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The Impact of Undergraduate Student Involvement in Creating Engaged Alumni

Katherine Elizabeth Winstead Reichner

William & Mary - School of Education, katie.reichner@gmail.com

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**THE IMPACT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
IN CREATING ENGAGED ALUMNI**

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Katherine E. Winstead Reichner

February 28, 2019

**THE IMPACT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
IN CREATING ENGAGED ALUMNI**

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Katherine E. Winstead Reichner

Approved on February 28, 2019 by

James P. Barber, Ph.D, Chairperson

Eddie R. Cole, Ph.D.

Kevin Hughes, Ph.D.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother.
Beth Miller Winstead
1954—2013

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Abstract

Undergraduate experiences can have a profound impact on a student's emotional connection and affinity for their alma mater. For many graduates, involvement experiences like student organizations, membership in fraternities and sororities, and on-campus jobs can become an ingrained part of the individual's social identity. This phenomenological study examines the experiences of young alumni at Christopher Newport University through interviews with members of the class of 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013. The research examines their experiences through the lens of Social Identity Theory, particularly the components of *prestige* and *distinctiveness* that are believed to increase connection to an identity or group. The results of this study indicated that meaningful relationships, skill development, and individually curated experiences were the practices most likely to increase the perceived prestige and distinctiveness of the institution. The most frequent outcomes from students with these experiences were continued service to CNU through giving back, and a sense of connection to the positive growth of the institution.

**THE IMPACT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
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CHAPTER 1

Background of the Study

The college experience prepares young adults for success, shaping elements of occupational, social, and economic status (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who are involved in college life perceive a higher sense of support and belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Among many factors, the role of student involvement and college-sponsored programs can improve the overall college experience, sense of belonging, increasing educational attainment and persistence, and promoting higher levels of satisfaction (Astin, 1999; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001; O'Neill, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012).

Involvement and participation in campus programs can create lasting connections to an organization that result in strong bonds as alumni (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Experiences like membership in a social fraternity or sorority, leadership in a student club, involvement on a college athletic team, or participation in an alternative break trip are only a few ways that students connect with their institutions (Ikenberry, 1999; O'Neill, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). These experiences build lifelong connections with their alma mater that sustain long after commencement ends.

Since the early days of higher education in America, students developed connections with their institution that extended beyond their years as students (Morrill, 1938; Shaw, Embry, Upham, & Johnson, 1917). These connections were the foundation

on which the modern alumni society was created, impacting the fundraising, communication, and maintaining connections between graduates and their alma mater (Morrill, 1938; Sailor, 1930; Yale Alumni Association, 2014).

As institutions have grown, and the college experience has become more diverse and more accessible, the desire to shape and cultivate that experience has become increasingly relevant to college administrators. They understand that the ideal time to create meaningful connections between students and their alma mater is while the students are still enrolled on campus. Many of these connections are interpersonal —some that happen casually in social spaces and informal learning environments (e.g., administrative assistants, residence hall housekeepers), or in more formal settings (e.g., faculty, organization advisors, and staff) (McAlexander & Koeing, 2001). Beyond relationships, the transformational and fun experiences and involvement opportunities that students encounter during their college years are important contributors to alumni's lasting relationship with the institution and their loyalty to the institutional brand (McAlexander & Koeing, 2001; O'Neill, 2005).

Through identifying the activities and involvement of the most active and engaged alumni, we can better predict which alumni are more likely to give, contribute and engage while discovering ways to reach them more efficiently (Golz, 2013; O'Neill, 2005). What is not understood, however, are the qualities of these experiences — specifically those that occur outside the classroom — that lead to the most dedicated and beneficial relationships between students and their alma mater.

Developing Social Identity

A key contribution to affinity is the incorporation of an institution with one's social identity. Educational institutions provide an ideal environment to examine how organizational function affects the overall well-being and social identity development of its students, and the idea of social identity suggests that people classify themselves into different social groups (Bizumic, Reynolds & Turner, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). These groups can be defined as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves as members of the same social category and share some emotional investment in their common interests and memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this way, an individual can develop their identity in terms of themselves as an individual, as a member of specific in-group (like a fraternity or athletic team), or as a member of a larger, more inclusive in-group or culture like a college or university (Bizumic et al., 2009; Hogg, 2001).

This identification is established while a student is an undergraduate but can continue far beyond commencement. Once a student leaves an institution; their likelihood of supporting their institution is directly tied to the level of affinity or identification they feel for it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Drezner, 2009; Ikenberry, 1999; Kidder, 2016; Stephenson & Bell, 2014). In turn, they are more likely to contribute financially to their alma mater, encourage others to attend, stay involved in university events, and report an overall higher level of satisfaction (Golz, 2013; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2013; Stephenson & Yerger, 2015; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

It is no surprise, then, that higher education administrators want to begin that relationship from the day a prospective student first arrives on campus. From a high school student or potential transfer student's first visit, the institution can shape and

influence their college experience, creating an environment where people feel as though they belong this exclusive group. Students who are involved while at college feel a stronger sense of connectedness to others than their peers who are not (Strayhorn, 2012). This experience and these connections has long-lasting effects on the relationship between the student and their alma mater (Gaier, 2005). This sense of belonging has the ability to inspire life-long interest and engagement with a school financially and socially (Berquam, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

How Student Involvement and Campus Programs Create Connections

One of the most valuable tools in creating this sense of belonging when students arrive on campus is through their on-campus activities. Involvement in organizations and participation in on campus programs can be a valuable tool in relationship building, and lead to lasting relationships with an institution (Clotfelter, 2001). Participation in extracurricular activities is a powerful contributor to student retention and academic success (Astin, 1999), but also facilitates meaningful connections to colleges and universities that cultivate that essential sense of belonging long after students graduate. Johnson (2013) believed that this belonging obtained through participation in student activities facilitated higher levels of social support that lead to meaningful engagement with an institution, and Lawley (2008) determined that these extracurricular activities were valuable tools in encouraging future alumni financial contributions.

Interpersonal relationships are a powerful indicator of student success (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). These relationships can form meaningful connections, engagements, and social support mechanisms that help guide students through their college years. This success breeds high levels of satisfaction as students transition to

alumni, and the relationships formed with faculty and staff have a significant impact on alumni participation as they look to maintain these connections after graduation (Drew-Branch, 2011; Gaier, 2005; Hummel, 2001).

McAlexander and Koenig (2001) coined the term, “peak experience,” to describe the highly emotional, memorable, enjoyable, and personally significant events that link the participant to the facilitating organization (p. 26). These peak experiences created strong bonds between the individual and the institution, and the relationship created through them was a lasting one. Their research demonstrated that these experiences clearly influenced the relationships students formed and maintained at their alma mater with faculty, staff, and peers. Other researchers support this position, concluding that alumni use their undergraduate relationships with faculty, staff, and peers to remain connected to the institution (Hummel, 2001).

One of the ways undergraduates build these relationships is through impactful involvement opportunities. Engaged students are more likely to become engaged alumni and future alumni volunteers or donors, with involvement in student clubs yielding more significant results than either athletics or extracurricular programs (Hummel, 2001). These opportunities to get connected and have ownership over something at the university are one of the first and easiest ways to begin affinity development (Berquam, 2013).

When considering which organizations have the greatest impact on giving, several groups have a greater influence than others. Student government, intercollegiate athletics, performing arts and music, fraternities or sororities, religious groups, or residence life are all correlated with greater levels of alumni giving (Monks, 2003; O’Neill, 2005; Parsons,

1998). It is clear that through meaningful involvement, undergraduate students have experiences that greatly improve their experience in college, but also increase their potential for future contributions (Hanson, 2000).

Outside of donor behavior, limited research exists on how undergraduate involvement and the relationships built through it contribute to other forms of alumni engagement, though research suggests some connection between the experiences had during the undergraduate experience and the alumni's likelihood of what Gallup (2014) called a "well-lived life" (p. 5). Gaier (2005) found that alumni who were involved as undergraduates were 154% more likely to participate in alumni activities than those who were not involved. Students were even more likely to engage when they were exposed to alumni. When given the opportunity to interact with alumni volunteers, students became more likely to become volunteers themselves (Hummel, 2001).

The existing body of research indicates a strong connection between an alum's undergraduate involvement experiences and their future relationship with their alma mater. While a great deal of work has been done to determine donor behavior and contributors to institutional advancement, there is a lack of research to support the experiences that lead to less quantifiable measures of connectivity.

Problem Statement

Administrators in higher education face increasing levels of accountability for their work. From justifying dollars spent on student affairs programs and services, to validating the need for new staff and offices, these individuals are often asked to answer why their work impacts student success, retention, and a positive student experience (Golz, 2013; Ikenberry, 1999; Kuh et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). At

institutions across the United States, we see this represented through moves to merge, consolidate, and downsize student services units to support success initiatives.

Increasingly, schools combine divisions that oversee both student affairs and enrollment management, a move that emphasizes the need for administrative units within higher education to become more data driven (Poisel, Neufeldt, Ward-Roof, Sheek, & Lewis, 2017).

For student affairs practitioners in particular, that answer seems obvious. They observe learning in their day-to-day interactions with students, and they see those students leaving the university having had meaningful, impactful experiences outside the classroom that teach them awareness of themselves and the world around them (Astin, 1999; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For high level administrators and legislators without regular interaction with students and outside student-centered roles, these lessons learned are less apparent.

To adequately illustrate the role that campus activities play in the life of a college campus, administrators must become storytellers. They must be able to tell those who ask how their work makes students feel. They need to understand how the emotional connections of students to their institution are shaped by the experiences and activities they engage in. Finally, they must know how to tell that story to others.

Research shows that students struggle to make meaning of their experiences within the short time they are members of a campus community (Baxter Magolda, 2002). They often have not had sufficient time or capacity to reflect upon their experiences in a way that allows them to know that their role as an orientation leader was a key factor in their identity development, or that their Panhellenic recruitment experience helped them

feel more confident as a communicator, or that their position on a programming committee taught them to manage conflict. In many cases, they are not ready or able to share the impact of these individual stories until after their time at an institution has ended.

The struggle to show this impact is a challenge. The benefit of answering these questions could have a lasting impact on the success of the institution. If it is confirmed that students who are involved in co-curricular activities while enrolled at an institution can demonstrate a stronger emotional connection, or affinity, to their alma mater, these relationships can have lasting impact on the work of administrators throughout higher education, whether they be admissions counselors, development officers, or alumni relations staff.

As budgets become tighter and higher education becomes increasingly data-driven, the need for student affairs practitioners, especially those working within the areas of student life and student activities, to demonstrate their role in creating connection is vital. By determining what practices are most impactful—whether that be involvement in a student organization, participation on a research team, or simply a meaningful mentorship relationship with a faculty or staff member—they can channel their efforts and resources into programs that create connection. These findings can help to bridge the gap between the “business” of higher education and the work practitioners do as helpers, mentors, and guides by drawing connections between the value of co-curricular experiences in creating lasting relationships between students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

Research Questions

1. What undergraduate involvement experiences do alumni identify as most impactful?
2. In what way do undergraduate involvement experiences develop emotional connection between a student and their institution?
3. How does connection to a student's alma mater continue in the years immediately following graduation because of student involvement and campus programs?

Definition of Terms

Affinity

Ashforth and Mael (1989) tied affinity directly to one's identification with a group or institution. Affinity is generally associated with positive feelings about the individual's identification with the group, and in this study, are used as a measurement for alumni engagement. For the purposes of this study, affinity in college alumni is operationalized through participation in co-curricular student activities, including physical attendance at campus events and the encouragement of others to do so, verbal, and symbolic promotion and endorsement of an alma mater in every day interactions, and financial contribution.

Involvement

Astin (1984) defined involvement as the "amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). For the purposes of this research, the focus is on co-curricular involvement, that is—the on-campus activities and opportunities for engagement outside academic pursuits. This study adapted Astin's definition to include the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student

devotes to their engagement outside the classroom. In order to narrow the focus of this study, some experiences such as participation in collegiate athletics, or the residential experience, were not explicitly explored.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, participants shared specific memories that impacted their experience, allowing me to draw conclusions about which of their involvement experiences were most influential. Since many college students are involved in more than one opportunity in college, this type of study allows for differentiation between difference experiences. The types of involvement examined in this study included:

On-campus clubs and organizations. This type of involvement includes membership in an organization that operates as a fully recognized group on their campus, with sustained involvement throughout their time as a member of the group. These groups may include academic honor societies, club sports, social interest groups, governing organizations, and event planning organizations.

Social fraternities and sororities. These groups are organizations commonly known by Greek letters that are recognized under a national organization with multiple chapters across the country. These organizations are primarily social in nature, unlike similar fraternal organizations with an academic or service focus (Cory, 2011; O'Neill, 2005). This definition excludes organizations affiliated with the National Pan-Hellenic Council, who categorize themselves as service organizations.

On-campus jobs. This type of involvement is defined as a paid (hourly, by stipend, or compensated with housing waivers) job within an office or unit at an institution. These jobs may include office assistants, resident assistants, event

management staff, recreational services staff, and other student positions that are not related to the student's academic pursuits.

Young Alumni

This study defines young alumni as those who are one “academic generation” removed from their collegiate experience, or more specifically, 5-10 years. There is not a universally accepted range that defines this group, however others suggest those under 35 (House, 2015) or within 10 years of graduation (McDonough, 2017). The rationale to narrow this definition for this study is explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

The question of what connects students in college and helps them persist to graduation is one that educators have explored for many years. A wealth of research exists on the educational ways students engage in college, most notably the data that exists from the National Survey of Student Engagement and the work of George Kuh. His “high impact practices” provide a framework from the academic perspective to create an environment where students can thrive (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010).

Kuh (2016) also identified a number of factors that predict success in college. Of these factors, the most relevant in this study is the idea of psychosocial fit, when students find others like them, which contributes to a sense of social acceptance and personal efficacy. This draws attention to an area that is not as widely studied—experiences outside the academic arena that most impact connection to one's institution.

When looking at existing research on alumni, a wide variety of research exists on the impact of these experiences on donor behavior (Cory, 2011; Ikenberry, 1999; Lackie, 2010; Martin, 1993; Miracle, 1977; O'Neill, 2005; Parsons, 1998). Less research exists to

support the qualitative ways alumni stay connected to their alma mater, such as returning to campus for traditional events, engaging with a regional alumni chapter, encouraging children and others to attend the institution, and more.

This study makes an important contribution to the literature in this area. By discovering the experiences outside the classroom that have the most meaningful impact on alumni affinity, this study achieved several goals. I created a framework of experiences that student affairs professionals can use to develop programs and allocate resources. Second, I provided valuable data for alumni officers to aid in the development of affinity groups and outreach. Finally, the impactful qualities of the undergraduate student experience identified in this study can have a lasting impact on the overall health of higher education—from admissions, to student life, to alumni relations, and to advancement offices.

I have introduced the idea that we can use alumni reflection to influence the services and programs we provide to current undergraduate students. While existing research looks at how undergraduates make meaning of their experiences in college and how the experiences of alumni influence financial contribution to their alma mater, there is limited literature on the long-term emotional connections formed through undergraduate student involvement and how that inspires alumni involvement beyond donor behavior. In Chapter 2, I reviewed existing literature on alumni engagement, meaning making, and the role of student involvement in identity development to further explore the research questions for this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Creating Lifelong Connections

The relationship between university alumni and their alma mater can be lifelong. As individuals progress through their college years, they have experiences and opportunities that allow them to explore and define their personal values, talents, and identities. These involvements provide an incubator for identity development and provide opportunities for an institution to become an integral and meaningful contributor in defining who that student will be. Understanding the environments and interactions that help individuals make meaning of the world is essential in shaping their social identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kidder, 2016; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; O'Neill, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Beyond individual identity, organizational identity may be more pervasive and more important than those of race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Student affairs administrators play an important role in developing connections between higher education institutions and college students, and it should be a priority for staff to ensure that this development occurs for their students (Stephenson & Yerger, 2015). This is particularly true today as institutions work to identify what makes them unique or distinctive from their peers. This study aims to examine the role that student involvement and campus programs play in developing these connections, and to

emphasize the value of these experiences in developing a strong alumni connection after graduation. This value is measured using three key research questions:

1. What undergraduate involvement experiences do alumni identify as most impactful?
2. In what way do undergraduate involvement experiences develop emotional connection between a student and their institution?
3. How does connection to a student's alma mater continue in the years immediately following graduation because of student involvement and campus programs?

Before these questions can be answered, the supporting literature must be explored. The review of related literature is organized into key sections, looking first at social identity; then at ways student involvement can be used to develop alumni affinity and support institutional advancement; and finally, the role that student affairs staff play in building these connections with undergraduate students.

Building a Mutual Relationship between Student and Institution

A college or university stands to gain a great deal by ingraining a sense of institutional affinity (defined in this study as a feeling of connection or affection for one's college or university) early in a student's educational career (McDearmon, 2013; Vanderbout, 2010). For instance, colleges and universities rely heavily on the support of alumni in a multitude of arenas, most notably with fundraising, development, and recruitment. Strong alumni groups find connections through their shared experiences as students at the institution, and many think back on these shared experiences fondly. This

is an area that can be developed and is largely ignored in the literature—how these experiences are shaped, and how they become a part of an alum’s identity.

Particularly through the use of traditions and symbols like myths, rituals, and physical structures, universities can create impactful and lasting memories for their students (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Magolda, 2000; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). These rituals and experiences are of particular interest as the physical footprint of campuses continues to change—colleges and universities must create connections to their campus when the physical spaces that alumni remember may no longer exist or have been renovated beyond recognition. How these memories are made is, in part, the responsibility of university representatives who interact with these individuals during their undergraduate years, as they act in the role of guides along a student’s journey (Baxter Magolda, 2002).

