the local community attaches to the university.

Another participant described his work:

> In addition [to teaching and advising], I'm the marketing coordinator for [university] at the Center so I do work with the Chamber of Commerce and I'm sort of the face out in the business world.

At times, HEC administrators are contacted by their institutions to attend specific community events. For example:

> And from time to time, if [associate provost and university president] needs someone somewhere and the two of them can't physically get here, they'll call and say, "Could you go and extend our apologies for not being here, but let them know you're here on behalf of the university?" And it's been nice that they've kind of used me in that role. My supervisor always says that I'm the face of [names institution] in [Metropolis].

Work: A Culminating Experience

Beyond serving as the face of the Center or of their institutions, the professionals in this study described the nature of their work as an opportunity to use a vast array of talents and prior work experiences. For example:

> This [work] is sort of the culmination of all of the things I've done in my career. I worked at two universities. I was in state government…You know, this one facility put it all together for me.

Another participant shared a career path that was primarily determined by following a spouse who also worked in higher education. She believed these experiences at other colleges and universities prepared her for the multiple roles required in her work:

> I just had this field base. I had done the advising. I had done facilities work. I had done financial aid, so it was just sort of a natural…It became just a wonderful way for me to do that which I wanted to do, have quite a bit of autonomy in the sense that every day is sort of like a new day.

These findings support the literature related to the culture of higher education and reasons why individuals seek careers in the academy. Those working in higher education describe their culture as one that facilitates autonomy, encourages creativity, and fosters collegiality (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). The participants in our study echoed these sentiments. Furthermore, faculty have credited independence, or autonomy as a primary benefit of a career in higher education (Hamilton, 2007) and scholars have linked faculty satisfaction with their levels of autonomy (Kim, Twombly, & Wolf-Wendel, 2008). Our findings expand prior research; autonomy is seen as a benefit by not only faculty, but by administrators. We have extended support for the assertion that independence and autonomy lead to employee satisfaction in the higher education environment.

Work: Challenging and Rewarding

Taking on challenges combined with the rewards of doing new things each day was a prevalent theme in the administrators' description of their work, regardless of whether the administrator was affiliated with the Center or with an institution.

> It you want to be an administrator one day, you can. If you want to be a counselor one day, you can…And to me, that's fun. That's the challenge. That's the beauty of it all. So,

> as one of the other site coordinators has said to me, “Being a site director is one of the best kept secrets.”…Because it gives you the opportunity to sort of work independent of your institution, but at the same time be a part of it and take on challenges.

Frequently, participants shared their personal philosophy about education in addition to describing their career paths and specific personal skill sets that they felt equipped them for their work. One institutional administrator described herself as an artist who needs to be engaged in work that both allows her the freedom to be creative while experiencing the rewards of contributing to the community. At the end of our interview, I asked her to reflect on our conversation and leave me with a final thought that she believed summarized her work at MHEC. She replied:

> I think it’s a fascinating career. I never would have imagined doing something like this. And I don’t think it’s something college students think about doing, you know. I don’t know how I really ended up being here. But, it’s a fascinating field. Continuing ed is a fascinating field to get into because it changes daily and that’s exciting.

Another institutional administrator shared:

> [This job] is a good fit because I do kind of like to organize things. I like to get creative and bring new things in. And make things better, make things bigger, make things more innovative.

One participant who had formerly worked as a senior administrator on the main campus of an institution expressed:

> I really feel like I’m in a chief administrative role without the three F’s: faculty, facilities, fundraising. And the piece that the chief administrative role plays that I really find myself in 90% of days is the friend-raising role. And I love to be with the community. I love to

> be with students. I love to just learn and listen to what other people are excited about and really serving in that capacity as a collaborator.

The participants described their work as challenging and rewarding. Demands on them change on a daily basis and allow professionals the opportunity to utilize their prior experiences in a culminating way. Our findings support the assertion that academic administrators have evolved with their ever-changing academic environments (Wolverton et al., 2001) as our respondents spoke of their own progress in meeting the needs of the shifting environment in continuing education. The research related to administrators at other types of colleges indicated risk-taking and creative opportunities positively contribute to professional life (Hirt et al., 2004). The participants in our study support this assertion, identifying creativity as a positive element of their work experience.

