Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within a Community of Practice

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Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within a Community of Practice

by

Lisa M. Endersby

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Faculty of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within a Community of Practice

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Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

A community of practice (CoP) is an important site for professionals to engage in the joint enterprise of defining and developing competence in a particular field. As such, it is far more than a site for networking and knowledge exchange. Seminal literature describes the CoP as a place where competence in a profession or field can be defined as moving from legitimate peripheral participation to full membership. This process involves observation, mentorship, and involvement in continued communal practice amongst a group of professionals. Working in and as a group also offers opportunities for forming important professional relationships and acquiring valuable knowledge that may support this move toward the becoming an acknowledged expert in the field.

This study explored and furthered discussions of developing a professional identity in student affairs. The primary goal was to broaden the idea of identity development as an individual exercise of acquiring explicit knowledge, to the role of a CoP in developing, negotiating, and sharing tacit knowledge. Six participants representing emerging professionals in student affairs (0-5 years of full time experience, 35 years of age or younger) offered insights into an area of CoP participation. The CoP as a site for this identity development offered a space for the negotiation and communication of the tacit knowledge that influences how this professional identity is formed over time. As new professionals are on the cusp of rapid identity development both personally and professionally, this tacit knowledge is critically important for the development of a professional identity. This professional identity is negotiated, developed, and communicated to support an emerging professional being seen as
possessing some level of competence in the field and as aligning with the prominent beliefs, values, and attitudes of the profession.

Using a phenomenological approach, a narrative description of this phenomenon was created from an analysis of 12 participant interviews (an initial and a follow-up conversation with each of the 6 participants) and a review of participants’ ‘About Me’ statements posted on a professional website. Participants described tacit knowledge as a cognitive process akin to learning the language of the field that contributed to their identity-work. This tacit knowledge that formed their professional identity integrated the explicit knowledge gained from informal interactions and formal professional development opportunities in the CoP. Participants further described this tacit knowledge as demands of the field that impacted their current work and future goals, including the need for active, reciprocal, engagement with the CoP. They also identified disconnect between the CoP’s expressed values of inclusion and some practices that demonstrate existence of a more inequitable pathway to acceptance.

Overall, this study adds substantively to the body of research exploring the development of a professional identity for emerging professionals in student affairs. In particular, it contributes a more fulsome understanding of the development of a professional identity as a process situated within a CoP, nested amongst increasingly impermeable spheres of influence, communally negotiated and communicated, and yet, personally defined, re-negotiated, and documented.
Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my entire Joint PhD cohort, especially my Anselm House family. You were, and are, my rocks. Special thanks as well to my entire committee, Dr. Erika Kustra, Dr. Mary-Louise VanDerlee, Dr. Greg Chung-Yan, and Dr. Gavin Henning for pushing me to think more deeply and critically. Your careful balancing of challenge and support made this research what it is today.

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To the friends, acquaintances, and total strangers who so patiently listened to the long-winded explanations of the trials and tribulations of my doctoral journey, thank you for your continued friendship. I know you may now know more about communities of practice than you ever wanted to hear, but I hope you also know that being able to safely land my chaotic thoughts and energy with you was so needed and so very appreciated.

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality ................................................................. iii
Abstract ............................................................................................. iv
Acknowledgements ........................................................................... vi
List of Tables ...................................................................................... x
List of Figures ..................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1: Purpose and Rationale of the Research ..................................... 1
  Positioning (Locating) Myself .......................................................... 5
  Rationale ......................................................................................... 6
  Research Questions .......................................................................... 13

Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................. 14
  Communities of Practice .................................................................. 14
  Critiques of Communities of Practice .............................................. 24
  Defining Communities of Practice for this Research ....................... 30
  Identity and Identity Development ...................................................... 31
  Challenges to Identity-Work in Communities of Practice ................. 43
  Identity-Work in Online Environments and Communities ................. 47
  Concluding Thoughts ....................................................................... 52

Chapter 3: Methodology ........................................................................ 54
  Methods .......................................................................................... 56
  Participants ...................................................................................... 56
  Research Site: The Community of Practice ....................................... 57
  Participant Recruitment .................................................................... 60
  Research Method ............................................................................ 63
  Online Interviews: Challenges and Implications ............................... 66
  Interviewer bias and member checking ............................................ 67
  Research Instrument ....................................................................... 69
  Data Analysis .................................................................................. 73

Chapter 4: Results ................................................................................ 78
  Drawing the Map During the Journey: Tensions and Complexities in Developing a
  Legitimate Professional Identity ......................................................... 80
  Theme 1: Building the Foundation: Defining the Field and Describing the Professional... 83
  Theme 1A: Defining the Role of and Work within a Community of Practice .................... 87
  Theme 2: Setting the Standard: Beliefs and Values that Guide the Work ........................... 89
  Theme 2A: Raising the Bar: Membership and Defining the ‘Shoulds’ of the Field .............. 91
  Theme 3: Opening the Doors: Representation in the CoP and Access ............................ 95

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions .................................................... 102
  RQ1: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of
  practice perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity that is negotiated,
  developed, and communicated within the CoP? ................................ 102
RQ2: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice perceive the negotiation and development of their professional identity? .......................... 123

Benefits of the CoP: Membership, Belonging, and Identity Development ............................................. 123

Implications ............................................................................................................................................... 159

Limitations ............................................................................................................................................... 165

Concluding Thoughts: A Modern Approach to Professional Identity .................................................. 173

References ............................................................................................................................................... 176

Appendix A: REB Clearance – University of Windsor ................................................................. 200

Appendix B: Call for Participants (Initial and Follow Up).............................................................. 201

Appendix C: REB Application Addendum Clearance: University of Windsor .................. 205

Appendix D: Audio Consent Form ........................................................................................................ 206

Appendix E: Research Interview Questions (Initial Interview) ..................................................... 207

Appendix F: Example of Data Coding Procedure ............................................................................ 208

Vita Auctoris ........................................................................................................................................... 211
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Alignment of Initial Interview Questions and Research Questions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Summary of Participant Demographics</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Appendix F: Example of Data Coding Procedure</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Themes and Subthemes Emerging from Data Analysis</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Moving Closer to the Centre: A Nested Model for Professional Identity Development for Emerging, Younger Professionals in Student Affairs</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Purpose and Rationale of the Research

The fundamental aim of the field of student affairs is well-articulated in a document many student affairs professionals consider to be foundational to their understanding of the goals of the field. Points of View (NASPA, 1989), argues for a holistic approach to development of the student as a person. The current definition of student affairs encompasses, “any advising, counselling, management, or administrative function at a college or university that exists outside the classroom” (Love, 2003, para. 7) collectively organized to support students academically, socially, personally, and professionally throughout their studies. These functions, which are typically placed in an institution’s organizational chart outside of academic programs or research, are often responsible for jointly promoting interpersonal and professional skill development and community integration (NSSE, 2017) for students within a particular college or university.

Historically, student affairs as a field was defined by the work of Deans of Men, staff charged with the whole welfare of the student—offering advice and support, while also gathering and mobilizing university resources (Rhatigan, 2009). Student affairs professionals and functions were typically referred to as ‘in loco parentis’ or in place of the parent (Lee, 2011), emphasizing the responsibility the field had (and is still thought to have) in caring for and developing the student. As campus populations grew and diversified, the field expanded to include Deans of Women (Blackburn, 1969), and later saw student affairs administrators, often referred to as ‘personnel workers’, take on the task of supporting students in their institutional lives outside of the classroom. In line
with the student development movement of the 1960s, student affairs began to differentiate from the service function of earlier Deans to an emphasis on student development (Brown, 1972) beyond the curricular function of the institution (Cowley, 1983). Coupled with an increasing societal emphasis on inclusivity and equity, student affairs units have expanded to serve student populations whose needs, historically, were not often addressed within institutional walls (Rhatigan, 2009). Today, professional associations serving and representing student affairs professionals across campuses highlight the shared commitment to student learning and development (NASPA, n.d.). This common orientation echoes the historical roots of the field in holistic student development while advocating a renewed commitment to political advocacy and social change (ACPA Speaks Up!, n.d.).

The field of student affairs, encompassing a broad range of services to support student development and facilitate social integration, also emphasizes and supports the development of community among its professionals (ACPA & NASPA, 1997). American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (sometimes referred to as College Student Educators International) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) (historically the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) are two professional associations, based in the United States, that aim to support the development and social integration of student affairs professionals. These associations offer opportunities for professional development and community involvement, while also engaging in advocacy work on behalf of the profession and those it serves. The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) serves a similar function for student affairs professionals employed in Canadian higher education.
institutions. Much of the work of these associations can be summarized in two of the core values held by ACPA: “the continuous professional development and personal growth of student affairs educators, and a sustained program of outreach and advocacy on behalf of students” (History of ACPA, n.d., para. 9).

The communal part of most current professional development programmes involves shared knowledge generation and dissemination, which may take the form of members coming together to actively negotiate and reflect on this knowledge to support both individual and communal meaning making. This social or situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) approach, adopted by these organizations (Brown & Duguid, 2001), can be seen as informed by postmodernism (Grenz, 1996) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978).

Postmodernism offers a subjective and contextual view of how we construct meaning, aptly described by Grenz:

Just as a text will be read differently by each reader … so reality will be ‘read’ differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole. (1996, p. 6)

The text that Grenz refers to is itself subjective, constructed as knowledge within the social context where it is interpreted and shared. Knowledge, and the meaning made from and with it, is therefore created subjectively and relies heavily on individual perceptions to negotiate meaning (Huckle, 2019). Individuals and groups therefore have considerable agency in what may be considered knowledge and what meaning is attached to it.

These interpretations of reality that Grenz refers to, however, do not occur in isolation. Professional development, at its core, can be conceptualized as building capacity, which Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) define as “a
complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support” (p. 221). The professional development offered by professional associations, often subject to organizational conditions in pursuit of meaningful learning, can be viewed, in part, through the lens of social learning theory, developed by Bandura (1977). Bandura argued that traditional learning theories, at the time, ignored the important influences of observation by and interaction amongst individuals, emphasizing the role of each individual as an active, rather than reactive, participant in the learning experience.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism is consistent with the notion that it is impossible to separate learning from its social context, and that social interaction is fundamental to cognitive development. Within communities of practice, social processes of negotiating competence in a particular domain over time (Wenger, 1998) involves “learning [that] is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice” (Lave, 1991, p. 64). These worldviews help to situate this research in the subjective, lived experience of professionals engaged in communities of practice, recognizing the complexities of one’s development within a profession that highly values community and community engagement.

Situating this research within the context of social learning theory and social constructivism also allows for the practical implication of selecting a subjective, contextual approach to a topic. As discussed in Chapter 3, this study’s methodology was chosen in large part for its suitability to uncover the diversity in experiences of emerging professionals as they develop their professional identity. Social constructivism offers this
research a lens through which a common phenomenon (the development of a professional identity) can be experienced, understood, and reported.

**Positioning (Locating) Myself**

My background in student affairs uniquely positions me to consider these notions of community. My own professional development was primarily forged through observation and active participation in a variety of communities. Although I obtained a Master’s degree to meet the requirements of an entry-level position, this credential served mostly as a means to access relevant knowledge in the field. Although theoretically, I was able to understand, for example, student development theory (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009), I learnt the expected behaviours and shared values of student affairs administrators through participating in formal learning communities and informal groups of like-minded professionals.

My current work in educational development, another field with no clearly defined entry point or developmental trajectory, has deepened my curiosity around notions of negotiated professional development where the regular input of professionals is welcome and encouraged. Becoming involved in professional communities has served as a vital means for developing core competencies for the profession, while influencing how I define my unique identity as who I want to become (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013) as a professional in this field.