The responsibility to build affinity is rarely a priority for faculty, staff, and administrators across campus, but should be a consideration for all. The role of the student experience in developing engaged, committed alumni is especially vital to student affairs practitioners, and there are a host of advantages to developing collaborative relationships and shared objectives with their peers in advancement (Drezner, 2009; Rissmeyer, 2010; Singer & Hughey, 2002; Stephenson & Yerger, 2015), not least of which is a sense of belonging and an environment where an institution becomes a meaningful part of a student’s identity.

This integration of an institution with a student’s social identity can cultivate emotional investment, the bedrock of affinity (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; McDearmon, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Existing research shows that social identity is closely tied

to organizational identity, which can be capitalized upon to strengthen ties between a student and institution through campus involvement (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Jorgenson, Farrell, Fudge, & Pritchard, 2018; Stets & Burke, 2000). After graduation, this meaning remains. This leads to a greater sense of connection and commitment to an alumni's alma mater, but little research exists to explore how to better cultivate these experiences with undergraduate students.

Building Social Identity in College

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory posits that people classify themselves into different social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These groups can be defined as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves as members of the same social category and share some emotional investment in their common interests and memberships (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Billig & Tajfel, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Researchers and practitioners alike develop policy and organizational structures that can promote certain attitudes and behaviors among these groups (Bizumic et al., 2009), and these structures are important tools in developing more committed and engaged group members. These memberships create a link to a group or society that can supersede even ascribed identities based on gender, age, ethnicity, race, or nationality (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Social identity theory rests on several factors that influence an individual's likelihood of identifying with a group. One is *distinctiveness*—that is, the specific and unique experiences surrounding a group's values and practices (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Through social comparison, an individual is able to evaluate how closely the group's

values align with their own, and these perceived similarities contribute to development of in-group and out-group categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Another important factor is the *prestige* of the group. Perceived organizational prestige contributes to organizational identification and positively contributes to the self-esteem of the group's members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This evaluation of the in-and-out-groups leads to positive identification with in-groups and negative perceptions of the out-groups (Stets & Burke, 2000).

These two factors that help develop social identity are key to intergroup development (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Jorgenson et al., 2018), which lends itself to the study of student involvement and connectedness. In fact, prestige and distinctiveness are qualities that any institution strives for as they seek higher rankings, higher selectivity, and sell an image of the unique student experience only they can provide.

Finally, identification with specific "in-groups" can increase the level of connectedness an individual feels to his or her institution (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, Jorgenson et al., 2018). In this way, an individual is able to develop their identity in terms of themselves as an individual, as a member of specific in-group (like a fraternity or athletic team), or as a member of these groups within a larger, more inclusive in-group like a college or university (Bizumic et al., 2009). These smaller in-groups allow members to self-identify with the groups most like them.

Application of Social Identity Theory to Higher Education

The desire of an individual to connect with a group is particularly high for college students, a fact that much of student development theory rests on. Astin (1984) and

Chickering and Reisser (1993), suggested that making significant interpersonal and organizational commitments are key components in the development of a student's purpose. These commitments can ultimately lead to a more fulfilling, successful college experience.

As newcomers to their organization (their college or university), college students are often concerned with building a self-definition, of which the social identity (or identities) is likely to comprise a large part. They often derive their identity or sense of self from the social categories to which they belong (Jorgenson et al., 2018; Stets & Burke, 2000). As students define this identity, they tend to choose activities congruent that mirror the group norms and values with which they identify (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Kidder, 2016; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000).

As these identities develop, it makes sense that once students leave an institution, their likelihood of supporting their alma mater is tied to the level of affinity or identification they feel for it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; McDearmon, 2013; O'Neill, 2005; Stephenson & Bell, 2014). The existing research is clear that how prestigious, distinctive, or otherwise special a graduate perceives their experience to be can have lasting effects on their relationship with their alma mater (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2013; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Weerts, & Ronca, 2007).

What this research does not prove, however, is which experiences during college that have the greatest potential to develop affinity to an alma mater, and many of the existing studies rely heavily on financial contributions to make their point. There are many ways that alumni, particularly young alumni who do not have the means to give

financially, choose to give back to their institution. These include recruitment support, presence at on-campus events, and mentoring new and prospective students, in part.

The Role of Social Identity in Group Identity Development

Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that social identity is a key factor in the identification with an organization's values and beliefs, leading to those values and beliefs becoming internalized within a person's own identity. This can develop independently from interpersonal relationships and can lead an individual to feel loyalty or commitment to an organization, regardless of the actions of its members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

A major contributor to this social identification development comes from symbolic interactions. The manipulation and use of symbols prove helpful to impart values and beliefs that create a distinctive identity for an organization that attract the recognition, support and loyalty of members and supporters (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Magolda, 2000). Using mascots, shared language, ritual, and similar strategies can reinforce the exclusivity of the in-group and create a distinctive identity for the organization.

For college and university students, exposure to the in-group happens as early as their first campus visit. The prospective student is given a tour of campus, shown iconic buildings and places, and educated on important traditions and rituals that they too can experience if they choose to attend (Magolda, 2000; Vanderbout, 2010). The entirety of this interaction is to prove the distinctiveness of the institution and why this organization will provide a different, even better experience than another (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Once a student chooses to attend an institution, their role as a member of the in-group stresses the similarities they share with their fellow students and alumni. The focus is on shared experiences, values, and strengths, and on the qualities of the group that differentiate them from their peers and competitors (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hogg, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). An individual develops a lifelong relationship with their institution during matriculation (Rissmeyer, 2010), and this study seeks to determine if that fusion of institution with individual continues after a person leaves their alma mater. All of these pieces—the symbols, the loyalty, and the internalization—become a seamless part of the alumni’s identity.

As early as orientation, first year move-in, and even a campus tour before a student commits to an institution, colleges can send powerful messages about identity and connectedness to new students that continue throughout their college experience (Magolda, 2000; Rissmeyer, 2010; Singer & Hughey, 2002; Vanderbout, 2010). These points are opportunities for institutions to serve their present and past students—using alumni to teach about culture and tradition and sending messages to incoming students about the expectation for lifelong connection.

Alumni-student interactions that allow alumni to share lessons learned, share tips, and show pride in their institution provide students an important opportunity to develop and learn loyalty to the institution directly from alumni (Singer & Hughey, 2002). This form of alumni engagement for those who were once involved on campus can be a powerful way to engage those who may want to stay connected but do not have the means to give at high levels or attend expensive events.

Extending Group Identity through the Alumni Experience

This identification is established while a student is an undergraduate but can continue far beyond commencement. Once a student leaves an institution, their likelihood of supporting their institution is directly tied to the level of affinity or identification they feel for it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In turn, they are more engaged alumni – giving more of their money, their time, and their loyalty to the institution. (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; O’Neill, 2005). While these connections are well-documented, information detailing the types of experiences that build identification is limited, and data on the experiences that build group identity beyond dollars raised are even more so. This study explores the connections that may exist between specific experiences and their impact on the long-term affinity of alumni.

Because identification leads to this affinity, it is no surprise why higher education administrators want to begin that relationship from the day a prospective student first arrives on campus. From their first visit, the institution has the ability to shape and influence their college experience, creating an environment where people feel as though they belong this exclusive group. This experience has long-lasting effects on the relationship between the student and their alma mater (Gaier, 2005; Magolda, 2000).

This sense of belonging with an institution is closely tied to the relationships an individual has on campus (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Strayhorn, 2009, 2012). These meaning-makers and influential people to a student’s experience can teach valuable skills and create important connections. These relationships have the ability to inspire life-long interest and engagement with a school financially and socially (Berquam, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001), particularly when a student feels like they have

connections with others with similar racial, socioeconomic, or cultural backgrounds as them (Strayhorn, 2009).

Just as an individual's introduction to an institution is carefully crafted to ensure maximum impact and connection, the transition from student to alumni is one that falls in to the hands of alumni relations professionals and the alumni associations they cultivate (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Newman & Petrosko, 2011). For many institutions, the shared benefit associated with coordinating efforts between academic, student, and alumni affairs has been of increased interest (Singer & Hughey, 2002).

This integration has led to increased presence from alumni associations in admission efforts, at orientation, at campus programs, and throughout a student's time in college (Rissmeyer, 2010; Singer & Hughey, 2002). While this presence allows for early exposure to alumni, and in the case of advancement, to alumni giving, it is important for these interactions to be focused on affinity, not just giving. Research focuses heavily on the fundraising component of engagement and this is a missed opportunity. Connection and a long-term relationship build affinity, not simply a request for financial support. The existing literature focuses heavily on the impact of these interactions on financial gifts, however gifts are only part of affinity.

Student Involvement as a Tool for Alumni Affinity

Involvement in undergraduate experiences such as athletics, student organizations, and fraternities/sororities, among others, play an important role in the social identity of students (Jorgenson et al., 2018; Vanderbout, 2010). This self-categorization leads to the formation of psychological groups that are formed through bonds of interpersonal attraction (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Odio, Wells, & Kerwin, 2014),

fostering an environment where students feel like a member of an exclusive group that is unique to their institution. The concept that individualized involvement experiences that feel unique and personal increase the likelihood of connectedness, student success, and student learning is also supported within student development literature (Barber & King, 2014; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Strayhorn, 2009).

To create this environment, students must first identify as part of a group. The natural classification process that people go through to classify themselves into social groups helps to build emotional investment in their common interests and memberships (Hogg, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, & Sinclair, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and for involved students on a college campus, this can be achieved through their involvement in student organizations, clubs, teams, and leadership programs.

These opportunities are where many students find meaningful relationships, shared goals and motivations, and a common interest. The foundational literature in student affairs supports the social identity work in the idea that these relationships and co-curricular involvement matter to the identity development of college students (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1997). Beyond simply connecting, these involvements are an essential component to student success, belonging, and the development of an institutional culture (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2010; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Strayhorn, 2012).

This study ties together the common threads between these perspectives to investigate how co-curricular commitments create a strong connection that endures. The literature supports the idea that if an individual has identified with a given social group,

in this case their institution, the desire to remain a part of the “in-group” remains strong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Students need these experiences to feel connected to their institution and derive much of their identity or sense of self from the groups to which they belong. This identification, as well as a sense of gratitude for their experience, may lead to higher levels of engagement with an institution (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Emotional Attachment through Involvement

One of the most compelling contributors to alumni affinity is the idea that an emotional connection to an institution breeds attachment with an alma mater (Gaier, 2005; Hummel, 2001). This sense of belonging has the ability to inspire life-long interest and engagement with a school financially and socially (Berquam, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Research shows that alumni are motivated to make donations to an institution not because of economic benefits, but because it fulfills an emotional need (Drew-Branch, 2011). It is the responsibility of the institution to find ways to fill this emotional need for all alumni, not simply those who give. Students have a profoundly impactful connection while enrolled, but for many, that disappears quickly after graduation.

Beyond the concept that involvement in campus activities has a positive influence on a student’s emotional connection with the institution, a common catalyst for these connections are the relationships formed with faculty, staff, and advisors (Clotfelter, 2001; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001; Monks, 2003; Vanderbout, 2010). These relationships build connections that extend beyond the undergraduate experience, with alumni who have maintained relationships with a mentor or advisor on campus demonstrate increased connection with an institution (Vanderbout, 2010).

Sustained involvement with an institution after graduation is a common theme for students who maintained relationships with university representatives (Gaier, 2005; Johnson, 2013; McDearmon, 2013). Maintaining relationships can be supported from a variety of sources. They may be transactional experiences with staff at the library, or they can be prolonged, intimate relationships like those built in research teams with faculty or an organization advisor (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Creating Incubators for Relationship Building

Student-university affinity relationships take place in several venues during the college experience. Gaier (2005) outlined two primary systems that exist within the college experience: academic and social. Within each of these, there are activities and relationships that exist; research and educational learning activities in the academic system and co-curricular activities, involvement opportunities, and mentors in the social system. Within each, there is substantial space for overlap, an area that Gaier does not explore. Just as mentorship and social opportunities exist in the academic system, openings for learning abound in the social system. Both systems serve to facilitate high impact practices, particularly the high-quality interactions that can have a transformative experience on the undergraduate experience (Gaier, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010).

These transformative experiences lead to meaningful connections with their alma mater and are often deeply personal. Specifically looking at social experiences, one could consider a study abroad experience, a cultural experience that led a student to reflect on their own racial or ethnic difference, or a meaningful leadership experience (Kuh et al., 2010; Vanderbout, 2010). The effect of these experiences positively impacts retention and persistence, but also inspires alumni to maintain connections with the offices and

individuals that facilitated those transformations (Berquam, 2013). Administrators have a responsibility to create programs that allow space for these interpersonal relationships to grow. As alumni, the activities that are directed and shaped by staff mentors show higher levels of alumni donations than those who had similar experiences through independent study, travel, or research (Monks, 2003). As a byproduct of affinity, these alumni are more likely than their peers to give of their time, finances, and talents after their time at the institution has ended.

Institutional Advancement and Student Affinity

Affinity is closely related to the idea of advancement, or what many would call fundraising or development. Affinity manifests itself in a variety of ways. For young alumni, it may mean that they return to campus for traditional events like homecoming and commencement. It may mean that they continue to symbolically represent their alma mater through a sticker on their car, a banner or pennant in their office, or a flag in their yard (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Magolda, 2000; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Underwood et al., 2001).

In a social capacity, connected alumni may stay involved with their alumni association through their local chapter, attending local receptions and watch parties, or participating in student outreach and mentoring opportunities. These opportunities provide valuable outlets for maintaining an alumni-institution relationship, which requires a continuous commitment from the institution toward the development of the alumni's connection to the institution (Clotfelter, 2001; Drew-Branch, 2011; Lawley, 2008; Turner, 1975)

Little research exists on what experiences have the greatest impact on these connections to institutions of higher education, yet administrators are asked regularly about how their programs and services contribute to student success, retention, and matriculation. An equally important conversation should be dedicated to how involvement experiences allow the institution itself to become intertwined with this identity and leads to a sense of lifelong connection.

Students as Future Alumni

Student affairs practitioners and development officers should view students as future alumni. The work to build affinity and identification with an institution's "in-group" as students, leads to greater commitment and less desire to leave a group as alumni (Stets & Burke, 2000). This priority is shared with the goal of guiding students through their journey toward adulthood, it should be emphasized that part of this journey is the process of making significant interpersonal and organizational commitments.

From the moment students first step foot on a college campus, the opportunity exists to build the institution into their identity. As students spend more time on campus, find friends and get accustomed to the campus culture, they affiliate with social categories that can guide their actions (Stets & Burke, 2000). For these students, their college experience is unique. This distinctiveness is a key factor in the fusion of the institution with the student (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kuh, 2001; Moran, 2005; Turner, 1975). The message that their institution is part of who they are, should be a constant and persistent message throughout their experience.

The same measures we employ to design and facilitate activities for undergraduate students can translate easily into meaningful opportunities for engagement

for alumni (Singer & Hughey, 2002). A sustained relationship with their alma mater can provide valuable intellectual stimulation, social connection, professional connections, prestige, and identity stability for alumni, and can become a vehicle for altruistic or tax-motivated donations (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Vanderbout, 2010). It is increasingly apparent that the key to developing strong relationships with alumni is to inspire a sense of belonging and engage them early and often in their undergraduate experience.

Impact of Student Involvement and Campus Programs on Advancement

One of most valuable tools in creating this sense of belonging when students arrive on campus is through their on-campus activities. Involvement in organizations and participation in campus programs can be a valuable tool in relationship building, and lead to lasting relationships with an institution (Clotfelter, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Odio et al., 2014). Participation in extracurricular activities is a powerful contributor to student retention and academic success (Astin, 1984), but also facilitates meaningful connections to colleges and universities that cultivate that essential sense of belonging long after students graduate. (Vanderbout, 2010).

Johnson (2013) believed that this belonging obtained through participation in student activities facilitated higher levels of social support that led to meaningful engagement with an institution, and Lawley (2008) determined that these extracurricular activities were valuable tools in encouraging future alumni financial contributions. Meaningful connections, engagement and social support mechanisms all lead to the idea that the relationships established during the undergraduate experience are a powerful indicator of student success (McAlexander & Koeing, 2001), and have a long-lasting impact on alumni participation after graduation. (Gaier, 2005; Hummel, 2001).

I discussed the concept of the “peak experience” to describe students’ most emotionally important, memorable, enjoyable and personally significant events that help connect them to an organization in a lasting way (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Their research demonstrated that these experiences clearly influenced the relationships students formed and maintained at their alma mater with faculty, staff, and peers, developing higher levels of loyalty that led to a financial benefit. Other researchers support this position, concurring that alumni use their undergraduate relationships with faculty, staff, and peers to remain connected to the institution through alumni support—most commonly measured through financial contributions (Golz, 2013; Hummel, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2018).

To support the significance of this study, some research suggests that engaged students are more likely to become engaged alumni and future alumni volunteers or donors, with involvement in student clubs yielding more significant results than either athletics or extracurricular programs (Hummel, 2001; McDearmon, 2013). These opportunities to get connected and have ownership over something at the university are one of the first and easiest ways to begin affinity development (Berquam, 2013).

The Most Impactful Student Involvement Experiences

When thinking about which organizations have the greatest impact on giving, there are several groups that seem to have a greater influence on students’ affinity development than others. Student government, intercollegiate athletics, performing arts and music, fraternities or sororities, religious groups, or residence hall life are all correlated with greater levels of alumni giving (Monks, 2003). It is clear that through meaningful involvement, undergraduate students have experiences that greatly improve

their experience in college, but also increase their potential for future contributions (Golz, 2013; Hanson, 2000; McDearmon, 2013).