These first three themes focus on the nature of their work, or what MHEC administrators do. How they accomplish that work, however, rests upon their relationships with others. MHEC administrators serve as conduits between the community and their institution or the Center. That is, their relationships with others were at the core of much of their work. The MHEC administrators shared many stories about their relationships with on-campus colleagues and community members. Three themes emerged that describe those relationships: resources, advocacy, and appreciation.

Relationships: Coordinating Resources

One way the administrators explained their relationships with on-campus colleagues and the community was through engaging in resource coordination. It became evident that relationships with on-campus colleagues were initiated by the MHEC administrators whereas the relationships with community colleagues were generally reciprocal in nature. One institutional administrator spoke about the way she initiated and maintained relationships with her on-campus colleagues for the purpose of resource coordination:

> It is very very important, at least in my role, to network with your colleagues at the mothership…And that's one thing my mentors have taught me, is to make contacts, make connections on your main campus so that you have those relationships…We attend monthly meetings on the main campus with our colleagues from other regional centers from around the state and then general faculty meetings where I [go to campus and] see folks…Also, we participate in other events, more ceremonial events, such as commencements.

An institutional administrator spoke about driving to campus to visit with faculty:

> I like to sit in faculty offices and make the ask…for help. You know, the school system here is working on a grant initiative. How can I align them with the faculty or the right resources at the university?

Center and institutional administrators were not always the ones to initiate relationships with on-campus colleagues. As one institutional administrator noted, "Every now and then, our president will pop in and we'll be like, we didn't know you were coming." However such occasions were clearly rare exceptions. Overall, our findings support prior claims that faculty and administrators at traditional institutions are not likely to be aware of the off-campus education programs (or needs) of their institutions (Pusser et al., 2007).

Although the MHEC administrators were primarily the ones to initiate relationships with on-campus colleagues, members of the local community were more equitable in their relationships with those at the Center and initiated contact with professionals fairly regularly. For example, an institutional administrator shared a story about receiving a phone call from the

Chamber of Commerce asking her to arrange a visit with a business that was considering relocating to the MHEC area. She was asked to relay the types of training opportunities and faculty expertise that her institution, via the MHEC, could offer.

Relationships: Advocacy

In addition to serving as an intermediary between individuals on campus and those in the community, MHEC professionals saw themselves as advocates. Many of the institutional administrators described the nature of their relationships with on-campus colleagues as an opportunity to advocate for program needs or student needs. When we asked an administrator how she believed on-campus colleagues viewed her work, she said, “They’ve [on-campus faculty] got to come here…it’s the on-grounds persona. It’s very traditional – my university is very traditional with that – and we fight that on a daily basis.” This participant believed she had to “fight” for recognition from her main campus. This was less about confronting deliberate opposition from her on-campus colleagues and more about trying to create awareness for her on-campus colleagues to become cognizant of and engaged in the work of the Center.

Another institutional administrator shared why she believed those in off-campus education had to “fight” or advocate for their programs to their campus colleagues. She told us a story about the advice she received from a colleague when she first was hired:

> I was told, you need to make contacts with the on-campus professors, administrators so they know you because the program has really had to, I hate to use the word, fight, but that’s true. Because there’s, I think, fear from traditional faculty at times…about the quality of teaching and advising…and also a little bit of fear of, a little bit of challenge to their cozy ivory tower…that we might have to start looking at higher education from that

> feared prospective of a little bit more of a business because of the consumer mentality of students, especially adult students.

Another participant was very appreciative of the support and resources she received from her campus; however, she believed she had to work hard to advocate the needs of the students at the Center:

> I'm going to personalize this a little bit because I take a beating on this a lot. I tell people that I always feel a need to be like this. Often, when I interact with people on campus, I think they expect me to be overly assertive, aggressive, really pushy and somewhat abrasive. I'll claim those labels. But I'll tell people, it comes out of the nature of what we do. I can call up somebody and say I have a computer problem here. And you know my spirit; I'm not going to call you unless it's really creating a problem for us here. And remember the mentality I have, let's fix it here first. And then for somebody to say, well, we will, okay, okay, okay, we're going to get to it. And I just feel like if I'm not continuing to push them, it's sort of like, out of sight, out of mind. When I go to campus, I feel like a scavenger. That's what I am. I'm going from office to office to try to find what is in that office that I can take back with me. What is in that office that I can bargain for? So, there's still a sense of that. However, I think it's progressively gotten a lot better on our campus that I think that there are some offices on campus that have already factored in our students.