I have also spent several years developing and facilitating communities of practice in higher education, including two years as Chair of a community of practice (CoP; the NASPA Technology Knowledge Community or TKC) exploring the impact of technology on student development and professional practice in student affairs. This
work allowed me to explore the administrative aspects of community development while also offering a deeper understanding of the motivations and expectations of professionals who may choose to engage with these groups.

Interestingly, many members of these communities cited a need for belonging alongside having goals of skill development and networking. This inspired me to begin to consider what belonging might mean to professionals who may not always have a formalized conception of their role. It was becoming increasingly apparent that these communities, whether formally or informally created, serve a far broader purpose than housing, developing, and facilitating opportunities for professional development.

**Rationale**

Typical notions of professional development emphasize goals towards individual skill building, and increased employability and accountability to a set of common professional standards (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). In student affairs, professional associations have documented a set of Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Practitioners (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) to outline the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that define proficiency in the field. These competencies inform a developmental approach to supervision of novice professionals that includes the formation of a strong professional identity (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003).

Duguid’s (2005) notion of “learning to be” (p. 113) can be seen as a means to define this approach as distinct from learning how or learning about, more commonly associated with competency building and explicit knowledge acquisition (Bruner, 1996). Learning to be involves the acquisition of the tacit knowledge of the field, defined in contrast to explicit knowledge that can be readily articulated, as knowledge that is
difficult to formally document or express (Nonaka, 1994). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) further define two elements of tacit knowledge: cognitive and technical. The cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge may include, for example, beliefs and values inherent to the field, while the technical dimension involves know-how that allow professionals to perform effectively in their roles. The development of tacit knowledge through a social constructivist lens, is “more dependent on its holder [and] attached to a person’s mind” (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2013, p. 4), making it a more subjective means of understanding facts and negotiating meaning that is bound by contextual and social variables. The acquisition of tacit knowledge is particularly important for new professionals in student affairs as they are faced with the dual challenge of negotiating the demands of a field with an evolving set of standards while attempting to meet a set of institutional, departmental, and role-based expectations. This tacit knowledge forms the glue for integrating and embedding learning within context-specific, non-standardized processes (Dhanaraj, Lyles, Steensma, & Tihanyi, 2004), like those found in student affairs. For example, the longstanding emphasis on critical, ongoing reflection for student affairs professionals may mean that they develop the ability to respond to situations over time based on intuition, relying on knowledge that is unconscious, yet deeply impactful (Kuh, 1985).

A CoP could be considered a space where tacit knowledge is generated, negotiated, and disseminated. This communal setting also emphasizes a shared understanding of what it may mean to be a professional in the field (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Much of the research around communities of practice, however, is limited to investigating their utility for the management of explicit knowledge (e.g., Roberts, 2006)
or as a means to structure informal learning, often of explicit knowledge, in a social setting (e.g., Gray, 2004; Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). Duguid (2005) argued that membership in, and belonging to, a CoP can be seen as critical to the professional development of “aspiring practitioners, who need to not just acquire the explicit knowledge of the community but also the identity of a community member” (p. 113). This identity of a community member can be informed by tacit knowledge, as identity can be formed, in part, by an internalization of a group’s cognitive tacit knowledge, encompassing their core values and beliefs (Sugrue, 1997). Professional identity could then be defined as a product of “the art of practice” (Duguid, 2005, p. 113), which is tacitly held amongst this community within shared artifacts (Hutchins, 1995). Duguid describes the art of practice as internalizing the tacit knowledge of the field, including the ‘know how’ that comes with time and repeated experience, and that cannot always be formally documented. However, the purpose of these artifacts is often an attempt to explicitly document this tacit knowledge (Duguid, 2005).

The aim of this research is to extend ongoing discussions of the formation of a professional identity from a strictly individual exercise of acquiring explicit knowledge to the role of a community in developing and sharing of tacit knowledge. This ontological discussion will, ideally, bring to life the tacit knowledge of professional identity development in a field that has often struggled with finding its place in higher education. Student affairs and its many departments are typically understood as opportunities for social engagement outside of the institution’s core academic function, and may not be seen as equally informed by scholarship and theory. Current research into professional identity development in higher education has, in large part, been driven by a review of its
explicit understanding, based on the literature in the field (e.g., Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012).

Furthermore, current research is often centered on teachers and academics (Rhoades, 2007) or the emerging professional identity of students pursuing well-defined career pathways (e.g., Khosronejad, Reimann, & Markauskaite, 2015; Nadelson, et al., 2017). Even when broadening notions of professional identity development beyond an academic discipline, research typically remains fixed within discussions of complex identities of faculty (Whitchurch, 2008), who may pursue amalgamated academic and administrative professional pathways (Bourdieu, 1988). These studies indicate that the notion of a professional identity has received some attention in higher education, yet this research remains focused on the individuals who carry the perceived core academic function of these institutions. Furthermore, Clarke, Hyde, and Drennan (2013) note that professional identity as a construct has not been well researched in higher education. This research therefore aimed to further develop an understanding of professional identity beyond the academic-administrator milieu to include student affairs professionals who often occupy unique roles integrating education and administration outside the traditional realm of academe (Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2013).

Another goal was to extend the well-researched role of CoPs for their utility in explicit knowledge management to an investigation into how these communities may offer a framework for the development and embodiment of a professional identity for emerging student affairs professionals. Eaton (2016) argues that the professional competencies for student affairs practitioners could be used as part of a curriculum for graduate preparation programs to help students “develop their personal autonomy, a sense
of personal professional identity, and to engage in [a] dialogical relationship with their peers” (p. 585). It is this potential for leveraging the immense explicit knowledge of the field to inform the more tacit notions of professional identity that guides this study’s research questions.

The personal and communal work of developing as a professional in the field is also no longer limited to face-to-face, synchronous interactions. The digital age has had an increasing impact on professional development in the field of student affairs and the work of the communities of practice that support these activities, as, increasingly, professional development activities occur in the online space or with the use of technological platforms or tools (Teräs, 2016). For example, several institutions and associations have added online workshops or webinars to their suite of professional development offerings, using video conferencing tools to connect with colleagues without the need for a physical meeting space. There has also been a rise in the creation and dissemination of online modules or learning objects, where information is packaged in such a way that professionals can move through material and exercises at their own pace. Through the use of various technologies, training providers or employers can track completion of these modules and review individualized assessments of increased knowledge or understanding.

As the access to and use of technological tools continues to rise, communities of practice have grown to embrace these tools to aid conversation and connection, and many communities of practice may see the majority of interaction amongst members occur in this environment (Kirschner & Lai, 2007). Online discussions can be beneficial for CoPs and their pursuit of knowledge generation and dissemination, as conversations become
more accessible to the entire community and can be archived for future use (Sharratt & Usoro, 2003). Technology also affords new, expanded, opportunities for professional development beyond the traditional yearly national conference that is often seen as the primary or, at least, the most popular means for professionals to learn and network in the field (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003).

As more of the activity of communities of practice moves to the online environment, the work of identity development is impacted by interactions and knowledge sharing in this expanding virtual world. This research cannot ignore the proliferation of technological tools accessible to professionals, particularly emerging student affairs administrators who are entering the field in its digital age (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). Cabellon and Junco (2015) further note that technology must itself serve as a competency area for student affairs professionals as the profession continues to evolve and technology increasingly becomes a tool for achieving the functional goals of the field. As a professional competency, the use of technology for emerging student affairs professionals may also serve to influence identity development. Professionals are now both navigating and seeking out technology in support of their professional development, and recent studies have explored how social media platforms like Facebook (Eaton, Pasquini, Ahlquist, & Gismondi, 2020) and Twitter (Guidry & Pasquini, 2016) have influenced new professional’s identity development and socialization into the field. As Cabellon and Junco make a case for the further enhancement or development of competency areas in the field, there is also room to consider the important intersections of technology as now a nearly invaluable and inevitable tool for work that encompasses
both promoting student success and supporting professional development for those who engage in this pursuit.

As these virtual platforms are used to disseminate knowledge and provide opportunities for skill development, these same tools offer opportunities for the development of a professional identity. For example, a webinar or similar synchronous virtual event can bring professionals together to formally network and informally socialize, allowing them to observe and contextualize the ways in which others demonstrate (or not) their alignment with ideals of the field. In such a way these platforms may broaden the scope of explicit and tacit knowledge emerging professionals are exposed to early in their careers.

Wenger’s (1998) assertion that engagement in a CoP entails the negotiation of meaning through participation (acting and interacting) and reification (producing artifacts that organize and demonstrate meaning) is also a means to define identity development, acquiring both new knowledge and an emerging sense of self (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017; Wenger, 1998). The dual experience of developing membership in a CoP while also defining an emerging, individual sense of self extends our common conversations of professional development beyond simply being able to do the work of a professional to better understanding of the process of learning to be a student affairs professional, which Duguid (2005) contrasts with Bruner’s (1996) conception of ‘learning about’. Learning about requires only the more explicit understanding of the knowledge of the field, which, as Duguid (2005) suggests, “confers the ability to talk a good game, but not necessarily to play one” (p. 113). If we want our emerging professionals in the field to both talk the talk and walk the walk, it is imperative that we further explore the powerful implications and
opportunities in situated learning within communities of practice that both hold and, more importantly, develop and disseminate the tacit knowledge of the art of practice (Duguid, 2005).

**Research Questions**

To explore the development of professional identity by emerging professionals participating in communities of practice in student affairs, this research was guided by the following questions:

- How do emerging professionals in student affairs, who participate in a community of practice, perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity that is negotiated, developed, and communicated within the community of practice?
- How do emerging professionals in student affairs, who participate in a community of practice, perceive the negotiation and development of their professional identity?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review discusses research related to the creation and facilitation of communities of practice, alongside a variety of models typically used to define these groups. A review of communities of practice in higher education will precede typical critiques of communities of practice as a means to organize functional teams, and a brief overview of the work of communities of practice that work exclusively or almost entirely online. I will also discuss research related to identity development, focusing particularly on professional identity and how it is developed, negotiated, and expressed as a function of membership in a community of practice (CoP).

Special attention will be paid to a review of tacit knowledge, including how it informs the development of a professional identity, how it is transferred between individuals, and how tacit knowledge transfer is influenced by the use of online technologies. The concept of identity-work will be explored as a means to understand the development of a professional identity within communities of practice, alongside challenges to this work within the online community that will be investigated as part of this proposed research project.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are characterized by three key aspects: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). A CoP has, at its core, a common goal that binds the community together through mutual accountability and interpersonal engagement. The result of this enterprise is often a shared repertoire of resources, which includes artifacts that document a common understanding of mutual professional practice. A CoP reflects a postmodern and social constructivist worldview
whereby learning from and with others occurs within a space where desired competencies are communally defined and mutually negotiated (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Community also raises important considerations of membership, which Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as becoming a full participant in a broader system of relations among people, activities, and tasks. Taken together, a CoP is a unique venue that combines notions of membership, learning, and identity to inform a broader understanding of professional development.

Communities of practice are also organized around a domain, which Wenger (2004) defines as “the area of knowledge that brings the community together, gives it its identity, and defines the key issues that members need to address” (para. 13). The work of these communities is driven by knowledge of and engagement with a domain (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017) whose definition is communally developed.

Lave and Wenger (1991) make the case for legitimate peripheral participation as a means of moving from being a newcomer in a field, to gaining full membership as an expert or full participant in these communities. Learning in a CoP is seen as the “inherently socially negotiated character of meaning” (p. 50), where the goal of full membership involves the acquisition of the historical knowledge and cultural cues necessary for the embodiment of practice as an identity of mastery. These ideas of membership and professional identity remain as diverse as there are multiple entry points into the field, such that, “it is left to the individual professional and to the professional associations to provide definitions of full membership in the profession” (Carpenter, 2003, p. 578). The utility of these communities has now grown in popularity in student
affairs in part for their, “joint focus on both intellectual development and socially embedded learning” (Calhoun & Green, 2015, p. 56).