Outside of donor behavior, limited research exists on how undergraduate involvement and the relationships built through it contribute to other forms of alumni engagement. While we know that involved students become involved graduates (Gaier, 2005), and that students were even more likely to engage when they were exposed to alumni (Hummel, 2001; Singer & Hughey, 2002), our knowledge is incomplete. This gap has enormous implications for the ways that alumni relations and student affairs work together to build lifelong relationships with their students (Singer & Hughey, 2002; Vanderbout, 2010).

The Role of Staff in Creating Lifelong Student Affinity

This capacity for connection is largely based on relationships, which often define identity for college students (Abes et al., 2007). Student affairs professionals have a unique opportunity to bridge the emotional connection between organizational involvement and the institution. As a first entry point for involvement, and as influential contributors to a “culture of care” at their institution, staff in these roles can impact affinity building in a meaningful way (Berquam, 2013, p. 66). By serving in a mentor or advisor role, staff can increase student satisfaction and build a relationship between the student and their institution as a whole (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Professionals working in higher education, particularly student affairs, have the tall order of creating a college experience where each student feels supported and valued. This job is not an easy one but provides these practitioners the ability to directly impact the *distinctiveness* of an institution or the experience students have there (Ashforth &

Mael, 1989). As one of the primary factors in social identity theory, this quality (and the ability to create and shape it for students), is important. While faculty, an academic program, or a physical environment can impact distinctiveness, the relationship-focused work done in student affairs to create a sense of connection and belonging has the greatest ability to shape a unique experience for the students it impacts (Berquam, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig 2001; Strayhorn, 2012). Unlike other university counterparts, connection and belonging are a primary focus for student affairs practitioners in a unique way.

Cultivating Peak Experiences

These relationships between students and staff and staff members are critical because students perceive care and concern by an individual to be a demonstration of the institution's commitment to their success (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Berquam, 2013; Strayhorn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Student affairs staff create this climate in many ways. Shaping experiences that students find fun, challenging or developmental promotes interpersonal connections, and has a strong correlation with alumni satisfaction (Drew-Branch, 2011; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Advisors, counselors, and mentors can shape the peak experiences of students (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001) by creating intentional opportunities for interaction and relationship building between faculty, staff, and students. These interactions outside of class with advisors or campus staff result in connections for involved students that correlate with higher average donations than those of uninvolved students (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009), and create a unique and distinctive experience for students that allows them to make meaning of their college experience on an individual level.

Making Meaning of the College Experience

Professional staff members at colleges and universities have a unique responsibility for developing the lifelong relationship between their students and their institution (Rissmeyer, 2010). Because of the close relationships built as a result of student involvement, student affairs staff can play an important role in the way students process and make meaning of their experiences. Within the context of student life, administrators can encourage the formation of appropriate and meaningful institutional connections that extend beyond graduation (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Through this context, students can begin to understand the lifelong connection they have with their alma mater, and the legacy they plan to leave behind through their involvement with clubs and organizations (Berquam, 2013). These connections can be guided and shaped by mentors and advisors through their role as “good company” on the student’s developmental journey (Baxter Magolda, 2002).

The Role of Student Involvement and Campus Programs in Cultivating Strong Donors

The existing body of research indicates a strong connection between an alum’s undergraduate involvement experiences and their future relationship with their alma mater. While a great deal of work has been done to determine donor behavior and contributors to institutional advancement, there is a lack of research to support general affinity (Bizumic et al., 2009; Gaier, 2005; Golz, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Lawley, 2008; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Monks, 2003; O’Neill, 2005; Vanderbout, 2010).

Donor behavior is just one way researchers can observe the impact of student involvement activities, and is one of the most well-documented measurements of alumni

engagement. Several prior studies have found that undergraduate involvement in extracurricular activities had a greater likelihood of becoming donors (Haddad, 1986; Miracle, 1977). Gaier (2005) found that alumni who participated in at least one formal student activity (coordinated or approved by the university) in their undergraduate years were 87% more likely to give financial support, and research supports that this likelihood only increases as students got involved in more organizations (Hanson, 2000). What is less known is what experiences best shape this affinity.

Summary

The existing literature on alumni engagement and affinity presents an area for further research in this field. While involved undergraduates are likely to become giving alumni, there is much more to the alumni experience than simply deep pockets. These other components of alumni engagement—attending events, sharing positive attitudes about their alma mater with others, returning to campus, and others—can be equally meaningful to alumni as they build lifelong relationships with their institution. We must work to cultivate relationships with students who are still enrolled at the institution, in efforts to ingrain the values, norms, and traditions in their own personal narrative—their identity.

The literature tells us that relationships are important to cultivating identity, and that experiences that students have as undergraduates are the strongest incubators for these relationships. However, there is a lack of research on the types of co-curricular experiences that are most impactful in developing affinity, and the long-term impact of student involvement and campus programs on alumni perceptions of their alma mater.

This study distills the essence of these experiences, allowing for a greater understanding of how student affairs staff can best form life-long connection.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Professionals working with campus programs understand that learning happens in a variety of settings (Astin, 1984; Gaier, 2005; Tinto, 1997). The meaning making and growth that happens during these experiences is not always immediately perceptible to the average undergraduate student or happens over an extended period of time (Baxter Magolda, 2002). Instead, the full impact and influence of these experiences often happens after a student graduates and leaves the institution. These experiences can be used to determine what practices are most effective in creating lifelong connections between students and their alma mater.

One of the most dramatic side effects of meaningful undergraduate involvement may be the lasting emotional connection it builds between a student and their alma mater (Berquam, 2013; Monks, 2003; Rissmeyer, 2010; Vanderbout, 2010). This connection has widespread benefits—from brand promotion (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Underwood et al., 2001), to recruitment and admission (Magolda, 2000; Rissmeyer, 2010; Singer & Hughey, 2002), to alumni and donor engagement (Berquam, 2013; McDearmon, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). This study examined these connections in an attempt to determine which undergraduate experiences have the biggest impact.

The key to connecting the involvements of students during their undergraduate years to the reasons why they decide to maintain connections with their alma mater after graduation is their experiences. Alumni memories of their college days can take on a mythical significance as years pass, with stories being relived and retold over and over with friends, family, and children. By asking alumni to describe these experiences, themes emerged that illustrated those with the greatest lasting power and that build the strongest connections during a student's on-campus experience. These common themes provided valuable insight for student affairs practitioners as they make decisions on how to shape programs, how to allocate funds, and how to engage student leaders.

This research intended to provide insight through a phenomenological study that examined the essence of the student involvement experience. While existing literature offers little direct research on alumni affinity beyond donor behavior, supporting literature on institutional advancement can help connect alumni relations to some of the key concepts around student involvement found in the foundational literature in student affairs.

This study examined the ways engagement impacted alumni engagement beyond simply advancement. This chapter will explain how this study drew conclusions from a series of interviews with alumni, moving from a discussion about population and sample selection, to instrumentation, and finally, to how the information was gathered and synthesized.

Phenomenological Research

This study employed phenomenological research to collect the experiences of involved alumni. This form of research studies subjects who have experienced a shared

phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is the appropriate research method for this study because I examined the phenomenon of affinity through the lived experiences of active alumni. These diverse experiences—their involvement as undergraduates, the campus programs they participated in, and their connection after graduation—provided rich data around common themes.

Unlike other qualitative methods that seek to describe an experience or story, or those that look deeply into one or two subjects, phenomenological research allows the researcher to search for general themes between participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, phenomenology was particularly useful as I looked for common themes between many participants with very different backgrounds and experiences.

Population and Sample Selection

This research study drew upon the experiences and memories of alumni to evaluate which undergraduate involvements had the greatest impact on their decision to maintain or develop a relationship with their alma mater after graduation. The study examined the lived experiences of 10-12 alumni from one institution, during a specific window of time in that institution's history. This sample size allowed for a diverse range of stories and perspectives, while remaining within the commonly suggested sample size for this type of research (Creswell, 2013).

This study focused specifically on graduates from the classes of 2009—2013. This was a deliberate choice to capture a specific perspective. While existing literature defines “young alumni” broadly, recent graduates (0-4 years) were purposefully excluded from this study to ensure that participants had few remaining social connections on

campus and had been removed from their experience long enough to objectively reflect on it and its impact on their lives after graduation.

Christopher Newport University. In this study, I interviewed alumni from Christopher Newport University (CNU) in Newport News, Virginia. CNU is a public institution in the southern United States established in 1962 as Christopher Newport College. Founded as a branch campus of the College of William & Mary, located 25 miles to the north, CNU spent its first 30 years as a commuter and professional school, primarily serving members of the surrounding community. In the mid-1990s, a newly hired university president, former U.S. Senator Paul Trible, led a dramatic transformation that shifted its academic focus from professional programs to a liberal arts curriculum on a residential campus.

Under his tenure, the campus underwent \$1 billion in capital construction. This physical change has resulted in a dramatic shift in the community, demographics, and experience of the average CNU student, but provides the added challenge of creating a physical campus that many alumni no longer recognize. For most of the alumni interviewed in this study, they attended a campus under construction, or one that looked vastly different than the one they visit today. The highlight of CNU's leadership experience is the President's Leadership Program (PLP), a co-curricular leadership program that provides a scholarship to accepted students who complete the program's rigorous requirements and complete a minor in leadership. For many student leaders, their involvement in PLP serves as a gateway to leadership in student organizations and other leadership opportunities.

As a result, CNU is a campus where experiences have more relevance for young alumni than physical spaces, providing unique insight into the ways their experiences impacted the perception of the institution. Today, CNU is a public, residential campus of approximately 5000 undergraduate students.

Sample selection and data collection. To select the sample for this study, a call for participants was sent by the CNU Office of Alumni Relations to select members from their roster of Alumni Society leadership in August 2018. This group included individual chapter leadership, alumni board members, and regional volunteers. Only those from the classes of 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 were contacted, to comply with the definition of “young alumni” used for the parameters of this study and ensure that participants were an academic generation removed from their collegiate experience.

The timing of this solicitation was intentionally sent during a period when alumni were not over-saturated with development or alumni involvement requests (predictable events like Homecoming, Commencement, and the end of the year). For this study, this timing minimized the risk that participants’ responses would be skewed by nostalgia and ensured that this request would not conflict with the planned advancement calendar. Of that initial outreach, eleven alumni consented to participate.

These interested participants were sent a short survey to collect basic demographic information. Within this survey, participants were also asked to provide the names and contact information of other potential participants. This snowball sampling resulted in one additional participant. From this total pool of twelve consenting participants, eleven completed the survey, and ten completed the interview process. This introductory survey is included in Appendix B.

When reviewing the demographic information submitted by participants, each survey was reviewed to ensure the sample included the following:

- (a) diverse campus involvement, which includes the many different ways students may be involved on campus as undergraduates – as a student employee like an resident assistant or orientation leader, as a student organization participant, as member of a fraternity or sorority, or another unique type of involvement;
- (b) diverse student background, including diversity of hometowns, states, and regions; first generation or transfer status; undergraduate major; and diverse pre-college involvement and experiences, and;
- (c) alumni involvement, or the type and depth of activities an alumni engages in to stay connected to their alma mater.

Most important in the participant selection process was diversity of experience, ensuring that the sample did not contain participants largely with the same type of involvement when enrolled. Qualifying identifiers included fraternity or sorority affiliation, employment as a resident assistant or orientation leader, and student organization involvement. Next, the sample was determined by diversity of background. Factors considered were gender, hometown, graduation year, current location, and field of study.

Finally, all participants needed to be considered *active alumni* — members of the alumni association who had engaged in one or more of the following activities in the past year: an alumni chapter event, an on-campus alumni event, volunteering for an alumni outreach activity (such as a letter writing campaign), or donating money to the institution. By nature of the population available in this study, all respondents met these criteria.

A specific challenge of sample selection and participant recruitment came from my experience as a campus activities professional working at CNU. To account for my own subjectivities as a member of the CNU community, I eliminated any alumni whom I had previously supervised or advised as a student. I also eliminated any participants who were currently employed by CNU, however my final sample included three individuals who had worked for the institution immediately after graduation.

The final list of participants was asked to schedule an interview in-person or through a zoom video chat. These interview blocks were scheduled for 90 minutes, and most interviews lasted 60—75 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and participants were provided a verbal description of the study's purpose and were allowed the opportunity to ask questions about the study. Participants were asked during their interview if they would be available for possible follow up questions. The informed consent form appears in Appendix C.

This study examined the ways in which college involvement creates connection between a student and their institution. More importantly, this study worked to identify the specific activities, interactions, and experiences that create these connections at CNU. Research suggests that all experiences and knowledge are connected to observable phenomena: events and occurrences that take place in the world around us (Moustakas, 1994). Because this study primarily concerns the perceptions of young alumni about their alma mater and the experiences that contributed to this perception, the phenomenological form of research was particularly appropriate in this study.

Instrumentation

To draw a comprehensive picture of the path of an involved student to active alumni, this study collected the stories of its participants through semi-structured interviews. Using broad, open ended questions, participants were asked to reflect on which, if any, college experiences built a lasting connection with their alma mater, and why they chose to maintain that connection after graduation. Because my sample consisted of alumni who self-identify as involved after graduation, a connection can be assumed. This sought to determine if these connections were built, in part, because an institution becomes part of its student's and alumni's identity.

Design of the Interview Based on Social Identity Theory

To assess alumni affinity, this study used the critical lens of social identity theory and organizational identity development. These concepts are built on two primary factors that influence social identity—distinctiveness and prestige (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2001; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). These components provide a broad framework that allows measurement of related factors such as satisfaction, belonging, mentoring relationships, and other factors influential to creating connections (Hogg, 2001; Stephenson & Yerger, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012).

Distinctiveness. The first of these factors is distinctiveness, that is, the specific and unique experiences surrounding a group's values and practices (Ashforth & Mael, 2009). Through social comparison, an individual is able to evaluate how closely the group's values align with their own, and these perceived similarities contribute to development of in-group and out-group categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000).

For college students, and in their later roles as alumni, their satisfaction with their alma mater, as well as the distinctiveness of its leadership, policies, and culture, can have

an immense impact on their willingness to engage with the institution after graduation and their overall affinity with the school. Satisfaction with the undergraduate experience is a significant indicator of future donor behavior and involvement and can be evaluated in this study (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Clotfelter, 2001; Drezner, 2009; Gaier, 2005; Hummel, 2001; Stephenson & Yerger, 2015).

Prestige. The second factor that influences identification is the prestige of the group. Perceived organizational prestige contributes to organizational identification and positively contributes to the self-esteem of the group's members (Ashforth & Mael, 2009). This evaluation of the in-and-out-groups leads to positive identification with in-groups and negative perceptions of the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). This overall satisfaction with an organization and a member's experience inspires a higher connection with the organizational identity and a greater integration with one's social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 2009).

The role that students play on campus can have a dramatic effect on the perceived prestige of a group or institution and the integration of an organization with their social identity. More importantly, progressively higher leadership roles and the length of time in a leadership role can influence this relationship by entrenching members (in this case, students) more deeply in the organization's culture and values (Hogg, 2001).

Construction of the Interview Protocol

These two factors of social and organizational identity development were used to guide and structure each interview. These factors provided valuable guideposts to organize the conversation. These two primary categories of distinctiveness and prestige serve as individual sections of the interview protocol.

The questions included in these sections sought to address the study's three research questions through the lens of distinctiveness and prestige:

- 1) What undergraduate involvement experiences do alumni identify as most impactful?
- 2) In what way do undergraduate involvement experiences develop emotional connection between a student and their institution?
- 3) How does connection to a student's alma mater continue in the years immediately following graduation because of student involvement and campus programs?

During the interview, the interview protocol served as an entry point for conversation, with room for extrapolation within the interview structure. Specifically for this study, additional probing was necessary to differentiate overlapping experiences. In most cases, participants were able to draw from a specific experience or interaction that allowed for more specificity. This format follows the spirit and intent of phenomenological research by allowing for an informal, interactive process (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of these questions was to inspire reflection and begin a conversation, and a copy of the protocol used can be seen in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

To synthesize and draw conclusions from the data collected and generated, the resulting data from the alumni interviews were reviewed to achieve *horizontalization*, a research practice that allows each phenomenon to have equal value and reveal its nature and essence (Moustakas, 1994). This process allows the study to find what Creswell

(2013) called “clusters of meaning,” allowing the identification of common themes from the individual data.

Each interview was transcribed and coded using phenomenological reduction. This form of descriptive coding allowed me to examine every statement as equal, before eliminating those that are irrelevant or repetitive (horizontalization; Moustakas, 1994). This practice left what Moustakas calls “horizons” (p. 97), which were then sorted into common themes and coded. Using the online qualitative research analysis program Dedoose to sort and categorize these codes, the data were reviewed to identify common themes and experiences.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations to this research. Higher education institutions are highly varied, differing greatly in size, location, demographics, and structure. This can vary student experiences and institutional affinity widely. This study examines one, public, residential institution—a profile that is not representative of the majority of institutions in the United States. While this study suggests possible wider implications, its scope is limited because of its focus on one type of institution.

In a qualitative study like this one, the small sample size and limits placed on participants from only one institution limit the generalizability of the data to a larger population. In most types of qualitative research, including phenomenological studies like this one, Creswell (2013) noted that their intent is not to generalize, but instead to describe the unique and specific experiences of participants. This study explores experiences and stories from a limited range of alumni—not only because of the focus on

young graduates, but also because of the specific criteria and experiences through which we are identifying our sample (i.e., undergraduate involvement, enrollment status, etc.).