The administrators felt they understood the needs of adult students and had to work hard to articulate those needs to their on-campus colleagues. Regardless of how clearly they articulated those needs, however, those on the "mother campus" were perceived as insensitive to or unaware of the needs of those at the MHEC. An institutional administrator offered his viewpoint about why student advocacy is needed on-campus, especially related to off-campus *graduate* education:

> It's beginning to change obviously, but there are very, very few people that are teaching in higher ed who themselves were adult students. They are almost all people that were traditional students and a large number of them were not even people who went off to work after bachelor's or master's and came back to school, but were people who went from undergraduate to graduate…and it's only very recently that we have schools offering doctoral degrees, particularly by distance ed…So it's going to be, I would argue, at least another ten years before, maybe even longer, before there's any semblance of a critical mass of tenured faculty that have experiences other than as the traditional student…So the graduate student, for many of these faculty, they put upon these graduate students a template of their own life which often times was a full-time traditional [experience].

These findings resonate with other studies. Prior research has asserted that adult students need convenient and affordable access, but many working at traditional institutions do not consider the needs of non-traditional students (Pusser et al., 2007). The administrators in our study believed part of their role was cultivating relationships with on-campus colleagues in order to advocate for student needs. Administrators at HBCUs reported their work provided a sense of racial uplift (Hirt et al., 2006). Our findings support the notion of uplift. Administrators at the MHEC indicated their advocacy work provides uplift for the HEC students who are primarily adult students.

Relationships: Appreciation

Overall, our participants believed that shareholders (e.g., students, community members, on-campus faculty and administrators) who are actively engaged in the work of the Center have a good understanding of their work and appreciate the work of the Center administrators. One institutional administrator stated, “Faculty like to come here from [campus] to teach. They enjoy this facility a lot… If they’re involved with us, they regard it very highly.”

Additionally, the administrators appreciated the work of the on-campus faculty and reported that they enjoyed collaborating with campus colleagues:

> It’s about building relationships and I think you need to do that face-to face and share a cup of coffee or share lunch and just ask them [on-campus colleagues] what’s going on in their world. And so I love to go [to campus].

The institutional administrators in the study were aware of the many demands made upon their on-campus faculty colleagues:

> I think our faculty at the university are overwhelmed. They are very, very busy people and to ask them to do one more thing sometimes that you know will advance a program or help solve an issue here in Metropolis, it means that you’re asking them to do something miles away. And you’re not paying them what you’d be paying corporate America to do something for you. So that’s something that I’m sensitive to.

The sense of appreciation that is apparent between the MHEC administrators and faculty engaged in the work of the Center is also evident between the administrators and community members. We asked a Center administrator how he thought people in the community saw him. He replied, “The feedback I get is, the folks who are aware of what we’re doing appreciate what we’re doing. They see us as an element of the economic development puzzle. The see us as broadening opportunity.”

These findings support the literature that underscores the relationship between communities and higher education. Community members appreciate the importance of higher education and the role it plays in economic development (Florida, 2006). Our participants reiterated this sentiment in their responses.

In summary, HEC professionals view their primary role as being the face of their institution or the Center in the local community. They describe their work as a culminating experience, both rewarding and challenging. At the core of this work are the relationships that HEC professionals establish and sustain with others. These relationships are defined by resource coordination, advocacy, and appreciation and inform the work of those at the Center.

Discussion

This study was important because it explored professional life in a higher education environment that has not been explored in the literature. HECs are located across the higher education landscape and little is known about them. However, one delimitation of our study is that our findings are situated in the context of the MHEC and, as is true of all qualitative work, are only transferable in limited ways. Readers who wish to transfer our findings to other HECs should do so carefully and should consider the context surrounding each HEC since this form of delivering higher education has emerged in postsecondary landscape for different reasons.