It is important to note here that the domain of a CoP is far more than a collaboratively chosen area of interest. Defining the domain, is in part, what Wenger (2004) argues as giving the CoP an identity. This can imply that while members of a CoP may seek to define or develop their identity within or as a member of a community, the community itself can also influence how this identity is shaped, communicated, and understood.

Models of communities of practice. It is important to distinguish communities of practice from more commonly held understandings of social groups or work teams. Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) define a CoP as a “social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time. That this process ends up structuring social relationships among people involved in various ways is a secondary phenomenon” (p. 143). The domain is defined as the area in which the community can claim to have legitimacy in defining competence, and a shared repertoire of artifacts is how this competence is described and documented.

Wenger’s definition of communities of practice has been extended, modified, and co-opted across multiple contexts to describe learning in social settings. One of the broader conceptions of communities of practice defines these groups as networks of practitioners. For example, Lewis and Rush (2013) explored the networks of practice in higher education that, while useful for sharing information valuable in professional development, did not meet the requirements for a CoP. The networks offered a communal, collaborative opportunity for information management, but were not seen as
actively defining competence in a particular domain. Zhang and Watts (2004) labelled an online travel forum as a CoP, although their description relied heavily on the forum as a means of communal knowledge management.

These networks may offer individuals with mutual interests the opportunity to engage in the social sharing of information, but they do not meet the standard of a CoP. Although these networks act as a space for mutual engagement in joint knowledge management, there is no collective set of artifacts or shared repertoire defining competency in the field being produced as a joint enterprise. Such networks could be described as a living manifestation of a content library, where knowledge shared between people is written down, shared, and discussed primarily for dissemination rather than explicitly for learning and professional development.

By contrast, groups in higher education labelled as communities of practice identify a central goal of shared knowledge management as a space to “analyse and facilitate knowledge transfer in a wide range of organizational environments” (Roberts, 2006, p. 623). This is a widely-held approach in student affairs, often with the expressed goal of building communities of like-minded professionals around a particular topic. The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), for example, houses several organizationally-defined communities of practice designed to facilitate opportunities for networking and community (CACUSS, 2015, p. 1). As many of these communities are housed within professional associations, the work of the community is often driven by members’ identified need for mutual engagement. Joint enterprise and the creation of a shared repertoire are important motivators and possible
products of these interactions, but are not explicitly essential to the community’s function.

Many communities of practice are also emergent or self-generating. Lindkvist (2005) describes groups “that have been practicing together long enough to develop into a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings” (p. 1189). Lindkvist uses the term ‘collective’ to distinguish these groups as project-based teams brought together for a particular, narrowly-defined and finite purpose within an organizational setting that may develop some level of familiarity through completing their shared task. Some practitioners may also use the term ‘CoP’ to describe the broader, more intangible concept of the professional community. This community that “emphasizes mutually supportive relationships and developing shared norms and values” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 225) speaks to traditional conceptions of mutual engagement but lacks a clearly defined joint enterprise or more tangible definition of a shared repertoire.

**Online communities of practice.** An online CoP can be thought of as a CoP that facilitates all (or nearly all) of its activities virtually. Sotomayor (2014) discussed the utility of information technologies and virtual environments to enhance cooperation, interaction, and knowledge exchange in virtual communities in higher education. This mirrors the mutual engagement and joint enterprise Lave and Wenger (1991) define as key characteristics of a CoP.

As early as 2001, authors were exploring these intersections of online technologies and communities of practice. In particular, researchers sought to uncover the possible implications and opportunities inherent in the use of these virtual platforms for
mutual engagement in the joint enterprise of developing a shared repertoire. For example, the introduction of online platforms or other technologies may offer new, more efficient ways of sharing and organizing information (e.g., file sharing systems, cloud storage) or different ways for more individuals to explore ideas and offer feedback (e.g., discussion forums, social media). Johnson (2001) completed a survey of research on online communities of practice and drew a distinction between virtual communities and an online CoP. For Johnson, “virtual communities are groups that use networked technologies to communicate and collaborate [online]. Communities of practice are cultural entities that emerge from the establishment of a virtual or non-virtual organization” (p. 56). In other words, a virtual community has typically done the work of community building offline and uses online platforms to further their goals. A CoP, by contrast, is a more emergent group of individuals whose activities are carried by virtual and/or physical structures and systems.

These cultural entities reflect a particular or more specific way of engaging online amongst its members, which Nicolini (2012) described as “communities of practitioners constantly busy positioning themselves within the ongoing practice” (p. 94). This is similar to how other networks or collectives discussed earlier have been defined, with members (defined in these cases by paying a fee or creating an online profile) taking on various roles including experts, demonstrating visible professional competence in the form of actively engaging in sharing information and, by consequence, influencing the group’s norms (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2015).

More recently, researchers have explored the utility of online communities of practice for supporting career development in a variety of fields. One common area of
interest has been how the informal relationships and free, non-hierarchical flow of knowledge (Meret, Iannotta, Giacomelli, Gatti, & Sirolli, 2020, p. 123) typical to communities of practice can enhance what the authors call, intellectual capital. These “intangible assets” (p. 125) include values, attitudes, know-how, relationships, and organizational, internalized knowledge (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) that taken together, as discussed in later sections, may influence the work of developing and ongoing expression of a professional identity.

**Situated learning in communities of practice.** As a potential means to define learning for, or as professional development, communities of practice often engage in, what Lave and Wenger (1991) call, “situated learning” (p. 48). Beyond learning from and with colleagues in the field, situated learning encompasses a more relational view of knowledge where meaning is actively negotiated rather than where information is only passively received. Members of a community may be engaged in a variety of tasks across multiple functional areas and institutions, but they will still learn together within a domain. This domain or definition of expertise in the field will be negotiated through mutual engagement, defined by joint enterprise, and expressed via a shared repertoire of artifacts, stories, and tools that make up a common practice (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016; Wenger, 1998).

Situated learning is a sociocultural phenomenon, representing a “shift from emphasizing the individual’s learning contexts to a focus on what it means to learn as a function of being a member of a community of learners” (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003, p. 267). Working with and within this community, a learner must negotiate and problem solve with others (Stein, 1998), underscoring the importance and impact of other
members of the CoP in the generation and negotiation of knowledge. As this shared, social, learning is driven by actual situations, experiences, and dilemmas rather than formal coursework or other explicit content of the profession (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003), situated learning may be an important opportunity for the cyclical process of generating knowledge through social interactions. This in turn may influence these same interactions and relationships as a reciprocal phenomenon between individual and distributed cognitions (Salomon, 1993). Learning in this way may also generate and identify a more holistic definition of the field and its professional norms as values, beliefs, and norms may be more saliently demonstrated through observable behaviours than through static documents or policies (Hackman, 1992).

The theory of situated learning is also important to our understanding of, what Lave and Wenger (1991) identify as, full participation in a CoP. Moving from peripheral to full participation often intimately ties membership and learning, such that “becoming a member … allows participation, and therefore learning, to take place” (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005, p. 51). Learning in a CoP is not only the acquisition of explicit knowledge, but now includes the opportunity to identify, internalize, and participate in the cultural practices of the community (Hodkinson, P. & Hodkinson, H., 2003) to become and act as a member. This learning to be, which Duguid (2005) describes as different from acquiring the explicit knowledge of learning what or about, extends the role of a CoP beyond simply a repository of explicit knowledge to “an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Learning situated in and as social practice extends the more traditional
understandings of learning to encompass the complex intersections of learning in a social context. In particular, situated learning offers an opportunity to explore the influence of this social context on what is learned, how it is learned, and how this knowledge is transferred between the individuals who make up these communities.

**Communities of practice in higher education.** Communities of practice have emerged as a preferred model for professional development in student affairs and higher education, emphasizing individual learning as a social process within a particular cultural and historical context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The concept of communities of practice also extends the notion of learning beyond the classroom, or even the traditional school setting, to more broadly encompass any sort of practice or organized activity where learning may take place. However, current conceptions and iterations of communities of practice in higher education, and particularly in student affairs, are overwhelmingly community-based, focused on creating and facilitating a community of like-minded professionals. Although knowledge transfer and, by extension, some professional development often occurs, the focus of these communities is not primarily on cultivating a shared repertoire of artifacts documenting the knowledge, beliefs, and values of the profession through socially-mediated learning that defines competency in the field.

Within higher education, the role of communities of practice has been studied as a means for professional development by offering opportunities for networking and engagement in a community of like-minded professionals. However, these models remain often in the realm of a strategy for more informal learning (Gray, 2004) or as a way to more conveniently structure opportunities for learning in a social setting (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). Many institutions have adopted some form of a Faculty Learning
Community or FLC (Cox, 2004), which more closely approximates a CoP in their mutual engagement toward a shared goal, but the end product is not a joint enterprise. Rather, a FLC tends to generate a collection of individually produced artifacts that fit under the umbrella of a shared repertoire (e.g., a set of course syllabi unique to each member’s teaching goals, classroom context, and student population). These communities are often only active for a limited or finite amount of time, often in pursuit of a shared goal of examining, generating, and communicating explicit knowledge that advances the work of the field and its professionals (Richlin & Cox, 2004) while establishing and strengthening collegial relationships (Hatcher, Shaker, & Freeman, 2016). Although still valuable opportunities for learning and professional development, these faculty learning communities do not function as a CoP, as their role is often limited to navigating and developing an explicit understanding of the field in support of communal learning and professional development. A CoP may do similar work, but is uniquely defined by supporting the work of a professional identity development through negotiation and characterization of a jointly understood professional competence and mastery (Lave & Wenger, 1991) which is a mix of tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Many professional associations will also create opportunities for individuals to interact with and learn from colleagues in spaces defined as knowledge communities (NASPA), commissions (ACPA), or communities of practice (CACUSS). This variety of labels encompasses a common goal of offering opportunities for professional networking, community development, and a shared space for learning and development. Higher education and the field of student affairs hold community and community development as
core values (ACPA & NASPA, 1997), and a key function of this community is the ongoing personal and professional development of its members (History of ACPA, n.d.). These groups or networks of professionals offer a communal space for knowledge exchange and learning as a community, yet may also serve as spaces where the identity of the professional, and the profession as a whole, can be negotiated and communicated. Members of these communities also value the community, connections, and conversations that can support an early, rudimentary sense of belonging.

**Critiques of Communities of Practice**

Smith, Hayes, and Shea (2017) reviewed empirical research grounded in the theory of communities of practice to explore potential opportunities for future work. Their findings, in part, uncovered important critiques of communities of practice, including the need for a more nuanced understanding of the knowledge, community, and practice within a CoP. This section explores key critiques that underpin the development, negotiation, and communication of tacit knowledge – ownership of knowledge, power, trust, and habitus.

**Ownership of knowledge.** Despite the apparent ideal of social learning, communities of practice are subject to challenges inherent in generating and disseminating knowledge in a communal setting. Individuals may refrain from or outright refuse to share knowledge in order to protect their social advantage (Michailova & Husted, 2003). For example, maintaining social standing may coincide with being seen as smart, knowledgeable, or well-informed. This social advantage may demonstrate a favourable alignment with the individual’s social circle in terms of shared goals, beliefs, or attitudes. Alternatively, their inclination to share knowledge may be influenced by the
recognition they receive (Bock & Kim, 2002). The notion of the knowledge economy has commodified knowledge much the same way society may ration and value other goods necessary for survival, placing an increased importance on intellectual capabilities for knowledge-intensive activities (Powell & Snellman, 2004). Generating, exchanging, and applying knowledge in a social setting is therefore intimately tied to the habits, assumptions, and actions of the individuals who make up these communities.