A study that relies so heavily on the memories of its subjects must acknowledge that inevitably, those memories become skewed and faded over time. Subjects may also attribute feelings or experiences to different people or programs. It is possible that my research reflects a more positive picture of the undergraduate experience than what truly occurred.

One specific area where this may be true is looking at the experiences of students of color and those from underrepresented communities. This is largely because those students were not well-represented in this study (only 1 of 10 consenting participants identified as being from an underrepresented population). This low engagement from students of color, particularly considering that the sample for this study was collected from alumni who remained involved with CNU after graduation, is a limitation of this study because it offers a fairly narrow window of experiences from the majority population.

Finally, many participants in this study engaged in multiple involvement opportunities during their undergraduate career. While this yields rich data on the quality of their experience, it can limit the ability to pinpoint specific moments or interactions that led to the greatest impact. The interview process selected allows for deviation from the interview protocol, which provided space to explore experiences in more detail in an attempt to identify more specific experiences, however the tendency for these experiences to blur together over time is a limitation.

Delimitations

The intentional delimitations of this study pertain primarily to the limited scope of the research. The geographic constraints may have impacted the final findings, and while I have provided general recommendations to readers, there may be anomalies and patterns that are unique to college students in the specific geographic region where the research is conducted.

This research focuses on traditionally-aged college students at a residential institution. This specifically addresses the services provided by residential colleges and universities who serve students in a specific demographic and may add to the literature on this population that supports residential higher education.

Similar to the limitations acknowledged surrounding human memory, a delimitation of this study is the deliberate focus on specific areas of involvement (on-campus clubs and organizations, social fraternities and sororities, on-campus jobs, and sports clubs). There are a variety of ways students can have impactful experiences, but to keep the scope of this study manageable, there was a necessity to limit the involvements that were specifically addressed. This study does not account for affinity built through other high-impact practices, including research groups, study abroad, writing intensive courses, and so forth.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the study, a number of ethical considerations were determined. Prior to beginning data collection, the study was submitted to the Education Internal Review Committee—Human Subjects (EDIRC) for approval. It was determined that this study was exempt from this process and EDIRC approval was not needed. Because this study involved participation from an institution different from the author's home

institution, permission was granted by CNU to interview its alumni without a separate Institutional Review Board process. Written approval for this is included in Appendix D.

Another important consideration was that of the researcher as instrument. Because I work as a practitioner in student involvement and campus programs, and because I am employed at the institution where data were collected, and may have previous knowledge of participants, there was a need to disclose that connection and the personal nature of the research proposed. While this is not a limitation, it is important to acknowledge the impact of my experience in the research process.

Positionality

I bring to this study over a decade of commitment to campus programs and student activities. With that, I acknowledge that my experiences, views, and attitudes may serve as variables in the research process (Bourke, 2014; Greene, 2014). I believe deeply in the importance of student involvement in the college experience, and this leads to inevitable positionality in favor of co-curricular activities as highly impactful, memorable, and important experiences.

My interest in alumni specifically stems from my undergraduate involvement with the Student Alumni Association at my alma mater. My time with that organization gave me early insight in to the role of student involvement in creating engaged young alumni and exposed me to alumni relations and development early in my undergraduate career. While this experience provides context for this study and allows me to fully engage and understand my conversations with participants, I acknowledge that my experiences and opinions may color my analysis.

To mitigate potential conflict in these areas, transparency is key. Through acknowledging positionality with participants, and here, in this study, I can use it to better inform my research (Bourke, 2014). My experience and position provide valuable context in understanding the lived experiences of my participants and can be of enormous benefit in phenomenological research as I interpret the experiences and moments shared in this research.

Conclusion

As individuals move beyond their undergraduate career and look back on the experiences that were most impactful, research shows that it takes time for them to fully understand or appreciate that impact (Baxter Magolda, 2002). Researching the lived experiences of young alumni through a phenomenological lens allowed this study to draw themes and conclusions from across the diverse experiences of its participants, during a time period by which they have been able to fully process the long-term impact of their college involvements. By constructing research that allows for many participants to share their experiences, we provide space for a wide variety of participants to explain how they experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)—lifelong affinity to their alma mater.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study intended to examine the undergraduate experiences of young alumni to determine their most impactful experiences and the way they affected their emotional connection to their alma mater and their post-graduate involvement with CNU. To gather this information, I spoke with 10 alumni from the classes of 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 from a variety of backgrounds and involvement experiences. Their profiles are included here for context.

As participants shared their experiences, there were common involvements, relationships, and circumstances that emerged as they spoke about their college years. The data were coded using phenomenological reduction, where each statement is evaluated as equal, allowing me to identify concepts that were of particular significance or frequency (Moustakas, 1994). These themes are listed in Table 1, and are discussed in this chapter in correlation with their corresponding research question.

Table 1

Themes Sorted by Research Questions

Research Question	Themes
What undergraduate involvement experiences do alumni identify as most impactful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting Faculty and Staff who Understood Them <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ President Tribble's influence • "There was Just an Authentic, Intentional Bond." • First Year Roommates and Residence Halls – An Impactful Place • Opportunities Prompted by Encouragement from a Peer or Mentor • The Role of Involvement in Developing Professionalism and Management Skills • Learning about New and Different People through Involvement Experiences • Paying it Forward: The Ability to Serve as a Resource or Mentor to Others
In what way do undergraduate involvement experiences develop emotional connection between a student and their institution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Find a Place Where... You Feel like You Have Something to Give" • Connections with Influential Peers that Opened Doors to Involvement • Developing Identity through Involvement Experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Confidence building ○ Values clarification ○ Independence ○ Overcoming challenges and developing resiliency.
How does connection to a student's alma mater continue in the years immediately following graduation because of student involvement and campus programs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Traditional Symbols and Souvenirs • "It's Natural to Give Back to Someone Who Gave to You" • Alumni Involvement as a Way to Improve the Student and Alumni Experience • "What the Heck is this School Doing?" • "I Went to CNU. I Went to That School." • Engagement in Their Communities as a Result of Behaviors Learned at CNU

Note. CNU = Christopher Newport University

Participant Profiles

The sample for this study was determined with assistance from the CNU Office of Alumni Relations and was sourced from a master list of Alumni Society leadership. Thirty-four alumni from the classes of 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 were contacted to participate in the study. My primary priorities when compiling this sample were (a) diverse campus involvement experiences, (b) Diverse backgrounds, and (c) Varying levels of alumni involvement.

Of that initial request to 34 individuals, 12 expressed interest, 11 completed the pre-screening survey, and 10 provided interviews. Those who completed the pre-screening survey were asked to provide the name and email address of any friends from their college experience who may be interested in participating, and this yielded an additional two individuals, one of whom consented to an interview. Participants are spread over three states, four different class years, and a wide range of undergraduate involvement experiences. These experiences ranged from academic involvement, to on-campus employment, to membership in a fraternity or sorority, to membership in a student organization. As alumni, they ranged from limited involvement with a chapter event, to regional chapter involvement, to the Alumni Society Board of Directors.

An area that was more difficult to achieve diversity in was recruiting participants from varying races and ethnicity. As a predominantly White institution, CNU has put significant effort into recruiting a more diverse student population, however their involved alumni base remains overwhelmingly White, and this is reflected in the population of this study. Of the 10 participants, one identified as Black, and was the only representative from a race or ethnicity other than White. Each participant is listed with

demographic information in Table 2, and detailed profiles for each participant are listed alphabetically below.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Organizational Involvements	Proximity to Campus	Grad Year
Amy	Female	White	4+	Regional	2013
Brooke	Female	White	2-3	Local	2012
Chris	Male	White	2-3	Regional	2012
Doug	Male	White	4+	Regional	2009
Emma	Female	White	2-3	Local	2011
Julia	Female	White	1	Regional	2013
Lauren	Female	White	4+	Long Distance	2012
Mia	Female	White	2-3	Long Distance	2012
Madison	Female	Black/AA	1	Regional	2012
Thomas	Male	White	1	Regional	2013

Amy. Amy is a 2013 graduate from CNU who majored in English. She was a first-generation student, and the only of her siblings to attend college. While at CNU she was an active student leader, and was a member of a sorority, an officer on the Panhellenic Council, a resident assistant, and orientation leader, a student assistant in an on-campus office, and a member of a faith organization. After graduation, she spent a year traveling as a consultant for her sorority, before taking a job in advancement at another university. Now, she is a real estate agent in Virginia, and serves as the chapter advisor for her sorority chapter at CNU and as a member of the alumni board of directors.

Brooke. Brooke was a biology major at CNU from a neighboring town. Her parents were both in the military and she moved frequently as a child. While a student, she was a member of several faith groups, participating in mission trips during breaks. She is a new mom with a young son and is an alumni board member. After graduating in

2012, she stayed in the local area to work for a neighboring hospital. She returns to campus frequently; in fact, we held her interview at CNU.

Chris. Chris is a 2012 graduate who came to CNU as a transfer student after his freshman year. He originally attended another university in Virginia to play baseball, but when it became clear that the institution was not a good fit, he came to CNU because of its proximity to home and family. On-campus, he was a student employee at the on-campus fitness center and served as a group leader in his faith organization. While at CNU, he also was a part of a small group of men that attended a regular lunch with the president of the university. After graduation, Chris moved to a larger city in the region and remains connected to CNU through financial contributions and participating in events with his alumni chapter.

Doug. Doug is the participant farthest removed from his CNU experience, graduating in 2009. While at CNU, he majored in history and was involved in many organizations, including a service fraternity, an honors fraternity, the campus newspaper, a sketch comedy organization, and as a member of a social fraternity. His fraternity's chapter closed at CNU in the years following his graduation, however he serves as a volunteer on their national board. He stays involved with CNU by volunteering with his local alumni chapter but has not visited campus in the past year.

Emma. Emma is a 2011 graduate of CNU with a degree in biology. While a student, she was an active member of the marching band, serving as captain of the color guard her senior year. She is from the area, growing up around 30 minutes from campus. After graduating, she moved out of the area to work, and then attend graduate school. She

moved back to the area recently to accept her “dream job” in forensic science. She is just starting to get involved with CNU as an alumna, and volunteers with her local chapter.

Julia. Julia was a rare out-of-state student who came to CNU from New Jersey. She was a history major who worked part-time in the university’s advancement office as a telefund caller as an undergrad. This involvement led to a full-time position after her graduation in 2013, overseeing the telefund program. After leaving CNU, she worked has worked in university advancement and is now pursuing a master’s degree at another Virginia school. She stays involved with CNU as a member of her regional board and through attending regional alumni events.

Lauren. Lauren is a 2012 CNU graduate with a degree in communication studies. She was highly involved during her undergraduate experience and was a member of the Multicultural Student Association (MSA) and Colleges Against Cancer. She worked on-campus as an office assistant in several departments and was a member of the President’s Leadership Program (PLP). After graduating, she lived in several cities and has recently moved to North Carolina, where she has begun to connect with her local alumni chapter. She stays involved by donating financially and volunteering with her chapter.

Mia. Mia was the president of her sorority chapter while a student at CNU and graduated in 2012 with a degree in finance. She was originally from North Carolina and came to CNU despite a long family legacy of attending a prominent public university in her home state. While she was also involved with the French Club while in school, she credits her time with her sorority as a transformative experience that opened the door for many opportunities while in college. She now works in finance in the Atlanta area, and was involved in the formation of the Atlanta chapter of the CNU Alumni Society.

Madison. Madison graduated from CNU in 2012 with a degree in Psychology. She is from the area and had planned to attend a Historically Black University in the area before deciding on CNU (she did not provide detail on why her plans changed). While a student, she was an officer in the MSA and worked as an admission ambassador in the Admission office. After graduation, she worked briefly for the admission office before moving to another Virginia university. Madison is currently pursuing a master's degree and is expecting her first child, which keeps her from returning to campus as much as she would like. She stays connected to CNU by serving on the alumni board of directors.

Thomas. Thomas is a 2013 graduate from the Washington, D.C. area. CNU was his first-choice school, and he connected quickly on campus with a faith organization. Through that group, he served as a youth leader and also volunteered off-campus as an assistant lacrosse coach at a local high school. After graduating with a degree in communication studies, he spent a year working for the president of CNU. He now owns his own video production company and is engaged to be married this year. He has stayed connected to CNU since graduation through his local alumni chapter and was recently elected to the alumni board of directors.

RQ 1: What Undergraduate Involvement Experiences do Alumni Identify as Most Impactful?

The participants in this study were quick to share involvement experiences that they had particularly strong connections to or memories of. Often, the most memorable moments were specific interactions with people—faculty, staff, and peers—who took the time to know them and take them under their wing. Duration of interaction was not always a good indicator of impact. For some, relationships were built over a semester or

year; for others, a one-time introduction had a long-term impact on an individual's overall college experience. These moments led to meaningful relationships that lasted throughout their CNU experience and beyond.

Meeting Faculty and Staff Who Understood Them

For many, participants looked to faculty and administrators in positions of authority to help guide the way. These interactions helped students feel that there were individuals at CNU who cared about them, their well-being, and their success, providing “good company” for their journey (Baxter Magolda, 2002). While the natural inclination of many participants was to share a positive experience with a staff member, many of the most meaningful moments they spoke about were those that helped them through a particularly difficult time in their college experience. Thomas shared the story of an impactful relationship with the Director of Counseling Services, with whom he developed a long-term relationship.

We met, and we instantly clicked... And I got through college because of him in so many ways. That might be a little dramatic, but there are so many countless happy times in college. But there are also some really hard life things. I went through a big health issue in college my junior year. I was very sick and depressed physically and mentally. But he got me through, meeting with me weekly, reminding me things of just that I'm loved deeply, that I can choose fear or life, love, fear, and choose life, and helping for me to reshape my thinking...I still needed someone like that in my life, and he was that. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

Experiences where participants felt heard and cared for were some of the most common memories shared. Many participants spoke about staff and faculty with whom

they had meaningful relationships, and when they spoke about academic faculty, it was the interactions they had outside the classroom that were most impactful. The focus was far less on academic rigor, and more on the personal investment of time when considering these relationships.

Doug had a similar experience connecting with a faculty member, and the investment of time that faculty member made had a memorable impact on his experience. When asked about what stood out about this relationship in particular, Doug spoke about their shared interest in history.

My speech seminar was taught by [a former CNU president] who teaches in the history department. [He] knew I was a very studious connoisseur of history and I felt at home talking about ideas and theories with him. Sitting in his office for an hour or two and just talking about the material, independent thought, and my research...grab a cup of coffee and just keep going. (Doug, 2009 graduate)

These moments where students felt commonality with a mentor or felt that the faculty or staff member had shown a unique interest in them were impactful. Every participant was able to identify at least one faculty or staff member that they remember as an influential part of their experience, and these moments were key contributors in making their experience distinctive and memorable. This idea that students were having experiences that seemed to be individually curated for them was one that commonly emerged. At CNU, these interactions happened between students and professionals across campus, even with CNU's longtime president, Paul Tribble.

President Tribble's Influence

Memories of President Tribble's impact on their CNU experience ranged from long-term personal interaction, to single but memorable touchpoints. Nearly all participants mentioned the impact of CNU's president on their college experience – a hallmark of what it means to be a student at CNU. One alum, Chris, shared his experience attending weekly lunches with the president and a small group of students every Tuesday, "That was really cool. I did that for my junior year and that was pretty transformative." Thomas also recounted his first meeting with President Tribble:

I went to an admission event that played a big role actually in me deciding to come to CNU. (President Tribble) spoke for a while about how great CNU was, and that was the first time I experienced President Tribble. And all his enthusiasm and vigor for CNU, it was just nothing but short of addicting and really captivating. I even asked him a question in the audience...He literally looked me in the eye, grabbed me by both shoulders, and goes like, "Young man, I want you at my school. I want you at my university." And I guess you could say that was it. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

This direct communication style and distinctive first interaction was a common memory for alumni and impacted their overall perception of their experience. This level of access to a high-level administrator was unexpected to many students, and something they saw as special and unique to CNU's community. Students reported a feeling of being star-struck when interacting with him for the first time, and Brooke had a clear memory of her first interaction:

During welcome week...we leave my hall and we're walking through towards the courtyard and the library, trying to find what was the old admin building, and

there's this guy with this big Venti Starbucks and his fancy suit... So he kind of welcomes himself into the conversation and comes on over and is like, "Hey folks, can I help you find something," like the obviously you look lost... and of course he sticks out his hand and says, "Paul Tribble. Nice to meet you." ...My mind is running and I'm like, "I know that name. I know that name. Paul Tribble. Paul Tribble," right as of course I look up, giant sign, "Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library." I'm like, "Oh my God, that Paul Tribble." So he greets us and walks us to the admin building. We get on the elevator with him and I'm like sweating bullets at this point. Like, "Okay, what did I make on my SAT? What am I gonna tell him?" (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

This near-celebrity status is not unusual for CNU students. When talking about what she tells others about CNU, Mia "I tell funny stories about Paul Tribble when I talk about CNU, and I think that not many people have that level of connection. That's something I like about CNU. We're a tight knit community." This feeling was one that most participants emphasized as something that made CNU unique and made them feel connected to their alma mater.

"There Was Just an Authentic, Intentional Bond..."

The role of community was a frequent component of the CNU experience for participants, and one that they felt had significant impact on their involvement experiences. These communities within the larger CNU community lead to meaningful experiences within student organizations, at on-campus jobs, in residential communities, and in informal relationships with faculty. Small-group interaction was a key component

to the experiences of many of this study's most involved student's feeling of connectedness. For Lauren, it was these experiences that made CNU feel like home.