Nevertheless, our findings provide a springboard for further discussion. The paradigm of off-campus education is that those on the main campus direct and inform the work off-campus. Off-campus units have traditionally been viewed as arms of the university that extend into communities. Indeed, this paradigm appropriately explains the terms, “outreach” or “extended education" and signifies the resource dependency between off-campus units and the main campus. In this paradigm, however, the HEC administrators serve as a liaison to the HEC community and create relationships to channel main campus resources from the main campus to the HEC (e.g., faculty expertise, academic programs, student services).

Based on our research, we believe the paradigm must evolve to include greater reciprocity between on- and off-campus constituents as follows:

(1) Expertise Reciprocity. The administrators in our study described themselves as conveners who link university resources and faculty expertise to the HEC community needs. What we did *not* hear in our research was that those on campus take advantage of the expertise of the HEC administrators. The work of HEC administrators is grounded in collaboration. As those on traditional campuses are engaging more frequently in collaborative work, the expertise of those who exist daily in collaborative work environments like HECs is an untapped potential. We recommend that HEC administrators be utilized on their main campuses as experts in the areas of academic collaboration, market analysis, program development, educational consortium environments, and community development.

(2) Relationship Reciprocity. HEC administrators initiate most relationships with on-campus colleagues in order to coordinate resources and advocate for student and program needs. This unilateral approach is indicative of a problem: on-campus constituents are either unaware or unmotivated to initiate relationships with off-campus colleagues. With the many benefits these relationships have to offer, we recommend that institutions explore incentives that encourage two-way relationships between on- and off-campus colleagues.

(3) Resource Reciprocity. HEC administrators wear several hats. In many ways, the work of these individuals is an amalgamation of an entire college or university system. They are engaged in public relations work (e.g., marketing, advertising), faculty recruitment work (e.g., intimate knowledge of program requirements and curriculum), entrepreneurialism (e.g., seeking new opportunities), administration (e.g., supervision, resource allocation), and student affairs work (e.g., advising, admissions, student support services). On-campus constituents would benefit from understanding that in addition to generating financial resources such as tuition and revenue, off-campus administrators serve a major human resource. We recommend resource reciprocity between on- and off-campus colleagues that incorporates an understanding of these important human skills and resources.

Overall, the HEC administrators serve as the public persona of the Center or their institution in the community. Life at the HEC is not very different than life on a main campus. The administrators expressed the same values about the quality of teaching, advising, and research as expressed by those on a traditional campus. This kind of commitment should go a long way in diminishing questions or skepticism that on-campus faculty and administrators may have toward off-campus programs.

In addition to offering recommendations for practice, we also recommend further research to expand what is known about HECs. Additional cases of HECs should be studied to compare these Centers on a case-by-case basis. HECs have evolved in very different ways. For example, another Center in the same state as MHEC originated with a policy that prohibited duplicative program offerings. Institutions at this Center were not allowed to offer competing programs whereas at the MHEC, institutions were always allowed to offer duplicate programs.

Additional studies could compare operating policies across HECs and how they impact the work of HEC administrators.

Another opportunity for additional research is to explore the various structural models that institutions use in delivering off-campus education, like the programs delivered in a HEC. In our study, we found that the institutional administrators reported to different entities on their main campuses. Some reported to Vice Presidents for Outreach, others to Directors of Continuing Education or other cabinet level officers on the mother campus. We were struck by the complexity and variety of institutional models for off-campus education and concluded that clearly there is no “one way” or “right way” to organizationally structure the delivery of off-campus education. However, given that our findings support the lack of awareness among many on-campus constituents regarding off-campus education, additional research is needed to identify structural models that generate awareness, support and engagement between the tripartite relationships of campus colleagues, HEC administrators, and HEC communities.

Additional studies of the professional lives of off-campus or consortium administrators would further what is known about the experiences of those engaged in consortium work. Many of our participants stated that they “arrived” in these positions and were not previously aware that these professional opportunities existed in the field of higher education. Future investigation of career paths, motivation, and professional experiences would provide information about proficiency and qualifications for these positions. These studies would provide valuable information that could be used to prepare individuals aspiring to consortium work.

Campus policymakers who recognize the importance of off-campus work might use the findings from this study to explore policies related to encouraging formal recognition structures for on-campus faculty engaged in off-campus work. For example, policies could be developed that recognize faculty contributions to educational outreach or community development as part of the tenure and promotion process.