In this knowledge economy, knowledge is also an integral part of creating and maintaining an organization’s competitive advantage (Nonaka, Toyama, & Byosiere, 2003). Consequently, the exchange of information between CoPs and amongst individuals in a single CoP represents a complex, nested model of influence. For example, exchanging information between CoPs may be primarily a practical decision though this exchange may also be influenced by philosophical or psychological factors. Borrowing from language typically used in business, a CoP may choose to closely guard their ‘trade secrets’ to maintain an edge over other CoPs competing for the same, finite pool of time, monetary support, and attention from the potential and actual individual members and organizations. This may stagnate the overall advancement of the profession and individuals’ professional identity development, as only certain ideas remain a priority due to administrators interested primarily in the sustainability of the CoP’s financial assets.

There is also an additional complexity inherent in the makeup of many CoPs, as members may come from several different organizations, associations, or institutions. This means that there is another layer of goals and motivations brought from diverse institutional or organizational cultures. These expectations and ideals will then influence
mutual engagement in establishing the joint enterprise of defining an integrated, communal, shared repertoire. These conflicts of power and ownership will then, in turn, impact how, when, and if knowledge is freely exchanged between CoPs and amongst members.

Ideals of knowledge ownership are also often at odds with wider goals of innovation, captured by the somewhat contradictory call to action by Kreiner (2002), who advocates for organizations to “protect and utilize existing knowledge resources … and to facilitate the mobilization and expansion of new knowledge” (p. 122). The goal of protecting something that is, or is assumed to be, owned by an organization can be at odds with the parallel goal of mobilizing and expanding knowledge, which may imply movement beyond or outside of the boundaries formed by a single CoP. Organizations may wish to maintain the perceived competitive advantage of owning an innovative idea or trade secret that is assumed to make their product or service more attractive to potential customers. Knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer may then be a highly political act, including the legal challenges of ownership rights (Smale, 2008), resistance to change (Orgonez de Pablos, 2004), and the work of higher organizational leadership to deemphasize transfer to maintain a competitive advantage (Uzzi & Lancaster, 2003). This can run counter to ideals of the open, communal exchange of knowledge that is typically expected in higher education and student affairs. Knowledge, in this case, is seen as proprietary: a currency that helps individuals profit, rather than act for the greater good (i.e., advance the common ideals of an organization or a profession).

The panacea of coming and working together to support the development of professional identities as a communal, social act is therefore clouded by apparent
economic and political realities. These pressures similarly inform the generation of other tangible resources (e.g., time and money) necessary to house, make up, and support a CoP. Therefore, a CoP may be an important site for situated learning and knowledge transfer, but remains bound by structural and relational variables that impact the transfer and receipt of useful knowledge (Levin & Cross, 2004).

**Power.** Despite their well-documented utility for knowledge management and interpersonal engagement, communities of practice are also subject to criticisms inherent to working in groups or teams. In particular, the issue of power is dually relevant for the functioning of the community and its overall goals. Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner aptly describe this challenge by noting that, “when the definition of competence is a social process taking place in a CoP, learning always implies power relations” (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, p. 151). This can mean that when learning takes place in a community, the influences of perceived social standing can further or disrupt the common goal of defining competence in the field. For example, a small but socially dominant group of individuals may have influence over what is seen as acceptable standards of behavior for professionals, such that others must assimilate and demonstrate these ideals in order to successfully advance in the field.

The literature describes these power imbalances amongst a community. Roberts (2006), for example, argues that meaning-making, defined by the negotiation of knowledge among novice and expert practitioners in the community, may merely reflect the dominant source of power. The organizational context within which a community is housed may also be a barrier to effective meaning-making due to pressures from both inside the organization (e.g., managers and directors who occupy organizationally-
defined positions of power) and external (e.g., societal or cultural) forces (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000).

**Trust.** Issues of cultivating trust may interfere with community members’ ability and motivation to share knowledge. Trust becomes particularly essential to professional identity development in communities of practice, as it has been found to be, alongside familiarity and mutual understanding, an important prerequisite for the successful transfer of tacit knowledge (Roberts, 2000).

Levin and Cross (2004) proposed that trust is particularly important for the transfer of tacit knowledge, as unlike explicit knowledge, it cannot be separated from one’s relationship to the knowledge source (Polanyi, 1966). If an individual is able to trust, knowledge transfer may be less costly (Currall & Judge, 1995) as they perceive another individual or community as trustworthy and will be willing to be vulnerable (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Levin and Cross (2004) further emphasize that “the more that a knowledge transfer involved tacit knowledge, the more crucial it was – if the knowledge received was to be of any use – that the knowledge receiver trust the competence of the source” (p. 1485). Trust may therefore both impede and smooth the transfer of tacit knowledge between members of communities of practice, yet it remains highly dependent on the subjective view of another’s intellectual competence and personal trustworthiness (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003). Given that this sharing of tacit knowledge may itself demonstrate potential trustworthiness (Holste & Fields, 2010), trust is essential yet equally challenging to the tacit knowledge transfer proposed as important for the development of a professional identity within communities of practice.
**Habitus.** The tacit knowledge within these communities of practice is also subject to member predispositions, which can be defined by Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus, in part a conditioning to particular circumstances of existence. Put differently, communities of practice may stagnate in their knowledge generation and ongoing practice, such that their mutual engagement and joint enterprise may become institutionalized within these routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982). This routinization of practice may generate knowledge that only narrowly aligns with the predispositions of the community and that is therefore more likely to be adopted than knowledge that challenges members’ current identities and practice (Roberts, 2006). The resulting boundaries of communities of practice may then be reinforced by those who have a long history with the community and who may then identify more strongly with the community’s definition of competence (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). This could create a challenging dichotomy between experienced and newer professionals, such that the notion of a professional identity becomes so narrow that it only fits a small portion of the wider professional population. This limited scope of what it means to be a professional may then not leave room for the necessary innovation and change that must accompany a rapidly evolving profession (Herdlein, 2004).

Developing trust while negotiating the implications of power remains an important challenge for the functioning of these communities of practice and for how professionals might leverage their participation for meaningful identity development. While not a panacea for professional development, communities of practice offer an important framework for incorporating key values of lifelong learning and community
engagement that are integral to student affairs and valued by the professionals who work in this field.

**Defining Communities of Practice for this Research**

The previous discussion of communities of practice implies a set of criteria that may define a ‘true’ CoP that is distinct from other groups or networks of practitioners. This definition, however, may limit the scope of this research in pursuit of discovering a community that most closely approximates this ideal. In fact, Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss communities of practice as the sites of the learning process, where learning is defined as, in part, moving from peripheral to full participation and membership in the community. The knowledge, networks, and relationships that inform learning to be (Duguid, 2005) a professional in the field, and gaining full membership in the community are found within collections of artifacts and individuals that hold the explicit and tacit knowledge of the field.

Lave and Wenger (1991) further describe their understanding of community by defining what it is not.

In using the term community, we do not imply some primordial culture sharing entity … Nor does the term community imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. (p. 97-98)

Years later, Wenger-Trayner further defined the notion of a CoP as “a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time. That this process ends up structuring social relationships among people involved in various ways is a secondary phenomenon” (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, p. 143). These activity systems or social processes, as the authors define them, can therefore manifest themselves in
multiple ways. Most definitions of communities of practice have relied on defining the structure and function of the social ties that bind these communities together (e.g., professional networks, Faculty Learning Communities). Consequently, many different groupings of professionals could be seen to perform the work of a CoP, namely as a social process of defining what it means to be a professional in a particular field. This research uses a term community of practice as a process rather than a place, highlighting that it is a process of situated, social learning that occurs in and across multiple settings.

The process of cultivating these relationships in a CoP will then inform identity development, including how an individual expresses their competence in a community and whether others recognize this competence based on the mutually defined understanding of mastery in a particular domain. Participation in the community, and one’s location within the wider professional, social context, will also inform an individual’s broader sense of self (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

**Identity and Identity Development**

Identity development can be broadly thought of as the process of understanding who we are (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006), encompassing various aspects of the individual, including profession, gender, and age (Halford & Leonard, 2006). This development is not linear, and is often characterized by progress initiated by change or transition, and occasional periods of regression (Monrouxe, 2016). These personal narratives, however, are not developed in isolation. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas described identity enactment and identity development as inherent in encounters with others. Tied to an understanding of ethics and ethical conduct, Levinas (1981) proposes
an affective component to the exploration of the self through a moral responsibility for
the other that gives our existence direction, purpose, and meaning.

More recently, Watson (2008) defined this process as identity-work, seen as “the
mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and
distinctive notion of personal self-identity” (p. 129). In the context of communities of
practice, individuals may embrace or reject opportunities to participate as full members in
a community based on how or if these opportunities best fit their current and evolving
sense of self (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006).

Individuals often construct their identities through the integration of values,
beliefs, roles, and even linguistic forms (Lundell & Collins, 2001). These concepts may
be found within the mandates for the positions professionals occupy and the manner in
which they carry out their daily, assigned or prescribed tasks (Zizek, 1989). This sense of
self is typically a social self, such that the structural features of the social world
(Bourdieu, 1990) play an important role in identity formation (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan,
2013), as individuals work to find and define their place in the world (Deem, 2006).

Identity development, however, does not imply a fixed end point or a single, solid
definition of self. Reynolds and Pope (1991) proposed the importance of multiple
identities, recognizing that one could actively or passively identify with one (or more)
aspects of the self, whether chosen by the individual or assigned by others (e.g., society,
peers, family). These identities are typically related to sexual orientation, race, gender, or
religion, with many authors attempting to develop models that account for multiple,
intersecting aspects of identity across these various dimensions (Jones & McEwen,
2000). Considering the additional dimension of professional role or status in a
professional field further complicates this understanding of identity development, as
“locations in [multiple vectors] complicate one another, and not merely additively … Nor
do different vectors of identification and experiences overlap neatly and entirely” (Smith

These and other dimensions of identity are also thought to be influenced by social,
historical, political, and cultural factors, such that one’s identity will evolve as contexts
and relationships change (Omi & Winant, 1994). The salient or observable behaviours
associated with different dimensions of identity are also fluid and highly dependent on
contextual influences (Jones & McEwen, 2000). These contextual influences impact
identity development and may further influence how identity is explained or expressed. A
social constructivist view of identity and identity development describes learning about
oneself as strongly influenced by interactions with others. Wenger (1998) states, “Identity
in social terms does not deny individuality, but reflects how our unique and individual
perspectives and understandings are shaped through our participation in social
communities” (p. 146).

Participating in these communities implies that we can observe how others
express their multiple, intersecting identities, which may in turn impact how, when, or if
we overtly display the various parts of ourselves. The automatic, unconscious, and self-
application of stereotypes can influence how individuals perform in tasks or roles,
particularly if they identify as belonging to that particular group (Shih, Pittinsky, &
Ambady, 1999). These stereotypes or other generalizations about different dimensions of
identity can influence both individual and communal perceptions of others (Bargh, Chen,
& Burrows, 1996). The ongoing and evolving expression of one’s identity is therefore
deeply connected to the social networks or communities one participates in, as these systems of relations work to create possibilities for constructing identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through the socially-mediated formation, negotiation, and dissemination of the explicit and tacit knowledge of many dimensions of identity.