I think having to find my niche and then getting involved in those things made me feel at home. That's, that made me feel so much more comfortable and confident there as, not only someone who's trying to figure out am I even in the right major, but am I even in the right school, did I go the right place and so once I was more involved and more ingrained in everything whether that be member of the MSA who is there for every single meeting in my freshman year or getting further involved with Relay for Life and Colleges Against Cancer. I think that that made me feel like seeing you was that family that I was telling you about, that I've really felt like I needed down there. (Lauren, 2012 graduate)

CNU's small size and relatively small campus facilitated this sense of community further, ensuring that students would see students they knew in their everyday routine around campus. As students became more comfortable and found community in their small groups, it made the larger CNU community feel more accessible. Many alumni spoke specifically about the way their involvement on campus helped their college experience feel more connected and more intimate. Mia reflected:

I remember having little pockets of friends throughout college. French club, sorority, people in my classes, I stayed in touch with all the kids in my hall from freshman year and I stayed in touch with them through senior year. I really did enjoy passing people on campus and being able to stop and catch up with them and say hi. It really did feel like kind of, a small world, but I just thought it was

great. I knew the majority of people on campus by the time that I was graduating.
(Mia, 2012 graduate)

When alumni reflected on what stands out about their CNU experience, they spoke about the sense of community with pride. This is something that alumni feel makes CNU exceptional and different from the campus experiences had by family and peers at other institutions. Thomas succinctly summarized this feeling, sharing:

Being in YoungLife, I got exposure to other universities that have YoungLife and meet with other schools. And I'd meet other YoungLife leaders at other colleges and when they would come to CNU as well. They'd say, "There's something different about this place. There really is." and I think there was just an authentic, intentional bond between the people that were there. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

Some of the best opportunities for community building occurred in CNU's on-campus residence halls, where students are required to live for their first years as students. These were often the earliest connections made for alumni, and resulted in strong bonds between roommates, hall mates, and with resident assistants. For participants, these living arrangements had a big impact.

First Year Roommates and Residence Halls—An Impactful Place

While bonds developed throughout campus, strong relationships developed quickly within the residence halls, specifically with freshman roommate pairings. While CNU students are able to live with people they knew before coming to campus, many students choose to be randomly assigned a roommate using a simple survey to match roommates based on preferences (morning people or night owls, clean or messy, etc.).

These first “homes” away from home, and their involvement and relationships within them, were an incredibly impactful place for many students. According to Brooke:

I'd really prayed my entire summer before coming to CNU that like, "Okay God, if you want me to do this Christian lifestyle thing that I'm trying to get into, you're gonna put me with the right person. You're gonna put me with someone who can help me grow in that," and my college roommate ended up being that exact person. But I also know too, like with getting roomed with her randomly that I kind of could have and would have gone any different way depending upon that roommate. I love people and if I had been roomed with this girl who loved to party on the weekends and not do her homework and drink, I probably would have done that. (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

The success of these randomly paired students was a key influence on student's early connection to campus. While one participant had met their roommate at orientation the summer before arriving on campus, none of the participants in this study had known their roommates before their introduction to CNU. Emma also found this relationship important, and like Brooke, was paired with a random roommate as a new student:

I think I really lucked out as far as getting paired with a random person for my freshman roommate, we did great together. I mean, we might've fought about the thermostat, but other than that, living together, we did really good. I felt that was a really positive sign, and then I was in one of the end rooms in York East, so it was all four rooms connected. All the other girls were really nice and I made friends with the girls next door and we would do meals together. Obviously I got in early because I was there for band camp, but I mean, I had some of those

people in my hall or in my building and that was really a good foundation and connection to the campus. (Emma, 2009 graduate)

These close relationships allowed students to have an immediate touchpoint on-campus in a new and sometimes uncomfortable environment. For those participants who mentioned them, these roommate experiences had an immensely positive impact on their first impression of CNU. These relationships were some of the first emotional connections they made while students, and it became clear in this study that many considered them an essential part of their college experience. Beyond meeting the basic need of creating a comfortable and safe living environment, these individuals also served as guides to involvement opportunities on campus.

Opportunities Prompted by Encouragement from a Peer or Mentor

These interpersonal relationships started in their residence and branched out across campus. While alumni found strong connections with faculty and staff, many also were connected to involvement opportunities by peers and older students they saw as mentors. For many, these connections happened very early in their college experience, but were memorable years later. These experiences illustrated another instance in which students felt their experiences were personally crafted. Brooke, who connected so deeply with her freshman roommate, also had a strong connection with the RA on her hall:

A really impactful relationship was my RA my freshman year. We were on the fourth floor of [our hall] and there was only 25 of us and I think of the 25 of us, I think I invited like 12 of them to my wedding, like we all just stayed close all four years and that was really good. I mean, my RA came to my wedding... She was like the perfect freshman RA because she kind of was like, "There's no option to

sit in your room and not make friends. We're all doing this. Like you don't have an option.” So for those of us who might have been too cool for it or unsure, we were all kind of like, ‘Okay, I'm being told to do this, so like, I'm gonna do it.

(Brooke, 2012 graduate)

For other students, that encouragement came from an opportunity. Megan remembered an experience when she was asked to serve on a special committee:

My senior year, they wanted to revamp the honor code a little bit. So President Tribble put together of maybe five faculty, five administrators and five students and I was one of the students on that committee... I don't know whatever came of that, but that was something I was proud to be involved in. I was proud to be selected for that committee. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

Students who served in student leadership roles on campus were most likely to be nominated or encouraged to take on other roles, whether in a workgroup like Mia, or in other areas of campus. Those participants who spoke most about experiences like this were also those that were heavily involved throughout their experience and now participate in alumni activities at a high level. Other students were encouraged to seek out leadership opportunities or take on new challenges. Amy said:

I had been an RA for two years at that point, and going on my third year, and I had been only an RA for upperclassmen. [A former supervisor] actually, was the one that was like, "You should be an RA for freshmen..." I ended up being an RA for the same freshmen hall that I lived on, which was cool, because it came full circle. It's small things like that that I just ... that's the reason I love CNU, is

because what are the odds that I would be in the same freshmen hall my freshmen year as I did my senior year. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

These personal touches led participants to feel like they had an individually curated experience that was unique only to them. This investment of time and effort made them feel like they were prepared to take on more advanced roles and made them feel more connected to their CNU experience. As an added benefit to social connection, these opportunities to lead or engage often led to the development of skills that alumni later found applicable in their work and lives after graduation.

The Role of Involvement in Developing Professionalism and Management Skills

For those alumni who served in leadership roles as students, they shared that the experience played a role in developing their management skills and overall sense of professionalism. For many, this was an important part of their college experience and a significant learning opportunity that continued to influence them today. Skill development allowed students to see a tangible takeaway from their involvement experience, and one they continued to see value in after graduation. Madison noted that her involvement experience helped strengthen skills she already knew she had:

I consider myself an organized person, but being involved in a leadership role just solidified being organized, being professional. Though we were in college, communicating with outside agencies for volunteering or throwing events, so being professional. A certain level of decorum that you need to maintain, and again, a lot of that runs so parallel with my personality in general. I'm all about presentation, organization, and just being on point, I guess. A lot of that was good experience to solidify that for me for life after college. (Madison, 2012 graduate)

Others felt that their leadership experiences helped them to work through situations they had never encountered before. While many had leadership coursework as a part of their academic experience, their involvement experiences were where they were able to put this knowledge into action. This led to learning that they remembered as influential in developing their leadership ability and confidence. Mia said:

I think that I reflect a lot on my time serving as sorority president, because when you're president, you have a closer relationship with the administration, and you kind of learn their expectations and protocol and everything. Then, you go back to your chapter and you heard exactly what's happening from your organization, and the experiences they want to have or the things that were either miscommunicated or misinterpreted by the school. They're kind of in this war of interest and as far as learning managerial skills, I think that was more insightful for me than any other classes I took. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

Amy learned how to prioritize and manage multiple tasks through her involvement, and through those opportunities, developed professional values that have remained with her today.

I learned to shuffle everything around that you were supposed to do that day and prioritize the thing that needs the most attention. I think that really came a lot from being an RA and never knowing what the heck is going on and what to expect. I think just leading by example was a big part of it. There were definitely times where I had said something and probably went against it in my own actions and it came and it would bite me in the butt. If I'm going to say something and I'm

going to tell someone to not do something then I need to also follow that myself.

(Amy, 2013 graduate)

The idea that their leadership opportunities develop values and taught students how to manage people and personalities was a common reflection for participants. These interpersonal skills and ability to work with others added value to their CNU experience. While not always positive, alumni agreed that the experiences were beneficial. For Lauren, she learned that managing personalities can be challenging, noting:

I learned that people are not always pleasant...not that I didn't already know that, but that people are not always pleasant and life is not always gonna be perfect. For me, like I said I like for an organization to be organized, and things are not always going to be that cut and dry, they're not always gonna be that pretty. I feel like realizing that, taking that in, allowed me to go and work with people that who don't have it together at all. (Lauren, 2012 graduate)

Beyond the simple concepts of organization and time management, participants shared that their involvement experiences helped them learn to work with others and hold them accountable. These early management experiences helped develop skills that influenced their leadership style beyond graduation.

Learning About New and Different People through Involvement Experiences

Learning to understand others and navigate different personalities was a lesson that many participants reflected on. Many participants spoke about their involvement experiences as a way to challenge themselves to learn about others, either because they grew up in a diverse community, or because they had never interacted with people who were drastically different than them. While some touched directly on their ability to

interact with a diverse range of people, others spoke about simply learning from those that think differently than they do. Doug said:

For me, CNU definitely opened my eyes to other viewpoints and cultures. There were all sorts of political and religious and ethnic pride clubs and the founder of the gay/straight organization on campus was in my fraternity. Several of its leaders were also brothers of my chapter. I got to learn to respect your viewpoints even if they were different than mine. Finding some common ground overall, where even if their viewpoints are wildly different from your own, was always a useful tool. (Doug, 2009 graduate)

There were a number of experiences at CNU that exposed students to diverse world views. While many participants touched on organization experiences, there were others who talked about the role of their on-campus job as the way they were introduced to others who had different interests and motivations. Chris spoke about his experience as a student employee. “Working at the [campus fitness center] shaped my perception of CNU. I think that having an on-campus job was a great way for me to meet other people that I wouldn't have normally associated with.”

This finding may have been magnified in this study because of the predominantly White profile of its participants. While socio-economic data were not collected for this research, most participants reflected on their upbringing in middle-class or affluent households in largely homogenous communities. Their experience at CNU often challenged their previously held beliefs.

This variety of experiences and the ability to learn from others motivated some participants to give back to younger students, either because they came from similar

backgrounds, or because of the leadership roles they held on campus. These leaders expressed that these interactions gave them a sense of pride in the institution, while reminding them how much they had grown during their time at CNU.

Paying it Forward: The Ability to Serve as a Resource or Mentor to Others

As students became more established at CNU, and for some, became student leaders in their own right, many felt responsible for paying it forward to others. The ability to serve in this capacity as a leader to others was a meaning involvement experience in its own right. Most participants remembered examples where they had seen elements of themselves in others, and that drove them to connect, whether with a student who had similar background as them or that came to CNU under similar circumstances. For Chris, it was connecting with a younger transfer student:

There was a student that transferred in my senior year that I met through a mutual friend and I felt that I was really able to help him as a transfer student to get connected and make sure that he was able to get the most out of his two or so years. I felt that I could connect in that way, not having all four years at CNU. It was like, yeah, figure out what you can cram into two years that you would do in four. That was something that I was able to help him with and wish that I could have done that more. (Chris, 2012 graduate)

For those in positional leadership roles, they had to balance their responsibility to the organization with their desire to help and mentor members. Thomas was quick to share how mentorship felt like a part of his role as a leader in his faith organization:

A big part of my job as well was to, I think, just invest in my teammates who were CNU, my fellow CNU friends and students at my team. So there was a

group of five of us basically, and so I invested in them as well, checking in with them, how are they doing, how can I help them? And we took classes together, right? We invested in life together with each other. We tried to take some of the same classes together. We'd help each other study for exams, that kind of stuff. So it wasn't always YoungLife focused, but it was also just college life focused as well too. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

Through sharing their memories, participants revealed meaningful experiences and relationships that had come from their time at CNU, but also spoke about the distinctiveness of their experience at CNU over other institutions. While many acknowledged that their alma mater was not nationally known, and for some, was not even their first choice, it was their experiences that led to their long-lasting commitment to the institution.

Their experience as an involved student while in college had a profound impact on their overall sense of belonging at CNU. The qualities that made these experiences significant were heavily influenced by the relationships that were built during them. The ability to build mentorships with faculty, staff, and peers was a quality that was highly valued by all participants, and created a feeling that their experience was unique, distinct, and special.

Equally important and valued by alumni was the ability to eventually serve in this mentorship capacity themselves. Because of CNU's heavy emphasis on community within organizations, within residence halls, and within the classroom, participants felt pride in the ability to lead others and give back in a way that lasted beyond their college career.

RQ 2: In What Way Do Undergraduate Involvement Experiences Develop Emotional Connection Between a Student and Their Institution?

The participants in this study felt a strong emotional tie to their alma mater. This connection between the student and their institution developed from deeply personal and meaningful experiences participants had while in college and was stronger for those who were highly involved on campus or had held multiple leadership roles. When speaking about their experiences, alumni spoke about the way CNU made them feel like they were an important part of their community, and how the relationships they developed while in college left them with warm feelings towards the institution and the circumstances that brought them together.

“Find a Place Where...You Feel like You Have Something to Give”

Nearly every participant touched on CNU’s small size and their ability to be a big fish in a small pond. With full time enrollment remaining consistent at around 5,000 undergraduate students, they felt that the community was small enough that they could stand out. For many, CNU’s age and the ability to be a part of something new was an attractive aspect of campus life, and this desire to be a part of something new continued for many into their lives as active alumni. For Mia, she felt a one-on-one connection from her first visit to campus:

I was talking about it to my mom and she said, “Go somewhere where you can find your identity and feel like you really fit in with the community, a place where you want to contribute, where you feel like you have something to give. I think is going to be a better experience for you.” So she kind of insisted that we do a tour and I just remember on the tour, kind of everything clicking and coming together.

My tour guide did a great job. I was so impressed and it became my number one choice very quickly. I was excited to go somewhere where I felt exactly like my mom said. Somewhere where you can find your voice and stand out as an individual and a place where you feel like you kind of have more or less a home. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

When Julia applied to CNU, she made an early connection that had a profound impact on her connection to campus. This individual connection added a personal element to her experience and created an important touch point that she remembered years later. Her interaction with a high-level administrator made her feel special and made her experience unique:

I actually got to know the, I don't know if she was the dean of admissions at the time or the assistant dean of admissions at the time, but we started corresponding with her and she was really helpful through the whole process and then actually around the time that acceptance letters were sent out, I never received mine and she emailed us saying, "We thought Julia would have accepted by now," and we were like, "We never got a letter." So I like to joke around that the dean called me personally to let me know I got in. (Julia, 2013 graduate)

Many participants touched on the idea of not "being a number." Doug shared that he felt he "had a name. I wasn't person in the back row, billing statement number whatever." Thomas thought, "It's a great place for people who want a different college, don't want to be a number. They want to be known. And they want to be at a place that is beautiful and really up and coming." And Lauren knew when she made the decision to go to CNU that, "I'm not going to be a number there. I always bring that up to people, and

honestly...funny thing I tell people all the time, it's the best decision I ever made next to marrying my husband.”

This ability to be “known” helped alumni feel like their CNU experience was different than that of their peers. Beyond CNU’s comparatively small enrollment to other public institutions, participants felt most “seen” within the smaller subgroups and organizations they found after arriving. These more intimate, personal connections were the gateway for individuals to get involved and find their own community.

Connections with Influential Peers That Opened Doors to Involvement

Individual outreach is a common component in facilitating students’ connection to college. While some interactions are sought out, many happen organically as students navigate campus in their first days or weeks on campus. For Madison, she remembered an interaction with a peer that led to an opportunity:

I asked this guy, I said, “Do you know where such and such hall is?” And, he was so helpful to me. He invited to me the MSA meeting, Multicultural Student Association meeting. I think, that week or the next week, I went, because I just had such a pleasant interaction with him. I said, “Okay. If he's this nice, maybe there are other nice people in whatever this group is that he's talking about. Let me go to that meeting.” (Madison, 2012 graduate)

These unanticipated introductions to involvement opportunities were memorable experiences for alumni. Their unexpectedness was one of the reasons alumni felt they had the biggest impact. Mia met a classmate that introduced her to the idea of joining a sorority:

I was not that interested in the idea of joining Greek life, but freshman year I was taking a French 201 class and there was a lot of sophomores and it was maybe a class of 20 people, and in that group was a girl that was in Alpha Sigma Alpha. From the start, I kind of admired that through ASA she was involved in a lot of other things on campus. She took me to a lot of socials they had that were open to the public on campus. I was just impressed by the girls that I was meeting there, and I thought it was really sweet of her to kind of take a freshman under her wing. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

Other connections were through more formal channels but had equally important influence. Moments of personal connection made alumni feel seen and a part of the community. For Doug, receiving a bid from his fraternity was the encouragement he needed to stay at CNU rather than transferring to another university:

When I received my fraternity bid, the President of my fraternity chapter knocked on the door and I invited him in. When I saw him there initially I thought he was going to turn me down the way another fraternity at CNU had the previous semester, but we talked for a few minutes and when he said that they wanted me to join, I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. I was that excited. I knew I was not going to transfer at that point. Before freshman year I was thinking about doing a one semester and done. (Doug, 2009 graduate)

The personal invitations and encouragement from older, more experienced peers helped alumni see themselves as a part of the CNU community and allowed them to see themselves as a part of an in-group. These early interactions planted the seeds that helped alumni begin to see CNU as a part of who they were—a part of their social identity.