Finally, more than 54 million adult students in the United States do not have a bachelor's degree and they need convenient, flexible and affordable access to higher education (Pusser et al., 2007). Practitioners must begin to recognize the needs of adult students and factor off-campus programs into on-campus practices by making these initiatives part of everyday campus conversation. Reciprocity between on- and off-campus colleagues is one way institutions can accomplish this goal.

Table 1. Code Mapping for Work and Relationships

RQ #1 How do HEC professionals describe their work?	RQ #2 What are the relationships between HEC professionals and their on-campus and community colleagues?
Third Iteration: Data Application	
HEC professionals view their primary role as serving as the face of their institution or the Center in the local community. They describe their work as culminating experience, both rewarding and challenging. The relationships between HEC professionals and their on-campus and community colleagues are defined by resource coordination, advocacy, and appreciation.	
Second Iteration: Themes	
1A. Face in the Community 1B. Culminating Experience 1C. Rewarding and Challenging	2A. Resource Coordination 2B. Advocacy 2C. Appreciation
First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis	
1A. Represent Institution 1A. Market Programs 1A. Face that Local Community Assigns 1A. Ear to Ground for New Ideas/Needs	2A. Convening 2A. Coordinating On-Campus or Center Resources with Community/Student/Program Needs
1B. Multiple Roles and Functions 1B. Cyclical Nature of Work 1B. Understand Each Program/Institution 1B. Uses Prior Experiences	2B. Advocating Student Needs to Campus 2B. Advocating Community Needs to Member Institutions 2B. Advocating Center Needs to Policymakers
1C. Variety of Daily Challenges 1C. Creative Opportunities 1C. Independent/Autonomous 1C. Shared Scholarship	2C. Those Who are Active Appreciate Work of Center 2C. Administrators Appreciate Faculty 2C. Community Members Appreciate Center

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CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The results from this study provide a rich framework for understanding the professional lives of HEC administrators. The HEC administrators described their work as beneficial for students through access to education, for the community through economic development, and for member institutions through financial, mission, and image incentives. Overall, the HEC administrators believe their work positively impacts the lives of students through creating access to education that they might not have otherwise. This supports the assertion that administrators working in environments that create access for marginalized student populations believe their work has the benefit of creating uplift for their students (Hirt et al., 2006; Sissel, 2001). A symbiotic relationship exists among these beneficiaries (students, community, member institutions) and each enjoys the success of the other. In addition to noting the beneficiaries of their work, HEC administrators described the organizational forces that drive their work.

One organizational force driving the work of HEC administrators is competition. Competition is charged by financial pressures driven by the growing need to turn profits in higher education (Slaughter, & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter, & Rhoades, 2004). The force of collaboration also guides the work of HEC administrators. Collaboration is driven by a global economy where education is rapidly becoming a universally accepted currency (Freidman, 2006). The force of balance is a mitigating force between competition and collaboration. The work of HEC administrators, specifically the work of Center administrators, aids this force of balance. The force of balance informed the clause “managed by an independent administration” in this study’s definition of a HEC.

The work of HEC administrators has, at its core, relationships with others. Indeed, much of the work of the HEC administrators is through relationships with on-campus colleagues and those in the HEC community. These relationships are cultivated and maintained in order to match institutional resources with community needs. The findings reveal that institutions would be well served to engage in more reciprocity with HEC administrators. Three types of reciprocity were recommended: expertise, relationship, and resource.

In conclusion, the substantial amount of information obtained from this research is indicative that HECs are rich data sources. Although Chapters Four and Five present several findings and recommendations, much more could be written about work, relationships and rewards from the data that were collected. Therefore, this study provides a strong research agenda for the future. The procedures used in the present study could be replicated in additional studies of HECs. A grounded theory approach using additional HECs could create an organizational model of collaboration in higher education. Policymakers at the institutional, state and national levels who have an interest in collaborative organizational structures in higher education would benefit from such a model.

My experience working in a HEC and as a researcher in the HEC environment has led me to conclude that many states and universities are somewhat myopic and territorial when it comes to discussions of organizational collaboration in higher education. I am an advocate for collaborative organizational structures and believe collaboration between institutions is needed to take on the many challenges that higher education faces in the future. Collaboration allows universities to retain their own unique identities while working together to solve problems; the HEC is one organizational solution to the problem of access for adult students.