**Professional identity in education.** Professional identity “does not answer the question of whom I am at the moment but who I want to become” (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013, p. 9). Teachers’ professional identity can be highly complex and multifaceted, impacted by the workplace conditions (Goodson & Cole, 1994; Reynolds, 1996), and the theories and assumptions teachers bring to their roles (Sugrue, 1997). The ways in which teachers perform their roles can be a manifestation of their professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999), derived individually and socially as they develop competence based on their own expertise. This expertise is then practiced or demonstrated within their unique conceptual frameworks while performing roles that are often defined by the communities they participate in (Kogan, 2000). Professional identity, including that of education professionals, can therefore be viewed as a constant interpretation of experiences (Day, 1999), drawing on an individual’s unique history, moral and conceptual framework, and their participation within an identified, defined community of professionals (Henkel, 2000).

**Professional identity in student affairs.** The work of student affairs professionals is informed by research into and discussions around student identity development. Theories of identity development are particularly popular in the field, as most Master’s degree programs will include some introduction to seminal theorists to help practitioners understand how students will discover and develop competencies, beliefs, and goals that
make up a unique sense of identity (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). There is also particular emphasis on the social construction of identity, as many programs offer graduate students the opportunity to lead or engage with groups of peers in which they must learn to balance their own needs with those of others (Kegan, 1994). The work of discovering and displaying a sense of self is seen primarily as a developmental process, where students begin to “move from accepting simple definitions of self based on external factors to more complex understandings of self within context” (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 578).

This pronounced emphasis on students’ identity development has only recently been explored from the perspective of the professionals tasked with this complex undertaking. Much of the work of exploring professional identity in student affairs surrounds research into why administrators choose to enter (Taub & McEwan, 2006) or, more often, leave the profession (Tull, 2006). This research is often done with younger professionals as their age range typically aligns with expected markers or milestones in earlier stages of identity development (Erikson, 1974) and this demographic makes up a large proportion of participants in student affairs Master’s programs (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Young (1985) offers a view of the development of professional identity as related to a new professional’s commitment to the field, focusing on their formal preparation for and entry into student affairs, alongside the early stages of career commitment in their first professional role (Carpenter, 1980).

Young’s (1985) work is intriguing because of its linkages between professional identity and the identity of the profession itself. Much of Young’s article explores the perceived identity or role of student affairs on campus. It includes a disconnect between
an academically-focused Master’s program and the day-to-day practices in the field
where academically-informed programming could be perceived to be rare or absent.
Furthermore, Young discusses how student affairs is often known or seen as an auxiliary
or academic support service, which may indicate a subordinate status at the institution.
Notably, Young argues that recent graduates may experience a level of dissonance in
their professional identity when expected to offer support for a successful undergraduate
experience after having difficult or challenging experiences during their studies. Feelings
of dissonance may be particularly impactful when attempting to act in a helping role.
These emerging professionals may feel that they did not receive sufficient support to be
practically competent or emotionally prepared to handle complex situations that they may
not have successfully navigated themselves. These tensions related to being or feeling
subordinate on campus can be further emphasized by encounters with peers or fueled by
assumptions about more senior colleagues. The interplay between previously formed
assumptions about the self as a student and a newer role of supporting students in their
own developmental journey is an integral part of negotiating this professional identity.
New professionals often face the challenge of both understanding their role within an
institution that may have its own values, beliefs, and assumptions about the work of
student affairs while also integrating this knowledge into their past and current sense of
self as new professionals in the field.

The identity of student affairs professionals continues to be an ongoing discussion
in the larger field of higher education. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
(HEQCO) published a report discussing the role of student services in Ontario
postsecondary institutions, highlighting the perceived dichotomies of work in student
affairs as either transactional (e.g., providing services) or transformational (e.g., acting as educators) (Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011). While attempts were made to create a more fluid and dynamic model, the role of student affairs professionals as educators can be challenged by the ongoing assumption within individual institutions and throughout the field of higher education that education or learning resides primarily within the academic, classroom realm, often articulated as the academic-social divide between these institutional areas (Jackson & Ebbers, 1999).

Also in 2011, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) published *Leaders in Learning* (2011), a document capturing much of the work done as part of the CACUSS Identity Project related to understanding the unique role of student affairs in Canada. Notably, many Canadian student affairs practitioners do not have specific graduate preparation for their roles (unlike their colleagues in the United States), with many having obtained degrees in the U.S. to prepare them for the field (Cox & Strange, 2010). As many new student affairs professionals in Canadian institutions have not engaged in specific academic preparations for their roles, or have been educated outside of the country, it has become increasingly important that they engage in an online community to support or augment their ongoing professional development. These communities offer a variety of opportunities to bring together professionals from across geographic borders due, in large part, to the myriad of technological innovations and platforms available for asynchronous and synchronous engagement (Bates, 2014). This engagement is both voluntary and informal, resulting in the formation of and participation in several communities of practice.
If we are to expect that much of the more formal socialization into the field will or can be done in academic degree programs (Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, & Pasquesi, 2015), each CoP member’s educational background will play a significant role in their encounters with and understanding of the knowledge produced and shared within a CoP. As individuals will carry with them the values, norms, and relationships that impacted their experiences with previous communities of practice (both in a degree program and in other, informal learning networks or communities), their participation in the CoP will also include the negotiation of previous beliefs as they complement or conflict with this new social group (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006).

Young (1985) also discusses the acquisition or identification of the values inherent in student affairs, which could be considered an early analysis of the tacit knowledge that informs professionals’ identity development. Young argues for mentors, who would demonstrate values of the profession to novices, but also points to research suggesting that many who leave the profession identify with different values than those who remain (Burns, 1980). Once again, a CoP may play a role in developing or reinforcing particular values and beliefs in the negotiation of one’s identity as a professional and one’s ongoing membership in the community. If one were to consider tacit knowledge to be, in part, beliefs and values inherent to the field (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), and if one were to recognize the importance of mutual, interpersonal engagement within these communities (Wenger, 1998), the way in which meaningful mutual engagement occurs within a CoP could influence if, how, and when the tacit knowledge is transferred or shared.
Roberts (2000) argues for establishing trust among members as a prerequisite for the successful transfer of this knowledge, emphasizing the unique role of socialization, interaction, and engagement in identity development within communities of practice. This socialization is particularly important to student affairs, where the CoP model is gaining considerable popularity as a means to achieve concurrent goals of community building and knowledge development. The CoP has also begun to take on the responsibility of developing a common sense of identity alongside a similar struggle that its individual members, as practitioners, continue to engage in.

Taken together, this understanding of professional identity is perhaps best defined by Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, and Pasquesi (2016), who describe professional identity as “the commitment to values and practices of the profession plus investment of personal resources (e.g. time, money, effort) that emanates from an internalized congruence between one’s personal and professional values” (p. 560). This commitment and congruence relies, in part, on an acquisition and understanding of the tacit knowledge of the field, including the beliefs and values (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), and an exploration of the alignment between these values as demonstrated by a CoP and the individual’s personal values as part of their evolving sense of self (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006).

Professional identity and communities of practice. Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner offer an interpretation of identity as “the construction of sameness through change – the work of being an enduring entity through time and space” (2016, p. 147). Within a CoP, identity development is described in part as a process moving through imagination, engagement, and alignment (Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-
Trayner, B., 2014). The CoP further supports identity development as the growing sense of belonging among its members (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) further defines this expression of belonging as moving from merely engaging with the community (doing things together) to constructing an image of what it may mean to be its member. Imagining oneself as a member of the community leads to aligning oneself with the expectations and standards communicated by the CoP.

The imagination or inspiration for developing a particular professional identity and the subsequent engagement in identity development occur alongside the work of understanding the requirements for gaining this identity, which can be housed in the tacit knowledge and shared repertoire of communities of practice. This process can involve significant agency as identification can happen in degrees across space and time as individuals determine how much they identify with how this knowledge is negotiated and communicated (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). There is also considerable agency in the CoP to develop and define membership criteria, as one outcome of joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire is the community’s establishment of guidelines for “what it is to be a competent participant, an outsider, or somewhere in between” (Wenger, 1998, p. 137).

The CoP can also empower and support individuals in developing their identity as a professional in the field by providing access to opportunities for participation and reification – engagement with other like-minded individuals who jointly produce artifacts that display a shared, negotiated sense of meaning (Wenger, 1998). Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) argue that both of these processes must be present and working together to support learning within a CoP. This complex interaction between individual agency in
identity development and communal knowledge of identity provide a rich framework for exploring the development of a professional identity for emerging professionals.

Notions of membership in communities of practice are typically defined by competence, moving from newcomer, or peripheral participant, to expert, or full participant, in the field (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This competence or expertise is situated within the domain of the CoP, often defined by shared competence in a particular area or role. Early research in communities of practice described this process for butchers, tailors, and other professions that could be seen as relying on an apprenticeship model, inviting new professionals into the field through a common, structured pattern of learning experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning as professional development, however, can no longer be defined solely by the pursuit of a well-defined career or role, nor should membership in a CoP be defined solely by holding a role that fits with the community’s domain and expertise.

Lifelong learning has increasingly shaped our understanding of personal and professional development as membership in a learning society (Field, 2000) where one’s job title may not solely, if at all, define an identity but may rather be a description of a way one spends time in their day or how one obtains the necessary financial resources to support their way of life. Even without working in the field (or any field at all), individuals will also bring with them their own assumptions, ideas, and expertise when first engaging with a CoP, often as the explicit knowledge of a role and its associated tasks.

Acquiring this explicit knowledge can support the negotiation of tacit knowledge, where individuals develop perspectives or insights that may not or cannot be easily
communicated (Eraut, 2000). Individuals who engage with communities of practice, often begin at the periphery, are not entering as proverbial clean slates, ready to blindly acquire an understanding of the community’s domain and patterns of mutual engagement. The CoP may then be seen as offering a new, communally defined perspective on what it means to be a full member in the field – a definition that can be accepted, rejected, or further shaped by emerging, peripheral members (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

While the research does explore professional identity and its development in some depth, this work remains in the realm of more traditionally defined and well-standardized academic or practically-oriented professions. The work of identity development in student affairs and within their communities of practice is currently understood as professional socialization meant to shorten the gap between new professionals’ expectations and experiences (Perez, 2016). This socialization into the field offers a means to learn more about institutional culture, seek out mentoring opportunities, and engage in continuing professional development (Amey & Reesor, 2015). While integral to development of new professionals, socialization offers an incomplete picture of developing a professional identity, focusing primarily on more explicit knowledge without critical engagement with the tacit knowledge structures that answer the why of the explicit what and how that defines effective work in the field.

**Tacit knowledge in identity-work.** Polanyi (1962) describes tacit knowledge as personal knowledge that can be difficult to articulate. This knowledge, importantly, is hidden from an individual’s conscious mind but still greatly impacts the display of skill or competence. One of Polanyi’s (1966) most famous examples of this phenomenon is
riding a bike – we may be able to ride a bike (a skill) but may not know or cannot put into words how we perform this feat. In fact, we typically need to keep this knowledge below our level of conscious awareness so we can focus on performing the task rather than splitting our focus between performance and an awareness of the explicit knowledge of pedaling the bike and turning the handlebars.

Extending this idea to identity-work, researchers argue that emerging professionals gain both explicit and tacit knowledge, with the majority of knowledge related to identity formation being tacit (Cruess, Cruess, & Steinert, 2019). This tacit knowledge forms the precursor or precondition for performance, such that doing the work of, for example, a student affairs professional would be influenced by an unconscious knowing gained from experiential learning and interactions with mentors or role models (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). The use of guided reflection may help to make this tacit knowledge explicit (Eraut, 2004), as individuals connect knowledge and experience to an evolving sense of self (Monrouxe, 2013).