Developing Identity through Involvement Experiences

Existing research on social identity tells us that understanding the impact of involvement in student organizations, fraternities and sororities, on-campus jobs, and others is essential in shaping social identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kidder, 2016; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; O'Neill, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The two factors of social identity that influence identification with a group—*distinctiveness* and *prestige*—can have lasting effects on an alum's relationship with their alma mater (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2013; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Furthermore, the connections that participants made while students at CNU influenced values and beliefs that become internalized within their identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

These connections taught participants about themselves and strengthened their confidence, personal values, sense of independence, and ability to overcome challenges. For many, the interactions and experiences that had the biggest impact were linked to specific memories from their college experience. Their experience as involved students or interacting with others in the college environment had a profound impact on who they were, long after graduation.

Confidence building. For Mia, her leadership experiences gave her the confidence to navigate complex work dynamics and gave her examples that she used as a young professional:

Now that I'm in the real world, the experiences I had as a student working with my peers regularly or on group projects in the sorority shaped who I am now and give me a lot more insight than kind of text book information. I feel like in the

real world nothing is idealistic. When you're learning stuff from a textbook, it's a course. HR's going to do this and they're going to do it perfectly and here's the expectation and here is why you should communicate it this way to your people. This is how people are going to react. So, you learn about how things operate when everything's going very smoothly, but in the real world, things are very messy and there's a lot more emotion involved and that kind of thing. So handling those situations I always look back to what happened in the sorority. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

For Brooke, her involvement experience gave her personal confidence and self-assuredness. Her college experience helped her clarify who she was and who she wanted to be:

CNU let me know that being me was okay. That was one of the biggest things that I learned about myself coming here, because in high school, especially being a girl, you can be so particular about, “Well, I wanna be her or I wanna be her or I wanna be her,” and not wanting to be yourself. But coming here, just learning to really love me and be me was huge, because it was like CNU loves me for me. It's like I'm totally accepted and welcomed for that. I think that was one of the best things that I learned — what do I want to be and what's important to me and then learning that's totally okay to be that person. (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

Similarly, Amy's college experience helped broaden her worldview. As a first-generation college student coming from a sheltered home life, her involvement experiences gave her the confidence to try new things:

I was really an incredibly shy person coming into college. I didn't feel like I had any idea of who I was or who I even wanted to be, much less anything I wanted to do. In fact, that's why I became an English major, because my aunt said, "Well, if you don't know what you wanna do, if you can read and write, then you can do anything." Yeah, I just felt really lost before college. And not in a bad way, but just I could've gone in any direction. I could've become a nurse, I could've done whatever at home, but I think my experience at CNU just really opened my eyes up to who I am. I had never would've gotten that confidence, and I never would've gotten that experience, and I never would've opened my eyes to things that I just felt so limited by when I was back at home. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

Values clarification. Many participants alluded to their experiences in college helping them to determine what was most important to them. Whether that was Brooke's exploration of her faith, or Mia's role as a rule-enforcer within her sorority, they nearly all shared a story about when they felt challenged and made a decision based on their values.

Doug was particularly struck by the role his CNU experience played in challenging viewpoints and exposing him to new and different perspectives. He said:

Students have to learn these things for themselves and see viewpoints different from what they've been raised around. Obviously, a child can be born and raised into a family of particular religious or political beliefs, I mean, we're not going to change people on religion or politics here, that's not my intent, but college means the chance to see new viewpoints, to question what you've always known, and to essentially create a synthesis based on your upbringing and the deeper education

you're learning beyond high school to be a well-rounded citizen for your post-grad life. The majority of your life will actually be the post-grad time. (Doug, 2009 graduate)

Independence. More than anything, the alumni in this study reflected on the sense of independence they developed as a result of their college experience, and for some, their specific roles as involved students in college. Emma shared:

I learned a lot about my strength and my independence,” Emma said, “I spent a lot of time on campus, and then getting more independence being a little bit away where I can learn and be an adult on my own and not relying on everything that comes with the comforts of home. (Emma, 2011 graduate)

For Lauren, her newfound independence led to the confidence to move out of her comfort zone for work after graduation:

Since being at CNU, I lived in Virginia for a little while and then was like, “Alright, well I can do this, I can move away, and I can be removed and find another new group of people and new community to be involved with and everything.” Then when I moved to Chicago, while it was very challenging, I felt like everything that I'd done and being at CNU and being involved and stuff like that, it helped with literally everything in my life which is kind of comical because I didn't want to go out of state, but later in life I feel like it was my bouncing off point as, “Okay, I went this far, now I can go way further.” (Lauren, 2012 graduate)

Overcoming challenges and developing resiliency. As the alumni in this study reflected on their undergraduate experiences, they were not always positive. For many

participants, there were difficult relationships, hurdles, and moments that helped shape their college experience and ultimately their identity. Some difficult experiences helped them strengthen relationships with peers and mentors, like Thomas's relationship with CNU's director of counseling services, and Brooke's strong relationship with her freshman roommate. Brooke reflected on how this relationship helped get her through a particularly hard time:

I was going through a lot of hard stuff—mom deploying, parents getting divorced, going through these trials with my own personal life, but having her there to walk me through that and be there with me through good and bad, that was a really big bonding thing for us to kind of go through that together. She had never dated before and had her first boyfriend, hence first breakup, you know all of that kind of stuff on campus, so we both just went through personal things. (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

Amy reflected on an experience that is common for student leaders—wanting a leadership position, and not being successful. She said:

My senior year I was really upset. I did run for president of [my sorority] I didn't get it. That's okay because then I became VP of recruitment, which was an even more rewarding experience because I got to meet people and work with people outside of my own organization. I think that set me up so much better to becoming a consultant because I got a scope that was outside of what I knew. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

Participants spent their undergraduate experiences engaged in activities and opportunities that had a profound influence on who they became as adults after college.

For many, these experiences—whether it was their involvement as leaders in fraternities and sororities, their personal exploration of faith, or their clarification of professional goals and priorities—led to emotional connections to the people and places they engaged with at CNU.

The common thread for all of these individuals was their connection to people who were a part of their involvement at CNU. While these relationships did not always continue after students left the institution, the interpersonal relationships that were built through undergraduate involvement and the lessons that were learned through working with these individuals, were a key component of the alumni's connection to CNU after graduation. These were some of the most impactful memories of their time as a student.

Participants found a variety of ways to maintain these bonds after graduation. The varied experiences of participants while undergraduates led to them to pursue vastly different paths after graduation. While some went directly into their chosen field, others had detours — either to work for CNU for a short period of time, or to take on short term work related to their involvement experience, or to take a temporary position while they pursued their true area of interest. Either way, participants found ways to stay connected to their alma mater, both generally, and as a way to stay connected to the organizations they cared about as students.

RQ 3: How Does Connection to a Student's Alma Mater Continue in the Years Immediately Following Graduation Because of Student Involvement and Campus Programs?

Overwhelmingly, alumni showed a willingness and excitement to stay connected to CNU. For some, involvement was a way to give back to the institution, or to an

organization that was important to them; for others, it was a way to influence change at the institution, and for others, it was a way to meet others with shared experiences in their area. Many expressed regret that they could not do more—whether through giving more, attending more, or participating in fun activities or events.

In this study, those alumni who had been highly involved as undergraduates—as leaders in their student organizations or employed in high impact student employment roles—were mostly likely to be highly involved young alumni at the regional or board level. Those who had less significant involvement or a smaller investment of time were not as likely volunteer at high levels as alumni. During the interview process, these participants had far more to share, and more experiences to draw from when reflecting on the experiences that connected them to CNU. While this phenomenon was not explored further in this study, it further illustrates undergraduate involvement’s role in promoting alumni involvement.

Interestingly, geographic location had little to no impact on the desire or ability for alumni to stay involved. Alumni who lived within an hour of campus were as likely to stay involved as were those who had moved around the country or lived in different states. Participants credited social media and their local chapters with helping them stay connected, but also expressed a genuine interest in staying connected to the progress and updates coming from campus.

Non-Traditional Symbols and Souvenirs

For so many alumni, they maintained a strong tactile relationship to the physical objects from their undergraduate experience that held meaning. These were not “honors” that they received. No participants talked about an award or trophy they won, but they talked about objects that connected them to a special memory or person. A few participants talked about significant clothing that was gifted to them, or that they made, or that had specific significance. Lauren talked about one of these items:

I have a pair of really old CNU sweatpants. I was gifted them in my freshman year, by a friend of mine who was in MSA, and she was like they're too big, I can't wear these. So ever since then they've been mine. So they've always been my goofy connection to that person, and then to MSA, and then of course CNU.

Every time, as soon as it gets cold again, I'm wearing them all the time. (Lauren, 2012 graduate)

These items connect alumni to the relationships and people they remember from their undergraduate experience. For Amy, she kept each of the nametags she was issued for her different leadership roles. These tags held special significance and helped remind her of the specific experiences and lessons learned in each opportunity. Anecdotally, this is a common keepsake for student leaders at CNU. As a staff member in student life, I find the day students get a new nametag as one of their most anticipated “honors.”

“It’s Natural to Give Back to Someone Who Gave to You”

For many, the opportunity to interact and influence current students was a strong motivation for involvement. These connections were easiest for the organizations with strong alumni structures – most notably Emma’s involvement with the Marching Band,

and Doug, Amy, and Mia's affiliation with their fraternity and sororities. Amy serves as a chapter advisor to her sorority, which brings her back to campus weekly to meet with her students. She says:

Advising Phi Mu is a huge part of [staying involved], just being able to guide those women and feel like I'm contributing and giving back, not only to CNU but to my organization, has been incredibly rewarding. I started advising the summer before I got married, and at the time I was like, "What the heck have I done?" Here I am, I'm planning a wedding, working full time, and now every weekend of my life is dedicated to going to CNU and helping these women. But it's been awesome and it's great to see women that I didn't think would be involved afterwards to be involved. That's been an incredibly huge part of my alumni experience. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

Several others made connections through friends and family to prospective students who were considering CNU. Both Doug and Lauren recounted experiences speaking with newly admitted students, and both emphasized CNU's sense of community and culture. Lauren said:

Most recently I talked to my friend's sister, who's trying to decide about CNU, trying to understand what it looks like to live on campus and what she needs to try and get involved in, and she's a student athlete so her life is completely different than my experience was there. But I was talking her through what it means to be at CNU and what that culture is like, and that community. And that family feel and all that kind of stuff. (Lauren, 2012 graduate)

Many saw interactions with current CNU students and prospective students as way to pay it forward, speaking about their desire to help others to have the same or better experience than they had. Brooke was asked to speak at some regional admission events with high school counselors, where she shared a similar perspective:

I think it's one of those things where it's a natural thing to give back to something that gave something to you, so it's a natural thing to cultivate that. I got a chance to speak at two different events last year, so I spoke [with admission] to high school guidance counselors and I also had the chance to speak to admitted freshman. I have a passion for what CNU did for me and the relationships that I built here and the way that I just grew as a person here, but that's kind of what makes me naturally want to give back, because I want other people to have that same relationship and that same experience, so I want the high school guidance counselors to send their kids here and recommend it. (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

Beyond just providing a service to their alma mater, participants enjoyed these interactions with current and prospective students. They liked telling their CNU stories and helping students navigate their own experiences. Many found ways of doing this through their continued involvement with the organizations, but others became involved with the alumni society as a way to advocate for the student experience.

Alumni Involvement as a Way to Improve the Student and Alumni Experience

Participants often saw their role as involved alumni as a way to influence the experience for current students, sometimes in an attempt to change the experience for the better. For some, their involvement as alumni was motivated by a desire to improve the experience they had for future generations. As a woman of color, Madison said:

I want to show that, “Hey. You can come to CNU,” because when I was in high school, the perception was, it wasn't a place for African-American students to go, because there weren't a lot. So I think that, you can't necessarily...how can I put this. You can't necessarily complain about something if you're not willing to do a little bit of your part. So, because I had a great experience at CNU, and if I didn't have a great experience, then I may not, that would have changed. But since I did, I want to show that you can also go there—because it wasn't a popular choice for a lot of African Americans that I knew in high school. (Madison, 2012 graduate)

For those more focused on engaging current alumni, some of their motivation to be involved came from a desire to change the perception of involvement for their friends and fellow alums. Julia spoke about her efforts to dispel misconceptions about alumni events:

I'll encourage [friends] to go to other events and they're just like, “Whatever, Julia.” For friends here in Richmond, some of them are like, “I don't wanna network. I don't need to network,” and they sometimes see a lot of these events as just networking events, which I think is something the chapters need to work to change, especially with younger alumni, you're constantly getting like network, network, network thrown at you. People just don't want to do it. (Julia, 2013 graduate)

Others work hard to help peers see value in returning to campus, even when the campus is not the way they remember it from their time at CNU. Thomas shared:

I hear from a lot of people, “My experience of CNU was my friend group. Why would I go back to CNU? My friends aren't there. What's the point of going back

for homecoming? I'm not going to know anyone. The new building, whatever. It's my friends [who] made the difference, not my professor or the thing I learned in class.” (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

Most of the alumni who remain involved at CNU acknowledge that this is an area of growth for the university. “We had such this intense relationship and experience on campus and it just stops when you graduate,” Amy said, “Nothing really follows through when you become an alumni.” This desire to control the messaging around alumni involvement and have a voice in telling the CNU story was a common experience shared by participants in this study. As CNU continues its rapid growth, many alumni shared both their pride and wonder in the transformation of their alma mater, as well as a growing desire to be a part of it.

“What the Heck is This School Doing?”

Perhaps one of the biggest motivators for alumni to return to campus is to keep abreast of the rapidly transforming campus. For many of the alumni in this study, the campus they remember is very different from the one that exists now. This is bittersweet for most alumni—while they are proud of the growth they have seen on campus, they miss the physical locations that were a part of their college experience. Thomas shared:

I lived and spent a lot of time on these houses that were on Prince Drew Road. And they're no longer there. I lived on Merritt [Road], which no longer exists at all, right behind where the tennis courts are right now, where the Greek row houses are as well, so that cul-de-sac there. And those were on-campus housing actually, but they were houses. And those houses have been in my community's friend group for years before I had been there, probably 10 years. And that was a

safe place where I developed a lot of great friendships with people. So having those safe spaces as homes, actual homes, for me to come and go as I pleased, was really impactful for me. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

Seeing this growth and change can be an emotional experience for alumni, and Amy remembered going to campus for an event to celebrate the end of the university's recent capital campaign, which ended with a dramatic projection light show and fireworks:

I went to the campaign celebration, which was awesome. Almost brought me to tears just because like what the heck is this school doing? How have we changed so fast? I would have never...standing on that campus as a freshman when like Old McMurrin [an academic building that has since been torn down] was there and none of these huge buildings had really been built to standing and having all of these lights on this ginormous building was just...it was like an out of body experience. It was so cool. I think that's the part where you don't know what to expect from CNU sometimes, so you don't want to not be a part of it. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

The growth of the physical campus parallels the growth of CNU's academic prestige. Many participants shared their pride in this growth, and the perception that their degree from CNU was more valuable now than when they received it. This makes it easier for them to talk about the institution to friends and coworkers who may not be familiar with the university.

“I Went to CNU. I Went to That School.”

While the physical growth of campus provides an easy-to-see talking point and illustrates a dramatic change to campus from when most participants were enrolled, the institution's academic growth is even more exciting for many alumni:

When you look at what we care about post-degree and looking at that from an employer level and stuff like that, it's obviously very impressive when you can tell your coworkers that you went to this school that is in these magazines, making top 25, top 10, top seven lists for x, y or z—I think that's kind of one of the big things I let my coworkers know or let my boss know or anybody in the professional world know. 'I went to CNU. I went to that school. (Brooke, 2012 graduate)

Beyond rankings, participants perceived their degree as increasing in value, and are proud to be a part of that growth. Amy shared this feeling, saying:

I just think equity of degree is a huge thing that I really pride CNU in. My degree is more valuable now than it was when I graduated in 2013, and not many people can say that their institution is rising in that direction. The traditions and where CNU wants to go and having that vision and having a passion for making a better institution has been really great to be a part of. (Amy, 2013 graduate)

While alumni took great pride in the academic growth of their alma mater and felt that it made their degree more valuable, many spoke about the values and behaviors they learned while at CNU that influenced them after graduation. They spoke about their desire to give back to their new communities and how it influenced their actions long after graduation.

Engagement in Their Communities as a Result of Behaviors Learned at CNU

For many, it was this sense of engaging community that they looked for post-graduation in the communities they were a part of. For some, they sought out outlets for strong relationships like they had at CNU. For others, they looked for opportunities to serve or get involved in similar activities to what they did as undergraduates. For most participants, their experience at CNU set a threshold that they looked to meet in their post-graduate community involvement. For Mia, her undergraduate involvement set a standard she looked for after graduation:

I think if I hadn't had really strong social relationships at CNU, I wouldn't have thought out involvement post grad. I do have a lot of high school friends that went to big schools, and they'll get flyers from their school and go back from sporting events. But as far as actual kind of involvement as an alum or working on projects or going back and visiting campus, I just don't hear that that happens. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

A strong component of CNU's narrative to new students is that its campus is not a place where students can be spectators—they must be contributors. This is a message that is shared early on by peers; by the university President; and others. Students hear this messaging as early as their campus tour, then again at orientation, and throughout introductory student events like New Student Convocation. This expectation bled into the types of activities that alumni used to connect their communities. For Lauren, she felt a pull to connect socially in each of the areas she has lived after graduation, in part because she knew her CNU experience was richer as a result of her involvement. She said:

Because I was so involved and because I knew that that's what made my experience there, I like to make a point of doing a bunch of stuff now, even if it's

not the same stuff... I have other fun things that I'm going to do or people that I'm going to see or whatever, and I don't know that I would have ever not been that way, I'm a social butterfly, always have been, but I think those experiences and being involved in that kind of stuff made me realize how important it is to have the right people around you and to remain involved to enjoy life in general.