Therefore, this dissertation initiated a line of scholarship that explores work in consortium environments such as HECs. Indeed, those who graciously allowed their professional lives to be interrupted for the purposes of this research participated with this very outcome in mind. Thus, this was a meaningful study for both the researcher and the researched and is an original contribution to the body of knowledge in higher education.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

VirginiaTech

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
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e-mail moored@vt.edu
www.irb.vt.edu
FWA00000572(expires 1/20/2010)
IRB # is IRB00000667

DATE: November 14, 2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Joan B. Hirt
Bethany Flora

FROM: David M. Moore

Approval date: 11/13/2007
Continuing Review Due Date:10/29/2008
Expiration Date: 11/12/2008

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "Exploring New Territories in Higher Education Administration: The Professional Lives of Higher Education Center Administrators" , IRB # 07-569

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective November 13, 2007.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtained re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

Important:
If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, this approval letter must state that the IRB has compared the OSP grant application and IRB application and found the documents to be consistent. Otherwise, this approval letter is invalid for OSP to release funds. Visit our website at http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/newstudy.htm#OSP for further information.

cc: File

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Appendix B: Social Artifact Exercises 1 and 2

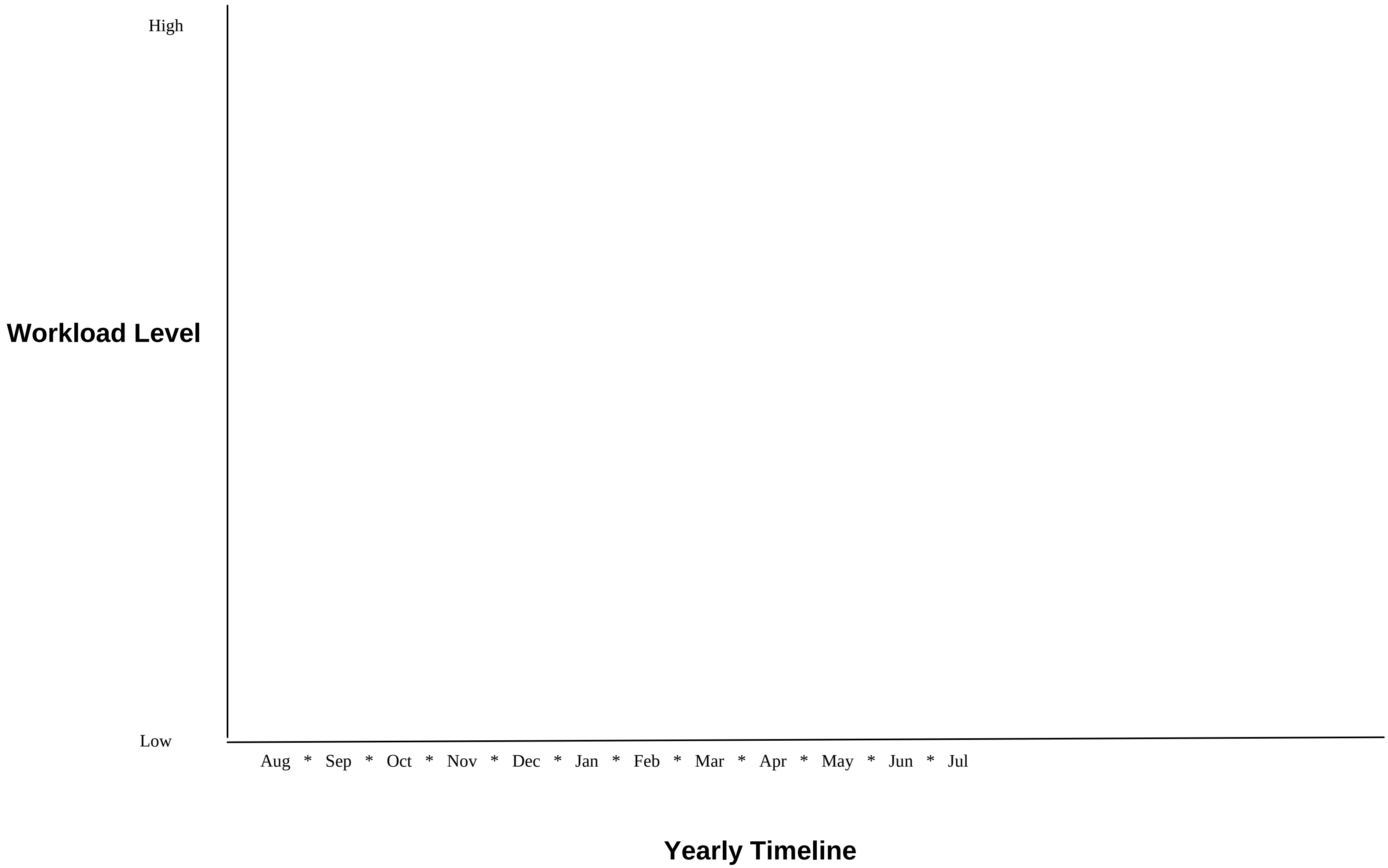
Exercise 1: Weekly Workload Activity Exercise

Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to elicit data about your typical weekly work activities. Please use your calendar for the last week or synthesize the past several weeks to describe your typical weekly work activities. List the activities you engaged in each day. Please use the back of this paper if you need more room.

Day	Activities
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

Exercise 2: Yearly Workload Timeline Exercise

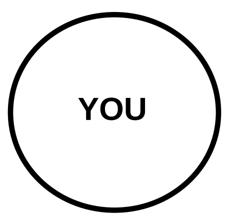
Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to elicit data about your yearly workload. Please draw a line on the timeline below to describe the levels of your workload throughout the year. Plot a point above each month that represents the workload during that month (from Low to High). Then connect the dots to draw a line that represents your workload throughout the year.



Appendix C: Social Artifact Exercise 3

Exercise 3: Relationship Concept Map Exercise

Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to elicit data about your relationships with others. The circle in the middle represents you. Please draw other circles and label them with the names of groups/people with whom you maintain relationships in your line of work. Draw the circle close to your name if you work closely with this group/person and farther away from your name if you work less with the group/person. Try to make the size of the circle represent the importance of this relationship. Larger circles would represent the most important relationships.



Appendix D: Interview Protocol

First, thank you for meeting with me today and for submitting the first three exercises. I look forward to talking to you more about those in this interview. Is it okay to tape record this interview so I do not miss anything? You signed the consent form for the interview at the program meeting where I talked about this research project; however, I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

Information

As we start, I wanted to ask you to review the information data sheet I collected at the program meeting to make sure everything is accurate?
So, tell me about your history with the RHEC.
How long have you worked in education?
In off-campus education?
Has the RHEC been a good fit for you as an administrator? Why or why not?

Work

I wanted to give you the opportunity to review the weekly and yearly activity you reported in the exercises and see if there is anything you might add or change to these in retrospect?
Reflecting on this past week, do you believe what you reported on the first exercise is a good representation your typical weekly activities? Why or why not?
Tell me more about the peaks in the yearly timeline. What activities or events are you engaged?
Do you find those times rewarding? Why or why not?
(Customized Prompt), I notice ___ is part of your weekly activities. Tell me a little more about what you enjoy about ___.
(Customized Prompt), I notice ____ is not listed as a typical weekly activity. Does someone else do ___?

Relationships

First, I wanted to give you the opportunity to look at your relationship concept map to see if there is anything you would add or change?
(Customized Prompt), I notice ___ is on your map. Tell me a little more about your relationship with them.
(Customized Prompt), I also noticed ___ is not on your map. Is the relationship with them not a focal point in your position?
Tell me a little about your relationships with home/member institutions (on-campus colleagues). How would you describe the nature of your relationships with them?

Rewards

Now we're going to break this up a bit and do the fourth and final exercise. (Do Exercise 4). (Write down card order).
Tell me a little more about why you find ___ most rewarding in your line of work.
What about some of these other rewards (name a few). Can you talk to me a little about why you find these things rewarding?
What would you say are the least rewarding aspects of your position as an administrator at RHEC? Why?

Reflection

If you could tell me one thing about the nature of work, relationships and rewards at RHEC, what would it be?

Thank you for talking with me today. The interview transcript will be emailed to you. Please review it to be sure it reflects what you intended to say and that all personally identifying information is masked. And remember, you are always free to call me or email if there are any areas that you would like to elaborate.