**Challenges to Identity-Work in Communities of Practice**

**Habitus as challenge.** Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of *habitus* challenges the very idea of negotiated meaning or competence (Roberts, 2006). The notion of habitus highlights the considerable motivations and assumptions individuals bring into communities that are often unconsciously acquired and resistant to change. These predispositions often influence not only how knowledge is absorbed into a community but, perhaps more importantly, what knowledge is created, and, by extension, what particular meaning is negotiated. The social conditions that individuals were and are
exposed to before engaging with a CoP will often create a set of dispositions that both exist prior to practice and serve to regulate it (Bourdieu, 1990).

As habitus is also strongly connected to and often developed in a particular social context (Mutch, 2003), it may be particularly challenging to encourage more innovative identity development in a novel social setting, such as a CoP, as most individuals will work to assimilate new experiences into a foundational habitus or set of principles (Bourdieu, 1990). This steadfast and often unconscious commitment to previously acquired habitus may therefore inhibit transformation in favour of more assimilative notions of identity development. In fact, “the issue [is then] the interaction between habitus and practice, rather than its creation through practice” (Mutch, 2003, p. 389). If the goal of professional development is to be particularly transformative, this notion of habitus is problematic, as “the development of knowledge within a CoP may become path-dependent as new knowledge reinforces an existing preference or predisposition” (Roberts, 2006, p. 630). Similarly, Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006) argue that “an individual’s continual negotiation of ‘self’ within and across multiple communities of practice may, of course, generate intra-personal tensions as well as instabilities within the community” (p. 648). Movement across communities of practice that lack socially visible boundaries (Lave & Wenger, 1991) may impact individuals’ identity development as they come to accept or reject models of identity that fit or conflict with their ingrained and well-developed principles. This frequent movement into and out of a variety of communities may also generate instability within communities that are attempting to support more innovative approaches to professional practice while modelling newer or more emerging ideals of professional identity.
**Self-imposed barriers to identity-work.** Although relationships within communities of practice and the wider social context play an important role in influencing identity-work, individuals also possess considerable agency in negotiating, defining, and expressing their unique identities. An individual may have or, at the very least, desire some agency over resisting the master, dominant narratives defined by society and culture, and may have difficulty holding onto multiple narrative expressions of identity that appear to be contradictory (McLean & Syed, 2015).

These challenges run counter to the formation and expression of multiple identities (Reynolds & Pope, 1991), and further complicate the perceived agency of individuals to move between communities of practice that reflect values or beliefs similar to their own. An individual may wish to move between communities of practice, or to express more saliently certain aspects of their identity, but may in fact feel stuck within broader systems, such that while “individuals can interact with powerful structures – that they can construct and tell alternative stories – [this] does not make those structures entirely negotiable” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 336).

McAdams (2013), however, defines identity development in part as a subjective process, implying that there remains some agency for and in individuals as they navigate the contexts, structures, and relationships that may inform the narrative of who they are, who they once were, and who they may become (Pasupathi, Brubaker, & Mansour, 2007). This agency is therefore, at the very least, a bidirectional exchange of influence, such that any self-imposed challenges to identity development are a function of or further manifested by context, location, and experience. As McLean and Syed (2015) argue, “the
potential for agency to manifest [an identity] is strongly shaped by the opportunity structure in which individuals are located” (p. 337).

**Issues with knowledge transfer between settings.** There is also an intriguing line of investigation concerning whether the knowledge gained through learning within a CoP can transfer between settings. Professional development occurs anywhere and anytime, in spaces that are geographically or functionally removed from an individual’s place of work. It is possible, then, that a professional may develop and express multiple identities in different contexts. The knowledge and skills developed through participating in a CoP may influence what facets of oneself are shared with others, particularly in online communities where participation and engagement are dependent on psychosocial filters that mediate knowledge-sharing (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000).

**Tacit knowledge transfer in communities of practice.** As tacit knowledge is uniquely tied to the individual (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2013), it may be difficult to transfer between professionals. However, this hidden, unconscious knowledge may be explicitly demonstrated in the actions of CoP members, who can be thought of as speaking the language of the profession (Goldie, 2012). Furthermore, mentors or role models in the CoP can provide opportunities for guided reflection (Wald, 2015) and feedback (Mann, Dornan, & Teunissen, 2011) to make the tacit knowledge of the field more explicit. These mentors, however, may reflect (in their demographics and through the transfer of knowledge) only the dominant source of power (Roberts, 2006) in the CoP and the wider field. This may influence an emerging professional’s movement from legitimate peripheral participation to full membership in the CoP, as negotiating their sense of self may put them in conflict with the identified norms of the CoP (Frost &
Regehr, 2013) and, at worst, may cause them to be excluded from the community (Hafferty, 2016).

Étienne Wenger-Trayner, one of the seminal scholars in the field, highlights another challenge in this transfer of knowledge in relation to identity development and achieving full membership in a CoP. He argues, “if you limit expressibility and you narrow accountability so much that people have to almost forget who they are in order to belong there, it is no wonder that the experience does not carry much into the rest of their life” (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, p. 156). This argument implies a robust tension between developing full membership in a CoP and developing as a unique, singular professional within the wider field. The terminology alone of wider field implies some concentric, nested model of community in the profession. How likely, then, is it that a CoP housed within higher education is representative of the field itself? If members are coming together as like-minded professionals, perhaps a necessary extension of this research may be not only examining which professionals are included as members of a CoP but which, by definition, are actively excluded.

**Identity-Work in Online Environments and Communities**

The role of digital technologies continues to be a vital element of how, when, where, and what is shared between members of a CoP. Recent studies have explored how technology, particularly social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, can demonstrate a future-oriented understanding of how professionals can practice rather than only how professionals currently practice (Evans, 2019). However, Smith, Hayes, and Shea (2017) argue that “adding these interactive spaces to an online/blended learning environment does not guarantee that the resulting interactions support the kinds of meaning making
necessary for the development of a CoP” (p. 222). In other words, social media platforms and other technologies may facilitate practices of sharing and support (Lundin, Lantz-Andersson, & Hillman, 2020) but are not immune to the social processes and pressure of identity-work (Robson, 2017).

The adoption of technology for communal use is itself a social process (Rogers, 2010), having its own social structures and norms. The use of technology to facilitate engagement within social groups presents an interesting consideration for the communities of practice, namely whether it is the technology that serves to create and maintain the community, or whether the community, in its pre-formed state, makes use of the technology to achieve its goals, or both.

Endersby, Phelps, and Jenkins (2017) note that the “application of technology does not free us from consideration of social processes” (p. 84). Online spaces and virtual networks have been subject to numerous studies exploring social influences on collective behaviour. For example, Centola (2010) found that social reinforcement (e.g., praise, attention from peers) was more likely in highly clustered networks (often referred to as tight knit groups with a high density of close social ties). The Internet can offer opportunities for easier, quicker access to these clustered networks, where social relationships can reinforce one’s identity through being recognized and subsequently valued as an individual and as a member of a social group sharing common interests (Lin, 2017).

The spread of information is also limited by social connections, although Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, and Adamic (2012) found that novel information is often spread primarily through weak ties, characterized by low levels of, or a lack of, intimacy and
interaction. These weaker ties, however, have become increasingly important to communities of practice, as they provide access to novel information that is frequently leveraged to make better decisions and solve problems that have remained unsolved within the limits of local knowledge (Aral, 2016).

In all cases where knowledge is transferred into and within communities of practice, the influence of these social connections is highly apparent in the transfer of the tacit knowledge important to identity development. Andrews and Delahaye (2000) argue that the psychosocial filter mediates the process of knowledge-sharing and importing, including how individuals perceive others to be approachable and trustworthy. Knowing that trust is essential to the sharing of knowledge amongst members of a CoP (Roberts, 2006), these social interactions, and their immediate psychosocial aftermath, will aid in determining how, and if, the tacit knowledge of identity development is negotiated and communicated. Amin (2002) also makes the case for the importance of considering the complexities of virtual communities of practice by suggesting that relational proximity, defined as “the strength of interpersonal links, in particular to what extent people know each other and interact” (Huber, 2012, p. 1174), may be more important than geographical proximity. The use of technology to create, develop, and maintain communities of practice removes geographical limitations to interaction by offering individuals the opportunity to build relational proximity with others who, while distant by kilometres, may be highly emotionally and socially close. The online community that was selected for this research featured many of the same characteristics, including social reinforcement, weak ties, and the development of relational proximity that may influence
the development, negotiation, and communication of tacit knowledge of identity development.

Hara and Kling (2002) argue that researchers who discuss criteria for effective technologies to support online communities often emphasize the technical aspects of these platforms without considering the important dynamics of developing and facilitating a community. It is also noteworthy when authors identify “CoP design elements” (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003, p. 184), emphasizing the design and development of community as a structured network with the goal of enhancing engagement. However, emerging trends in professional development represent an important argument for the value of communities of practice in online spaces. Tams and Arthur (2010) concluded that professionals “need to engage in external networks and build personal connections that [make] knowledge transfer and new learning possible” (p. 631). This makes a strong case for communities of practice, where competence and, by extension, identity, is a social process negotiated over time (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

Fenwick and Landri (2012), however, argue that professional learning is becoming far more individualized, with self-directed learning becoming more visible and viable with the use of social media technologies (Wanger, Hassanein, & Head, 2008). This emergence of self-directed learning in Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) places control of professional development squarely with the learner (Fournier & Kop, 2010). An emphasis on individual agency in professional development means that the communities of practice we typically refer to as being highly social processes of professional identity development may in fact “assemble together people with digital
network technologies engaged in professional identity generation in sites of professional learning” (Evans, 2015, p. 32). This shift in professional development from community to individual sees greater agency for the individual in these digital spaces, reflecting emerging understandings of how professionals may engage with communities of practice.

Digital technologies offer a vast array of tools and information for identity development, but the influence and impact of the community itself may be secondary to the role of the individual in “com[ing] to embrace or reject opportunities to participate more fully in their CoP, depending on the ‘fit’ or resonance of those opportunities with their current senses of self” (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006, p. 645). This agency and autonomy, particularly with the aid of technological advances, offers an important implication for the communities of practice facilitating professional identity development rather than being solely spheres of particular social and informational influence.

**Tacit knowledge transfer and technology.** Wenger, White, Smith, and Rowe (2005) aptly noted the challenge of “confusing the community with the technology” (p. 2). Typically, information technologies have been used in the more efficient communication and exchange of explicit knowledge (Elliott, 2017). Johannessen, Olaisen, and Olsen (2001), however, argue that tacit knowledge can offer important implications and advantages to a company’s knowledge base. The authors advocate for making tacit knowledge explicit through building organizational relationships that offer opportunities for apprenticeship to further strengthen the company’s competitive advantage. For example, the authors go on to emphasize that tacit knowledge can help to reinforce innovative, continual learning within the company as part of the organization’s
total knowledge base (e.g., tacit and explicit; internal and external). This may help to counter challenges of habitus and power, offering support for innovative ideas and novel information.

The transfer of this vital tacit knowledge using technology may rely on the intersections of the individuals, communities, and tools that hold relevant information. Al-Qdah and Salim (2013) argue that tacit knowledge can be captured, stored, and transferred using technology, though Panahi, Watson, and Partridge (2016) see more modern platforms, including social networks, blogs, and wikis, as perhaps better suited for the transfer of this subjective, situated knowledge. Universities have and will continue to implement a diversity of technologies for knowledge transfer, but Chugh (2019) argues that staff and faculty may be resistant or slow to adapt to information technologies despite their utility for knowledge transfer.