(Lauren, 2012 graduate)

Beyond social involvement, others took lessons from CNU about civic engagement and service and implemented it in their post-grad lives. The message that graduates should go on to live “lives of significance” is a part of the institutional narrative and one that is deeply ingrained in the values of the institution. This was not lost on alumni as they sought out ways to be “significant” within their groups and communities post-graduation. Mia shared:

I think that leadership and community being so important at CNU, I think that, that's why I am the way I am. That's something I've taken and I've lived in three different towns since graduating and in each one of them are trying to be civically involved in certain causes that I connect with. I watch the local news, and see where I can participate. (Mia, 2012 graduate)

Thomas applied those lessons as a small business owner, using the lessons learned during his time at CNU as a way to invest more deeply in his clients and convey the mission and values of their organization.

I still use a lot of what I learned in my work today, actually. My job is to communicate things, it's to in some ways communicate on a deeper level about something, like a business, per se. But we're talking about the ethos, the spirit of a

business. I use a lot of these understandings in philosophy of an immersive experience to understand the mission of an organization. And they're the same lessons I learned in class being lived out today in my work. (Thomas, 2013 graduate)

The alumni interviewed in this study were involved in experiences that impacted their desire to give back beyond the boundaries of CNU's campus. Their drive to connect with others, either socially, through community efforts, or through their work, was in part a result of the lessons and values conveyed to them during their time at CNU.

Summary

Participants in this study shared very different experiences, but all had examples of people and experiences that made their college experience unique and special. From these lived experiences, the emerging themes illustrate the importance of student involvement in the college experience, and its overall role in developing lifelong connections between individuals and their alma mater. Participants understood the way their involvement affected their experience, and when they spoke about it, many spoke passionately about its impact, both personally and generally. Madison summed up the role of involvement succinctly, sharing,

If you want your alumni to be ambassadors for the university, if you want people to actually spend their money and time and give back to the university, you have to start from day one. Student involvement is very important and it helps cultivate and shape the future leaders. These are people who are going to be leading the country one day, so what do we want to instill in them? What values do we want them to have? College is not gonna be your parent, that starts at home, but it helps

shape you as a young adult. You're halfway in the real world, halfway still not in the real world, so the college campus is supposed to help give you those tools that you need to succeed. Student involvement encompasses all of that. It prepares you in so many ways. (Madison, 2012 graduate)

This idea that involvement can fill the changing need of a student as they navigate their college career and result in transformative experiences is a significant benefit to involvement. Amy was not the only one to reflect on the lessons learned through this type of experience, and in Chapter 5, I examine the common contributors that made these experiences so profound, and ultimately, how they helped connect students to CNU.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Through this study, I looked to examine the connection between undergraduate involvement and alumni engagement. The activities that students participate in while in college can facilitate long term connection to their alma mater (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001), but the body of research ends at knowing there *is* a relationship, not how it's developed or the experiences that best facilitate it.

My research revealed that undergraduate involvement impacts social identity in a way that melds an institution's identity with the individual. Participants in this study recognized both the role involvement played in their personal journey, but also the larger importance of involvement on a college campus. As Madison summarized,

Student involvement is very important and it helps cultivate and shape the future leaders. These are people who are going to be leading the country one day, so what do we want to instill in them? What values do we want them to have?

My study supports existing research suggests that involvement gives us the opportunity to shape these leaders (Astin, 1984; 1999; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Cory, 2011; Drew-Branch, 2011; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012).

The most relevant components of this model to the college experience are *distinctiveness*, or the specific and unique experiences involved with being a part of a group; and *prestige*, which promotes an individual's identification with an institution and increases pride and self-esteem (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). We see these themes throughout literature and folklore around the college experience. All institutions desire to be distinctive and special from their peers, and all seek to be prestigious. We see this throughout the undergraduate experience — during the campus tour (Magolda, 2000), at athletic events (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001), and in day to day involvement on campus (McDearmon, 2013; Singer & Hughey, 2002; Stephenson & Bell, 2014).

As I moved through the interview process and spoke to alumni, it became clear that at CNU, distinctiveness and prestige play unique roles in shaping alumni attitudes about the university. As a newer institution, alumni felt intimately connected to CNU's growth and upward trajectory and spoke at length about the ways this change and growth impacted their experience.

My interviews sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What undergraduate involvement experiences do alumni identify as most impactful?; 2) In what way do undergraduate involvement experiences develop emotional connection between a student and their institution?; and 3) How does connection to a student's alma mater continue in the years immediately following graduation because of student involvement and campus programs?

Research Question One: Impactful Undergraduate Involvement Experiences

When considering what involvement experiences alumni found most impactful, the results of this study suggest that impact was less determined by the specific type of involvement than it was by two key components of the experience: skill development and strong relationships. This finding was of particular interest to me as a campus activities professional at this institution. As the facilitator and connector for many of the types of experiences alumni described, these data supported much of the work I do on a daily basis, while illuminating areas of future focus.

Nearly every participant discussed the skills they learned from their involvement in clubs, organizations, on-campus jobs, and research. Most notably, respondents discussed the lessons learned around professionalism and leadership, and their experiences working and learning from people with different perspectives from theirs and the ones they were raised with. CNU is an institution that places high value on professionalism, requiring students to dress in business attire beginning at their first formal academic event in their freshman year—Honor Convocation. This expectation stuck with alumni and prepared them to engage in professional settings. These skills were important in their future professional careers, but also in learning to navigate the world beyond college as adults.

The second, and most prevalent component that led students to feel that their undergraduate experience had impact was strong relationships with those around them, a concept strongly supported in literature around student connectedness (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Cory, 2011; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012). While some participants had profound relationships with faculty and staff at CNU, others felt deeply connected to fellow students who they considered peers and mentors. Both types of interactions came

up in every participant's experience as something that made their college experience unique and special (distinctiveness) and was something they thought made their CNU experience stand out in a different way than those of alumni from other institutions (prestige).

The ideal scenario for alumni was when they had meaningful relationships that also served to teach an important lesson about working with others, leading a group, or encouraging them to step outside their comfort zone. This study suggests that these are the types of relationships faculty and staff should focus on cultivating, either through developing student leaders (resident assistants, orientation leaders, student organization leaders, etc.) or in their own interactions with student staff, advisees, and leaders (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Kuh et al., 2010).

Research Question Two: Emotional Connection Resulting From Undergraduate Involvement

Creating emotional connection for alumni is closely connected to social identity theory and organizational identity theory, where the experiences and relationships built during their undergraduate experience build a long-lasting connection to their alma mater that becomes an integral part of their identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2013; Sidanius et al., 2004; Stephenson & Bell, 2014). For the participants in this study, much of this connection was developed through opportunities where they felt that their experience was individually curated for them—whether that was a specific interaction with a faculty member on an academic trip, or a nudge from a trusted advisor to take on a challenging leadership role, or a one-time interaction with the university president that allowed a student to feel seen as an individual instead of one out of thousands of students.

A finding in this research was that many alumni found that their most impactful emotional moments—where they felt most supported as a student and had the greatest emotional investment—were those that were the most challenging (Barber & King, 2014; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Some participants reflected on a period of mental health challenges, and others spoke about moments when they felt thrust into scenarios for which they were unprepared, but they all tied it back to the way CNU faculty, staff, and students. The people with whom these moments happened and the places where they took place were the reason students returned to campus, and often where they felt most connected to their alma mater.

For practitioners, this research suggests a need for CNU to focus on allowing space for students to work through challenges and disappointments, while providing resources for one-on-one interactions between faculty, staff, and students. These spaces should allow students to feel heard, supported, and made to feel like an individual. This is an area where the university has invested significant time and effort, infusing education about resiliency into a number of interactions throughout their experience.

Research Question Three: Alumni Engagement as a Result of Undergraduate Involvement

Finally, the findings related to research question three suggest that student involvement leads alumni to stay involved with their alma mater in diverse but significant ways. Proximity to campus did not impact alum's desire to engage, and in fact, both local and remote alumni were involved both remotely in their day-to-day lives, and with direct interaction with CNU.

From a distance, alumni most often felt connected to CNU through their use of symbols and souvenirs from their college experience. Many spoke about the “swag” they displayed in their office and on their cars, and apparel they wore. For many regardless of their distance from CNU’s campus, they shared stories of a particular item that had sentimental value to them, either because of who gave it to them, or because of the memory that it reminded them of.

Alumni were also quick to share their pride in CNU’s growing prestige. As a young institution (founded in 1960, but a residential university only since 1992), the university has put significant effort into increasing their academic rigor and selectivity over past years, and that commitment did not go unnoticed by alumni. For many, they are proud to talk about their experience as a CNU student because of how far they feel the institution has come.

This extends to the growth of the physical campus, which for many, looks very different than the campus they attended as students. While they feel a great deal of pride in the “beautiful” grounds and new buildings, some also expressed sadness at the important places from their undergraduate experiences that have been demolished or changed beyond recognition. I have sensed this feeling of loss in my work with students at CNU, as the physical campus has changed around us from year to year, and feel that this makes the importance of campus involvement and activities even more acute for these alumni who cling to the experiences they had rather than the places that no longer exist.

While alumni were involved remotely in many ways, many chose to maintain direct, hands-on involvement with the institution through a role with their regional

alumni chapter, the alumni board-of-directors, or through volunteering at admission events. They expressed different motivating factors for staying involved. Many wanted to help engage their fellow young alumni at a higher level, and others expressed dissatisfaction with current efforts to support alumni and wanted to be a part of the change.

The idea that young alumni could have an impact on shaping and influencing the experience for others and continue to contribute to CNU was of particular interest to participants. The popularity of this idea is supported in other research on alumni motivations for involvement (Drew-Branch, 2011; Lackie, 2010; Lawley, 2008; McDearmon, 2013). This is particularly significant for this study, as we look to engage alumni in the connection of current students to their institution. Faculty and staff can look for ways to connect alumni with students and encourage a new generation of alumni to imagine their future as a “captain for life.”

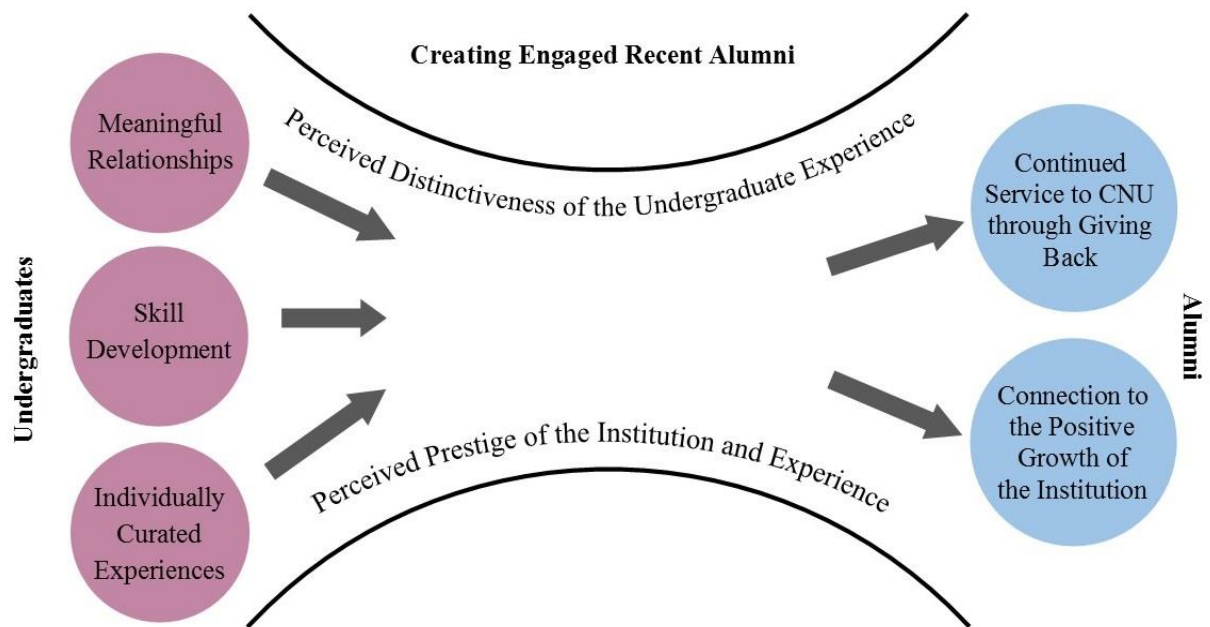


Figure 1. A framework for engaging recent CNU alumni

A Framework for Recent Alumni Engagement

When examining the findings of this study in full, there were common experiences shared by participants that yielded productive, meaningful alumni interaction. Of all the unique involvements and opportunities they shared, there were three common qualities of their experiences that emerged as most impactful to their future as engaged alumni—(a) meaningful relationships, (b) skill development, and (c) access to an individually curated experience that felt unique to them. As those students transitioned to alumni, these experiences translated into two distinct motivations for alumni engagement—a desire by them to be involved and affiliated with the continued positive growth of the institution, and a personal investment in continued service to CNU

through giving back with time, involvement, and money. This framework is visualized in Figure 1.

The three undergraduate student experiences that created engaged CNU alumni in this age group are closely tied to college student development theories on connectedness, meaning making, involvement, success, and engagement (Astin, 1984; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Kuh et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2009; Tinto, 1997). The concept that people can help students feel more connected to a place is not new, however the findings of this study suggest that for CNU students, the relationships they engage in while undergraduates and the moments that helps students have an individualized collegiate experience can have long term impact on how they feel about their alma mater.

These undergraduate involvement experiences impact their perceptions of CNU's prestige, as well as the perceived distinctiveness of their collegiate experience, which promotes recent alumni engagement. The belief that the CNU experience is unique or different than those had by peers at other institutions was a pervasive perspective shared throughout my interviews. In this way, their experience validates prior research on alumni engagement, undergraduate identity development, and social identity (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985; Turner, 1975).

As alumni, these two observed outcomes of prestige and distinctiveness reflect ideas described in past studies on social identity. McAlexander and Koenig (2001), McDearmon and Shirley (2009), and McDearmon (2013) discussed specifically how organizational identity creates alumni connections. At CNU, these most frequently manifested as continued service to CNU through admissions events, alumni chapter involvement, and volunteer opportunities on campus; as well as an increased sense of

ownership and connection to the positive growth of the institution. This idea of an organizational identity is closely tied to social identity, tying individuals to groups and cultures in a way that becomes an intrinsic part of who they are (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Connecting Findings to the Literature

My research demonstrates that student affairs administrators (and others) play an important role in connecting an institution with its students (Stephenson & Yerger, 2015), and further my study's findings on the importance of faculty staff relationships and mentoring support that assertion. More importantly, this study's findings support Astin's (1984) foundational research on student involvement and its role in student identity development. Participants spoke at length about the way their involvement experience developed confidence, clarified values, and built capacity for independence and resiliency.

Specifically when considering the role of social identity theory in contributing to affinity building, this study supports the idea that involvement contributes to the perception of students that they are a part of the in-group, and therefore, share emotional investment in common interests and memberships—and in this case, in CNU (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The two factors that influence an individual's likelihood of identifying with a group—*prestige* and *distinctiveness*—are seen in practice within this study, and had a noted impact on participant's connection to the institution (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Prestige

At CNU, prestige is important to both students and alumni, in large part due to the institution's rapid growth and upward trajectory. The participants in this study took particular pride in CNU's rankings, perception, and the way that it had changed this their years as students. True to the literature, this rising prestige has contributed to the organizational identification of participants with the institution (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Vanderbout, 2010).

For some participants, the physical campus and the changes made to it contributed to CNU's prestige and their pride as an alum. Participant Amy's wonder at an on-campus event over the school's transformation and her exclamation of, "What the heck is this school doing?!" is a prime example of alum's perception of the drastic physical progress made in a relatively short amount of time. Research supports the idea that physical structures can be a way to convey information about the prestige, distinctiveness, and story of an institution (Magolda, 2000).

Finally, much of participants' perceptions of prestige were tied to CNU's campus culture that emphasizes interpersonal connection. This idea that individualized experiences with personal outreach leads to greater levels of connectedness, student success, and student learning is supported within student development literature (Barber & King, 2014; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Strayhorn, 2009). The role of administrators as meaning-makers, specifically, helps students who experience those relationships feel like they are having a unique and distinctive experience.

Distinctiveness

Participants spoke at length about CNU's distinctiveness. They gave detailed examples of the ways their relationships on-campus made their undergraduate

experiences unique and impactful. This supports the literature that suggests that relationship building has the greatest ability to create a sense of connection and belonging at an institution (Berquam, 2013; McAlexander & Koenig 2001; Strayhorn, 2012).

For many alumni, they reflected upon a memory that they felt was special or different than those of their peers at other institutions. Existing research shows that this ability of an institution to make their students feel they are a part of an exclusive group or experience gives the perception that their experience is distinctive (Gaier, 2005; Kuh, 2001; Moran, 2005; Turner, 1975). Participants felt more connected to their institution because of this distinctiveness.

This type of social categorization where individuals identify with a group due to its perceived distinctiveness from other experiences supports existing research on social identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Hogg, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2000). This was illustrated throughout this study but was apparent especially for Mia when she spoke about her decision to attend CNU and the ways it stood out to her—a place where she could “find your place and stand out as an individual.” Throughout the data collected in this study and its supporting literature, there are stories and experiences that illuminate several recommendations for practice. At CNU, some of these recommendations are in practice within select areas of the institution. Others are new opportunities worth consideration. I approach these recommendations as a practitioner who works directly with the student population at CNU.