It may be important, then, to consider technology as a complement to rather than replacement for processes of tacit knowledge transfer, particularly as Subramaniam and Venkatraman (2001) found that effective tacit knowledge sharing involved face-to-face interactions that were complemented or enhanced using information technologies. Technology may therefore support tacit knowledge transfer by recording the explicit knowledge generated by reflecting on tacit knowledge, or offering an alternative to the face-to-face interactions that are more likely to support the communication and acquisition of tacit knowledge.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The development, negotiation, and communication of tacit knowledge for the development of a professional identity can be both housed in and influenced by a CoP.
As a site for the highly social process of situated learning and identity development, communities of practice offer an important window into how individuals may learn to be a student affairs professional, not just learn the what or the how of these roles. The work of communities of practice moves across and between multiple mediums or locales. Likewise, individuals move between, for example, a face-to-face conference and online discussions, supported by professional associations that deem these interactions important for professional development.

What is less clear in the literature, however, is how, or if, these interactions influence individuals’ understanding of what it means to work or behave as a professional in the field. It is also not yet clear what beliefs, values, and know-how may form the foundation of a practice that attempts to align with those of the profession itself. The identification and exploration of this tacit knowledge (both its content and its creation) as a crucial component of the development of a professional identity for student affairs professionals formed the foundation of this qualitative research study. In particular, it was hypothesized that student affairs administrators may draw context and meaning from their involvement with and membership in professional associations that serve to articulate values and standards for the profession (Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, & Pasquesi, 2016). Therefore, an investigation of the role of these communities of practice in the communal generation, exchange, and analysis of this tacit knowledge served to further an understanding of how emerging student affairs professionals navigate their knowledge of and commitment to the field. In the next chapter, I will describe the design and process used to investigate this phenomenon.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study was to critically explore the tacit knowledge of professional identity for emerging student affairs professionals, as well as their perceptions regarding the process of developing a professional identity. To achieve this goal, this study’s methodology involved a qualitative exploration of emerging professionals’ experiences of identity development within a professional association that can be described as a community of practice (CoP). The qualitative methodology offered a subjective view of knowledge, which can be described through the lens of social constructivism (Creswell, 2007). As individuals seek to understand the world around them, they develop subjective meanings that “are varied and multiple, leading the research to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 20). The data necessary to explore identity development therefore lied within those engaged in this phenomenon and were subject to the interpretations of both the individual and the researcher.

This complexity of views and diversity of experiences offered an opportunity to engage in phenomenological research. A phenomenological approach to exploring the professional identity development of emerging professionals in student affairs was an attempt to describe what is occurring as accurately as possible (Groenewald, 2004) in order to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of those involved (Welman & Kruger, 1999). What was particularly appealing about a phenomenological approach to this research is its relationship to tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, as difficult to formally document or express (Nonaka, 1994), often resides within the individual (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2013) and is dependent on a subjective interpretation of
the world to negotiate its meaning (Gren, 1996; Huckle, 2019). Phenomenology as a methodology was chosen as a useful means to uncover these unique insights into the tacit knowledge that can impact identity development, as it aims to report how participants view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the beliefs and values inherent to the field were thought to inform participants’ identity development (Sugrue, 1997), and such tacit knowledge was considered to be discovered, developed, or interpreted differently by each participant. The aim of this phenomenological approach was therefore to understand the essence of this phenomenon (identity development) as perceived by the individuals who experience it (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012).

The tacit knowledge held within communities of practice, like other tacit knowledge, is itself difficult to document or identify. This also contributed to the decision to use a phenomenological approach to data collection, as this knowledge could emerge from the collection of participants’ retelling their experiences with and within this CoP. Tsoukas (2011) argued the value of dialogue as a means to uncover such tacit knowledge: “Through dialogical exchanges we are led to notice certain aspects of our circumstances that, due to their familiarity, remain hidden” (p. 471). As much of the tacit knowledge that informs our work remains hidden from our conscious actions (Polanyi, 1962), semi-structured discussions provided a means for participants to describe their unique experiences of developing and integrating a professional identity into their daily professional practice.

While the phenomenon of the development of a professional identity may be universal, this phenomenological approach offered the important opportunity “to
determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

**Methods**

The choice of a phenomenological method privileged the participant experience, shifting attention to the unconscious beliefs and know-how (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) that are integral to developing an understanding of what it means to be a professional in the field (Duguid, 2005). Each participant experience was unique, such that multiple narratives were captured to explore the many ways in which a professional identity may be defined, developed, negotiated, and expressed (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991) as a function of their participation in the CoP.

**Participants**

This research explored the development of professional identity from the lived, shared experiences of six emerging professionals in student affairs. An emerging professional is typically defined as a first-time administrator having between 0-5 years of full-time experience (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006). The six participants represented a large continuum of experience in the field, from a few months (Participant F4) to close to five years (Participant M1).

Emerging professionals are often engaged in rapid and immersive development as they have typically completed or are close to completing graduate work and are transitioning into new roles as professionals. These new roles and related experiences may contradict or complement other identities (Kinser, 1993). Authors also emphasize the importance of preparing new professionals for the transition to the field (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), highlighting the need for a more holistic approach to professional
preparation that includes an exploration of values (Young & Elfrink, 1991). This personal-professional integration was foundational for exploring how the participants came to understand the tacit knowledge that may inform their role in student affairs not just as practitioners but also as members of a community with a unique set of ideals and expectations.

**Research Site: The Community of Practice**

Participants in this study were all paying members of a CoP created to engage, support, and connect student affairs professionals currently practicing or desiring to practice in Canadian universities and colleges. The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) offers opportunities for its members to engage with each other, and the existing and emerging knowledge in the field, through online repositories (e.g., websites, social media accounts), and at both in person and online professional development opportunities (e.g., webinars, annual conference). This community draws from a seemingly narrow group of professionals (i.e., student affairs professionals in Canada), but can yet include a wide diversity of individuals. The CoP included those who are new to the field, either in the early stages of their career at a college or university, those currently not occupying a defined role at an institution, and those who may act as experts or mentors having been employed in the field over multiple years and, typically, occupying more senior administrative positions.

This professional association can also be described as closely approximating key features of communities of practice. On the surface, it often acts as a space for the shared management, generation, and dissemination of the explicit knowledge of the field. The association regularly curates and publishes information in the form of research articles.
and resource documents that may inform the daily work of professionals and the broader conversations concerning the current state of the profession and its evolving future directions. CACUSS also regularly encourages members to engage in collaborative research and knowledge generation, leveraging the shared, social relationships members may bring to the association or that are developed through ongoing engagement in association activities.

CACUSS also serves as a more formalized community emphasizing supportive relationships and shared values. The goal of this mutual engagement is often to collectively and collaboratively define and document a shared repertoire of standards of competence for the profession. This has been particularly relevant in the recent work of the CACUSS Identity Project (CACUSS, 2011), which sought to explicitly capture the more tacit knowledge of the field, including a defined purpose of and core values for the field of student affairs in Canada.

This and other professional associations are also often seen as spaces where both formal and informal socialization into the field may occur for new professionals (Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009). The association and its members can establish potential criteria for membership through defining and modeling the tacit values, beliefs, and ideals that inform the profession and daily, professional practice (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Membership criteria for the association, however, are not explicitly defined (CACUSS, 2019), though institutional, individual, and corporate/partner memberships in the categories of full, associate, and student membership can be gained by registering and paying a monetary fee directly to the association. This fee grants members access to a
variety of resources and supports, including professional development opportunities, documented best or promising practices, and a membership directory (CACUSS, 2019).

Membership, then, can be seen as paid access to opportunities, knowledge, and potentially other professionals unique to the association. This criteria for paid membership is explicit in terms of who is represented in the association, as their website defines those they represent and serve as “individuals who work in Canadian post-secondary institutions in student affairs and services” (CACUSS, 2020, para 1). What may be more tacit or unspoken, however, are the beliefs and values that define what it means to be or to be identified as a student affairs professional who could possibly benefit most from participating in or engaging with the CoP.

Membership as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991)—obtaining and embodying an identity of mastery in the field—is therefore seemingly up to the individual to define. This self-selection process can mirror the agency individuals have to move into and out of communities of practice based on, in part, whether the expressed goals and values of the community align with their own (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). The association is performing a function similar to other communities of practice by mutually engaging with and amongst its members in the joint enterprise of developing a shared repertoire of explicit and tacit knowledge.

This knowledge and ongoing interactions with or within the association can therefore define the work of the profession and influence the identity development of the professionals who perform this work across various institutions and functional areas. The CACUSS website offers a unique window into the activities of a CoP, offering a tangible space for community to form and engage, while also approximating the features of the
CoP as an opportunity for situated learning, where individuals actively negotiate and reflect on their shared knowledge to make meaning communally (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The association also actively and regularly engages in knowledge management for and with the profession, creating online repositories for explicit knowledge. CACUSS also facilitates multiple opportunities for engagement with this knowledge and amongst its members, which may influence the development and dissemination of the more tacit knowledge of the field (Levin & Cross, 2004; Polanyi, 1966). Overall, CACUSS serves as a reasonable approximation of a model of a CoP that may support emerging professionals’ identity development by negotiating, developing, and communicating tacit knowledge and facilitating relationships that, together, inform learning to be (Duguid, 2005) a student affairs professional.

**Participant Recruitment**

Prior to actively recruiting participants, an application for ethics clearance was submitted to the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB). The REB cleared this research, and a copy of the clearance is included in Appendix A.

The application for ethics clearance included written permission from the CACUSS Executive Director to recruit participants from the association. Permission was granted for two (initial and follow-up) calls for participants sent via the community’s email mailing list. This email included information on the purpose of the study as well as participant selection criteria, the nature of desired participation, and associated risks and benefits. A copy of the text from the initial and follow-up calls for participation is provided in Appendix B. The initial call was sent in October 2019, and the subsequent, follow up call went out in April 2020.
Since each registered, paying member of the association is added to the community listserv, it was reasonably assumed that all members were accessible through this recruitment strategy. Taking advantage of the breadth offered via the Internet and online means of recruitment, this strategy was used to maximize access to all potential participants. This online recruitment strategy was also used to seek out participants with both similar and somewhat diverse experiences of the phenomenon under study (identity development within or as part of engagement with a community of practice) (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). While early participants responded to the listserv message, subsequent participants were informed of the study through what may be described as snowball or chain sampling (Creswell, 1998). At least two participants indicated that they had heard about the study through their social or professional connections with past participants.

All participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study (i.e., paid members of CACUSS, 35 years of age or younger, and 0-5 years of full-time, professional experience). It is important to note here that the participants were diverse in certain respects (e.g., gender, years of experience in the field) and potentially representative of some emerging professionals experiencing the phenomenon of the development of a professional identity. However, these participants may not be truly representative of the larger field, as they were volunteers, willing and available to contribute to this study. There may be a variety of reasons for why this was the case. Some of the challenges with recruiting and potential generalizations of the results were explored by participants themselves and are reported in the limitations of this study section.

Participant recruitment was challenging in its execution. For example, despite communicating using a listserv that all paying members have access to, each member of
the association engages with the listserv, and the association itself, in different ways. This was especially apparent in a slower than expected start of participant recruitment, when 3 months (October 2019 – February 2020) elapsed between recruiting and interviewing Participants M1 and F1. In an attempt to increase the reach of the recruitment message and the likelihood of obtaining more participants, a request to revise the original ethics application was submitted. A copy of the clearance of this addendum is available in Appendix C.

This addendum requested, alongside the previously cleared second or follow-up call on the CACUSS listserv, to share the same recruitment text via a Facebook group administered by a sub-committee of the association (Leadership Educators’ CoP or LECOP) and the association’s Twitter account (@cacussweets). Written permission was obtained from the Facebook group administrator and from the CACUSS Executive Director to use these additional venues for participant recruitment. This application process also contributed to a delay in participant recruitment, as approximately two months (November 2019 – January 2020) elapsed between submitting the application and receiving clearance from the University of Windsor REB. During this time, no other participants responded to the initial call.