Recommendations for Practice

Next, I offer several recommendations that capitalize on the components of participants’ experiences that contributed to their long-term connection with CNU. While

these recommendations are specific to the data collected from the lived experiences of CNU alumni, they are good reminders to prioritize relationships and individual touch points with students and alumni alike. In my work within the Division of Student Affairs at CNU, these recommendations are of particular interest to me as I seek best practices for improving my work and that of my colleagues.

Focus on One-on-One Student Interactions with Faculty and Staff

In this study, the common thread was not a type of experience, but instead were quality one-on-one interactions with individuals at the institution (Baxter Magolda, 2002). Level of engagement after graduation was not dependent on whether this individual was a student or faculty/staff member. However, I found in interviews with the participants, that those who had had meaningful, multi-semester relationships with faculty and staff were those that spoke most emphatically about the impact of these experiences, and anecdotally, were able to communicate the meaning of these interactions more clearly than their counterparts.

Creating space for one-on-one interactions and long-term relationships with students should be a priority for faculty and staff. These touch points should be less transactional in nature and be focused instead on shared and common interests. Participants in this study connected most easily with faculty and staff they saw themselves in – whether that be a counseling director that the student felt shared his faith, or a professor who was able to articulate the feeling a student had when they were outside in nature, or a staff member who was able to commiserate with the challenges and opportunities that rose when leading alongside peers.

CNU provides some outlets for this already. Students meet with a core advisor to support their academic development, students in the President's Leadership Program (PLP) meet annually with a member of the PLP staff, student leaders are required to interact one on one with advisors and in trainings. The relationships that are strongest are those that are consistent—the program board advisor who works with a student for their whole college career, the orientation leader who works closely with the orientation staff, the student athlete and their coach, the student researcher who spends hours on a project with a faculty member, and others. More effort should be made to ensure more students have these types of connections.

Finally, participants in this study felt especially seen and appreciated when they were acknowledged by high-level administrators. For some students, they remembered very short conversations and moments with the university president or dean of students that left a lasting impression. For this reason, administrators in positions of authority (deans, vice presidents, directors), should prioritize visibility to the general student population. This presence should go beyond simply being “seen” on campus, but should extend to one-on-one interaction with students.

Emphasize Student Community through Small Group Interactions

Unsurprisingly, study participants spoke at length about the friends and peer relationships they made while at CNU. Most often, the most meaningful connections happened outside the classroom, specifically in their residence halls and through involvement in student clubs and organizations. Participants often spoke about their experiences in small groups—their floormates in their freshman residence hall, their fellow student employees in the telethon call center, or the executive board of their

student organization. These small groups are an important component to student connection and affinity to the institution.

Increased attention can be given to supporting these small group interactions. Residence hall staff can create additional opportunities for floor interaction, student activities staff can enhance efforts to support student organization leadership, and orientation staff can build intentional small group time for orientation groups that allows for more organic conversation and connection. For faculty, they can make intentional efforts to connect students with each other through research groups, teamwork, and study groups.

The residential experience has been one of high value for CNU over the past 25 years, as CNU has expanded its residence hall facilities, enacted a three-year residency requirement, and most recently, invested in the construction of a multi-million dollar fraternity and sorority housing initiative. This effort appears to have a positive impact on student engagement, even for participants in this study who did not have the advantage of these newer policies and facilities.

Seek Ways to Connect Alumni with Current Undergraduate Students

Once participants became alumni, they spoke with enthusiasm about the interactions they had with current CNU students. This is not something that CNU currently does widely; seeking opportunities for alumni and students to interact would serve a dual purpose of early exposure to alumni relations for current students, while providing a meaningful form of alumni engagement for graduates.

Current alumni most often engaged with undergraduates through an advising role with an organization they were involved with while a student, or through speaking about

their CNU experience to prospective students in an admissions capacity. While these are both valuable engagement opportunities for alumni, alumni support staff can make additional efforts to partner with student affairs offices to connect these two constituencies. Providing joint programs at key times of the academic year like Homecoming and Commencement can be an important first step in joining these two populations. Partnering offices can also explore programmatic options that invite alumni back to campus to engage in meaningful ways with current students—whether connecting them with students in their same academic program, or members of their same fraternity/sorority chapter or student organization.

For those alumni who do not live close to campus, finding methods for remote interaction is equally important. Academically, we can tap in to the expertise and achievements of our alumni to speak with professional organizations and other applicable groups. For admission and advancement offices, providing a more structured way for alumni to engage with current students through writing campaigns can be a valuable way to connect. Alumni can welcome admitted students to the institution, providing an important touchpoint for new students just beginning to imagine their college experience.

An important finding of this study was that participants felt somewhat unfulfilled by the vision of alumni engagement as solely a professional networking opportunity. They sought out and longed for ways to give back to their campus in a way that would improve the experience for their fellow alumni and for current students. For many, they saw this type of engagement as an attractive way to give back that was not tied to a financial commitment or significant investment of time, but one that would allow them to contribute meaningfully to an institution that they care deeply about.

Enhance Efforts toward Involvement-Centered Affinity Groups

From the student life perspective, work can be done to engage past students in their previous involvement opportunities. Creating affinity groups based on impactful student involvement experiences like student government, programming board, fraternity and sorority life, campus newspaper, orientation leaders, and others, can be an attractive incentive to engage alumni. CNU has done some work to collect information on some groups (past residence life staff, for example), but staff who work with current students can be helpful collaborators in collecting and maintaining alumni lists for the groups they work closely with.

Consider Undergraduate Involvement History with Alumni Leadership

This study shows the impact of undergraduate involvement on a graduate's overall collegiate experience. For those alumni who continue their connection to the institution through involvement in chapter or association leadership, this history can be a valuable connection point between the institution, current, and past student leaders. For this reason, CNU should consider utilizing these connections when selecting, appointing, and utilizing alumni leadership.

Because CNU is a young institution, they may not yet be at the point where they can be highly selective with chapter and society membership, however they can develop a framework now that will incorporate involvement into other criteria for selection. Building involvement history into the application process, connecting alumni leadership with current members of organizations they would be involved with, and developing a more intentional relationship between the Alumni Society and those working with

undergraduate student involvement (e.g. campus activities, orientation, residence life) can help place emphasis on these connections made through co-curricular experiences.

Limitations and Future Research

This research revealed a great deal about the student experiences that created connections between recent alumni and their institution, however it is not without its limitations. This study is only a small window into the nuanced world of student engagement, commitment, and connection with an institution, but there are a number of considerations for those conducting similar research with this organization or at other institutions.

Broaden Sample Beyond those who are Involved with Alumni Chapters

In beginning this research, determining how the sample for this study would be established was a significant challenge. CNU, like most institutions, is protective of its alumni data and provided minimal access to contact information. For that reason, participation in this study was limited only to those recent alumni already involved at some level with their local alumni chapter or the alumni society board. This was reduced even more after eliminating alumni who I had worked with or advised personally. Although I invited an initial list of 33 involved alumni to recommend others who would be enthusiastic contributors to the study, that effort yielded only one additional non-involved participant.

Future studies can use the findings of this research to justify access to a broader sample. This would allow for a wider range of post-graduate involvement and help researchers delve further into why those who may or may not have been involved as undergraduate students choose to be involved as alumni—or not. Exploring the

experiences of this population can identify ways to engage alumni who are not currently connected.

Consider Perspectives from Students who were Not Involved

This study focused primarily on students who had had some type of co-curricular involvement as an undergraduate student, although there are surely alumni who feel deeply connected to the institution without having been engaged in any significant way outside the classroom. Who these individuals are, and the reasons they feel affinity for CNU, is an area of further research that can be explored. Researchers may consider these alum's desire to be involved, perception of alumni involvement, and overall perception of their undergraduate institution.

Narrow Research to Explore Specific Involvement Opportunities

This study highlighted the experiences students had through involvement in student clubs and organizations, on-campus jobs, and membership in a social fraternity or sorority. Future research may focus specifically at the impact of one of these involvement opportunities, or at one of the areas that was not explicitly studied in this research.

An area that was not considered at all for this study was the role of athletic involvement on creating connection and affinity. This is an experience that undoubtedly has a profound impact on those who experience it, however it was omitted as an area of research for this study in order to focus on co-curricular involvement experiences. Additionally, a great deal of research exists on the role of athletics in creating affinity and the student-athlete experience. CNU competes in NCAA Division III athletics, with 23 programs that have become increasingly more competitive as the institution has grown. This is also an area where the university has invested considerable resources and effort

through the improvement of athletic facilities and recruitment of talent, however none of the participants in this study were a part of the NCAA athletic community. Exploring the role that playing on an athletic team—and the relationships and experiences within it—have on a student's long-term connection to their alma mater would be a valuable addition to this body of research.

Narrow Research to Explore the Experiences of Underrepresented Communities

This study was limited in its ability to examine the experiences of students of color and those that identify with underrepresented populations. A compelling area of future research would be to look at these populations specifically to examine how their undergraduate involvement experiences were different as a result of their identity or ethnicity. In this study, Madison touched briefly on the way her identity as a Black woman at CNU impacted her overall experience, but hearing from other students would help identify ways to impact the experience of other students like her.

As a qualitative study examining the experiences of alumni from one unique institution, there are a number of limitations and areas where research can be continued and expanded. This study provides, however, a framework by which others can duplicate this research with their own student populations on different campuses to determine the most effective way to develop affinity for the institution.

Conclusion

Undergraduate student involvement and campus programs are a meaningful and significant part of the college experience. I believe this deeply, not only as someone who had an incredibly impactful undergraduate experience because of the involvement opportunities provided to me, but because I have invested the whole of my professional

career in creating these experiences and opportunities for other, and a significant portion of that career with students at CNU.

This study confirms that these involvements have a prolonged impact on an alumnus' connection to their alma mater in the 5-10 years after graduation and gives us a window into the relationships and moments that create the greatest capacity for affinity building. This research has provided a conceptual framework that illustrates the experiences most likely to influence alumni engagement at CNU.

For students, it was their relationships with others that provided the most dramatic backdrop for their college years, and what remained with them after they crossed the stage at commencement. The findings in this study give a greater understanding of the aspects of student affairs and administrative work that have the greatest impact on the student experience, and provides practitioners, administrators, and faculty with a framework through which they can evaluate the experiences of students and graduates at their own institution.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Distinctiveness

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Share whatever you'd like about your background and what brought you to Christopher Newport University?
2. Who were your important relationships (e.g., mentors, role models) before coming to college?
3. At what point, if any, during your college experience where you felt that you'd made the "right" decision?
 - a. Is there a specific memory you can describe? How did it feel?
4. Who were the influential people to your college experience? Why?
 - a. Do you maintain contact with them?

Prestige

5. How would you (briefly) describe [your institution] to someone who knew little to nothing about it (e.g. prospective student or co-worker)?
 - a. When thinking about this question, are there key experiences that helped you frame your description?
6. What kind of ways do you stay involved with _____ University? Some examples may include attending homecoming or other on-campus events, involvement in your local alumni chapter, financial contributions, mentoring current students, and others.
 - a. Are there other ways you'd like to stay connected? Why or why not?
7. What symbols do you employ to show your connection to [your institution] (e.g. car sticker, license plate, pennant in your office, apparel)?
 - a. What do these symbols mean to you? Is there a story behind any of them?
8. Tell me about the leadership roles you held on campus?
 - b. Which of these was most important to you? Why?
 - c. When you think about these roles, are there any that still influence your behavior today?
 - d. What level of contact, if any do you maintain with this group/organization?
9. Can you identify an example of a time you acted as a mentor or leader to another student?
 - e. What was that like? What was exciting about it? Challenging?
 - f. What experiences helped prepare you for that relationship?
10. What are the lasting lessons that you think came from your leadership experiences? These can be positive or negative.

- a. How have they impacted your experiences after college?

Wrap Up

- 11. What do you think the role of student involvement is on a college campus?
 - a. Do you feel like your college experience met this expectation?
- 12. What did you learn about yourself as an involved college student?
 - a. Why do you associate this learning specifically with your involvement?
- 13. How have your involvement experiences shaped your perspective of [your institution], either positively or negatively?
- 14. Is there anything else about your involvement experience that you'd like to share?
- 15. Now that we've completed the interview, is there anything about this study that I can answer for you?

APPENDIX B
Pre-Screening Survey

1. Gender:
Female
Male
Other gender
2. Race:
African American/Black
American Indian
Asian/Pacific Islander
Caucasian/White
Hispanic/Latinx
Not Listed
3. Year bachelor degree received:
4. I graduated from Christopher Newport University with a bachelor's degree in:
Less than 4 years
4 years
5 years
More than 5 years
5. I am currently employed full-time in a job requiring a college education
Yes
No
6. While a student, I was a member of:
1 organization
2-3 organizations
4 or more organizations
7. While I was a student, I was a(n):
Orientation Leader
Resident Assistant
Member of a social fraternity or sorority
8. While a student, I was a (check all that apply):
Full-time, traditional student (age 17-24)
Full-time, adult student (age 24+)
Transfer student
Other: _____
9. While a student, I lived on campus:
1 year

2 years
3 years
4+ years
I did not live on campus.

10. In the past year (or since commencement if a new graduate), I have visited campus:

1 time
2 times
3 or more times

11. My proximity to campus is:

Local (within 30 minutes)
Regional (includes Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, DC)
Long Distance (outside bordering states, more than 200 miles)

12. I contribute financially to my alma mater

Yes

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

Key Indicators for Developing Lifelong Institutional Affinity Through Undergraduate Student Involvement and Campus Programs

I, _____, agree to participate in a phenomenological study involving individuals who have graduated from Christopher Newport University between 2008 and 2013. The purpose of this study is to assess the experiences and reflections of young alumni to evaluate what experiences have had the greatest impact on their relationship with their alma mater. More specifically, we will be looking at individuals who were involved in one or more student organizations, teams, or groups during their time in college. This research is being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation within the School of Education at the College of William & Mary.

I understand that I was selected as a participant in this study because I replied to a request for participants from the Christopher Newport University Alumni Relations office. I understand that I am one of approximately fifteen alumni who will be asked to discuss their undergraduate involvement experiences. I understand that I will be asked about my perceptions of the value of my student involvement experiences, their influence on how I view my alma mater, and the ways in which I've interacted with my groups and my institution since graduating. I understand that the honesty and accuracy of my experiences are imperative; but that I am not required to answer every question I am asked.

I agree to participate in one, 45-60 minute interview that will take place in person, on the phone, or over a video conferencing medium like Skype, and I understand that these conversations will be recorded to ensure accuracy of the data. I have been informed that all information collected will be recorded using a pseudonym of my choice to protect my identity. Upon completion of the research, all recordings and information relating my identity to them will be destroyed. While research is underway, information relating to the identity and demographics of participants will be stored in a secure location, accessible by the investigators alone. The researchers will make all efforts to conceal my identity and keep personal information confidential.

Because of the individual, unique, and personal nature of student involvement, I understand that recounting past experiences may result in minimal psychological discomfort. I have the right to deny participation in this study or withdraw at any time, and my decisions will have no effect on my relationship with faculty, administrators or the University.

If I have any questions that arise in connection with my participation in this study, I should contact Dr. James Barber, dissertation committee chairperson, at jpbarker@wm.edu. I understand that I may report any problems or complaints to Dr. Thomas Ward, chair of the School of Education Internal Review Committee at 757-221-2358 or tjward@wm.edu or Dr. Michael Deschenes, chair of the Protection of Human

Subjects Committee at the College of William and Mary at 757-221-2778 or
mrdesc@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to allowing the researcher to contact me to arrange an interview as part of this study. A copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

Participant Signature Date

Interviewer Signature Date

APPENDIX D CNU IRB Waiver

8/8/2018

Christopher Newport University Mail - Reicherts Dissertation Study



Katie Winstead Reichner <[REDACTED]>

Reicherts Dissertation Study

Geoffrey Klein <[REDACTED]>
To: Adelia Thompson <[REDACTED]>
Cc: Katie Winstead Reichner <[REDACTED]>

Mon, Jul 2, 2018 at 10:00 AM

Adelia,

I just got off the phone with Katie R. regarding her proposed study for her dissertation. Based on our discussion it was determined that approval by W&M's IRB would be sufficient. She does not need to seek approval from CNU's IRB because she is not seeking to include our faculty, staff, and/or students in her work. The inclusion of CNU alumni does not warrant the need to seek approval through CNU's IRB.

Don't hesitate to reach out to me if you have any question. Best,

Geoffrey

--

Geoffrey C. Klein, Ph.D.
Vice Provost
Associate Professor of Chemistry
Christopher Newport University
[1 Avenue of the Arts](#)
[Newport News, VA 23606](#)
[REDACTED]

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VITA

Katherine Elizabeth Winstead Reichner

Birthdate: August 16, 1983

Birthplace: Alexandria, Virginia

Education: College of William & Mary May 2019
Williamsburg, Virginia
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership

Western Michigan University April 2008
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Master of Arts
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

Western Michigan University April 2005
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Bachelor of Arts
Organizational Communication

Relevant Experience:

Program Coordinator, Stamp Special Events and Programs 2008-2010
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

Assistant Director of Student Activities for Programming 2010-2013
Christopher Newport University
Newport News, Virginia

Associate Director of Student Activities 2013-2019
Christopher Newport University
Newport News, Virginia

Board of Directors 2018-2019
National Association for Campus Activities
Columbia, South Carolina