Following approximately seven months of participant recruitment and interviews (November 2019 – May 2020), six participants in total were recruited and interviewed. This number aligns with Creswell’s (1998) recommendation of up to 10 participants being a reasonable size for a phenomenological study, as “the important point is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the
phenomenon” (p. 122). All those who volunteered to participate were interviewed and no one left the study or forbade access to parts of the interviews.

**Research Method**

Emerging professionals who answered the open call were invited to participate in an initial, approximately hour-long interview that was conducted and recorded virtually (using Google Hangouts and, later, Zoom). Virtual interviews offered more flexibility in securing and scheduling interviews, and were essential as this study was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic where social distancing (remaining apart from people not in your immediate household) was required to slow the spread of the virus. Interview data (recordings and written transcripts) were kept confidential and were not shared among participants. Recordings were made only of verbal communication (webcams were not used during the interviews to maintain an additional level of privacy), were captured using an external recorder, and were downloaded immediately following the interview. All participants signed an audio consent form (Appendix D).

Prior to being transcribed, recordings were kept on a secure, password-protected laptop accessible only to my supervisor and I. The interview platform was kept private, with a unique access link for Google Hangouts or Zoom shared only with the individual interviewee. All second, follow-up interviews followed the same logistical procedures and confidentiality protocols. ‘About Me’ statements were collected and requested by email, and all statements were stored on the researcher’s secure, password-protected laptop.

In depth participant interviews were undertaken to “study how participants construct meanings and actions from as close to the inside of the experience as possible”
(Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 349). The choice to conduct these interviews was informed by the main purpose and important value of phenomenological research, which aim to describe, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon under study from the perspectives of those involved (Grownewald, 2004). Interview questions aimed to collect participants’ experiences, feelings, and beliefs (Welman & Kruger, 1999) related to the development of their professional identity as members of the CoP.

Data collection was mostly through semi-structured interviews. The first or initial interview included a set of pre-determined, open-ended questions as well as room for additional, follow-up questions, if needed. This process was meant to ensure that interview data are guided by existing theoretical constructs (Galletta, 2013, p. 45), while still allowing for eliciting novel responses not accounted for in the research. The follow-up interview provided room for clarifications and additional participant reflections. In addition, each participant was asked to share the ‘About Me’ statements as it appeared at that time on a professional website. In total, five of the six participants shared an ‘About Me’ statement that was used as additional data for analysis. The sixth participant did not respond to any follow up messages requesting a copy of their ‘About Me’ statement. These data were included as another representation of how participants experienced, reflected on, and communicated the development of their professional identity.

Relying on semi-structured interviews, however, was limited in its utility by the same contextual considerations that made them valuable for this study. As this research was to draw on the experiences of a diverse group of participants, it presented a risk that it may be difficult to compare across uniqueness of the interview conversations. This is especially true for semi-structured interviews, as any emerging lines of discussion
become unique to that particular individual’s account of their experience (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2015). This proved to be valuable, however, as assumptions gained from a review of the literature and anecdotal experience could argue that professional identity in its development and definition are in fact unique to the individual (see e.g., Day, 1999; Watson, 2008). The triangulation of the data (Bloor, 1997) between interviews and ‘About Me’ statements was also important to develop an emerging understanding of this phenomenon across diverse life experiences, expressed identities, and social contexts that exist outside of the more common experience of engaging with this single professional association. These unique, diverse experiences therefore contributed to the goal of this phenomenological research - describing what was experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell, 1998) to form “a single, unifying meaning of the experience” (p. 55) through the voices of those involved.

The interview questions were designed as an opportunity for participants to engage in the reflective practice of determining their unique conception of, amongst other things, key concepts in the field and how they may choose or have chosen to implement these ideas in practice (Caukin & Brinhaupt, 2017). Questions were designed to prompt critical reflection as one method for explicitly capturing some of the tacit knowledge of the field, particularly that which informs the individual’s emerging, evolving professional identity (Shaver & Strong, 1982). For example, participants were asked to share a few sentences describing their professional philosophy (i.e., the beliefs and values that guide their professional practice) at the start and again at the end of the interview to provide some opportunity for individual reflection and potential evidence of an evolving sense of self that may be inspired by the reflective nature of the research interview.
Online Interviews: Challenges and Implications

Conducting interviews using online platforms also introduced challenges unique to this particular setting. The convenience and flexibility of these online platforms for conducting research interviews were mitigated by their potential influences on how, if, and when the tacit knowledge of identity development is negotiated and shared. Huber (2012) argued that interactions online are often impacted by relational proximity, such that by removing previous barriers to geographic proximity, individuals are now more heavily influenced in the development and display of their evolving, multiple identities by the interpersonal connections and social reinforcement found online (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000). The emerging professionals who were participants in this study were entering the field during its digital age (Cabellon & Junco, 2015), and were bringing with them into the interviews the experience of engaging online with the CoP and its individual members as preexisting, important influences on their identity development.

Much of the influence of digital technologies on identity development stems from how online platforms impact how individuals engage in mutual engagement and develop social connections among a larger, interconnected network (Amin, 2002; Rogers, 2010). In this study, however, interviews were conducted solely between the researcher and a single participant at a time. This may have mitigated some of the challenges related to the expression of an individual’s current and evolving sense of self amongst a larger group of colleagues or peers. For example, participants were assumed to feel more comfortable discussing the development of their professional identity with a more neutral party (i.e., the researcher) rather than feeling obligated to share personal information or challenges with people they did not know well and could be currently or, potentially in the future,
influential members of their professional network. This one-on-one interaction, however, is still highly social and subject to the same challenges of establishing trust and navigating perceived power or authority (Roberts, 2006) that can impact the transfer of explicit and tacit knowledge. In a later discussion of this study’s limitations (Chapter 5), I will describe that while I did not perceive any challenges in establishing trust with my participants, my methods for navigating these potential power imbalances may still have influenced what participants chose to share during their interviews. It may have been impossible to remove these barriers entirely, but it remains important to recognize the unique context in which this research did occur.

**Interviewer bias and member checking**

Participants who may identify as members of a single or multiple communities of practice were being asked to discuss and display aspects of their identity as a function of engagement with others. Simultaneously, each interview was considered an interaction that may have transferred tacit knowledge that may have also influenced their ongoing identity development. It was therefore particularly important for the researcher to clarify their bias from the outset, knowing that these assumptions could impact data collection and analyses (Merriam, 1988). When preparing to facilitate interviews with participants, I deeply considered how or if I should share my own anecdotal experiences with and perspectives on the phenomenon under study gained from my previous professional experiences (especially from my time in student affairs and CACUSS). This was especially important knowing that it would be essential to bracket my own biases (Miller & Crabtree, 1992) during the data collection and analysis stages.
Early on, I made the choice to share some of my experiences near the start of each interview as a way to establish rapport with participants who may be hesitant to discuss a topic that may be deeply personal. I also drafted an interview script that was meant to focus the conversation by privileging the interview questions designed to elicit the participants’ experiences with and reflections on the development of their professional identity development. As discussed in the study’s limitations, however, this was difficult to achieve in practice, and may have influenced the collection and interpretation of participant data.

The essential work of member checking was completed in asking each participant to review a transcript of his or her initial interview prior to completing the follow-up interview. This process reinforced the goal of describing a phenomenon through the lens of the participants who have experienced it, while ensuring that the summarized findings accurately reflect their perspectives (Groenewald, 2004). Participants had the opportunity to correct any inaccuracies in their narrative account (Creswell & Miller, 2000) that were rectified in the written transcript and further clarified in the follow-up conversations. Overall, member checking was performed as “the most important technique for establishing credibility [of the data]” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), to ensure an accurate and fair representation of the participants’ experience with the phenomenon. Combined with triangulating the data, this study’s methodology aligns with Creswell’s (1998) recommendation that at least two verification procedures be used for any given study.
Research Instrument

The interview script was drafted and reviewed in consultation with the researcher’s supervisor and committee to ensure an adequate degree of validity. A review of the interview questions and their subsequent order in the script was performed to determine the questions’ construct validity and if the items adequately operationalized the constructs under study (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005). The primary test of the validity of the interview questions was completed during the defense of the dissertation proposal, where feedback from committee members offered important considerations for identifying ambiguous or difficult questions (Calitz, 2005), as well as determining the ideal amount of time needed to complete the interview (Dikko, 2016). This feedback and guidelines from the literature also helped to determine the ideal length for the initial, in-depth interviews (approximately 1 hour) (Creswell, 1998). The follow-up interviews, being less structured and not following a strict protocol, were each approximately 30-45 minutes in length. This was both a practical and theoretical consideration, offering, ideally, enough time for another reflective, in depth conversation while also ensuring participants could complete their involvement in a reasonable amount of time.

Additional feedback from and discussion between the supervisor and researcher helped confirm that the questions could prompt an adequate range of responses and potential interpretations (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Rather than relying on the standard of reliability for these interview questions, the goal was to establish the trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998) of the questions and overall study. A repeated review of the interview questions, alongside a critical review of and reflection on common terms in the field and literature, was completed with the goal of creating a list of questions that
could authentically and credibly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) bring about a rich description of each participant’s experiences of identity development with and within the CoP. A complete list of interview questions is available in Appendix E.

**Interview questions.** Identity-work and engagement with communities of practice are processes that are developmental in nature, occurring over time and often changing in response to numerous, ongoing shifts in context and consciousness (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). An important goal of these interviews was therefore to uncover how participants defined, perceived, and experienced the tacit knowledge of professional development being negotiated, developed, and communicated within the CoP. The interviews were also designed to explore how participants perceived the negotiation, development, and definition of their professional identity as a function of their community participation. In keeping with the phenomenological approach to data collection, interview questions allowed for data to emerge from these discussions (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998), adopting an inquiry-based approach to describing an experience rather than looking for answers (p. 39). These descriptions often took the form of a narrative account, where participants told stories of their experiences with identity development and from within the CoP.

Questions covered areas including participants’ past and current activity in these communities as well as their experiences in developing and defining a professional identity. Recognizing that individuals can seek out, gain membership in, and stop engaging with multiple communities over time (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016), and that communities of practice can create and inform criteria for membership (Wenger, 1998), questions also sought to identify and explore how (and if)
participants had moved between several communities and how their perceived, past, and developing sense of identity informed their engagement with these communities.

In turn, these communities and those they encounter in them may have also informed their negotiated sense of self (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006), making it necessary to ask questions that reflect the dual agency between communities of practice and the individuals within them in negotiating the process of identity development. For example, Eraut (2000) noted that the development of tacit knowledge is often influenced by individuals’ biases and predispositions that shape how they interpret the actions of others, at once generating tacit knowledge while drawing on previously developed beliefs and ideas. These ideas may be most salient in memorable moments or situations, such that when asking participants to identify a particularly memorable encounter, the researcher can obtain useful information about how, when, and where the participants have formed their tacit knowledge of professional norms that influence their assumed professional identity. This encounter was framed as one where the participant experienced and observed conflict between members of the CoP, as conflict may provide a particularly salient understanding of what is valued by the community.

Participants were also asked to discuss how they would define a CoP and a professional identity. While these concepts have been defined in the literature, the perceived professional identity in particular can be highly subjective, informed by previous experiences and current opportunities for engagement in the professional community (Omi & Winant, 1994). Participants’ understanding or definition of a CoP was useful data to inform how they might understand the potential influence (if any) of this group of professionals on the development of their professional identity. These
questions helped to form a more robust view of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the participants’ current and past experiences.

Emerging professionals, like all individuals, usually identify with multiple vectors associated with identity, which further complicates an exploration of professional identity as these vectors are integrative rather than additive and do not neatly fit together (Smith & Watson, 1992). In particular, a participant’s age may influence this negotiation of professional identity, as many emerging professionals are typically in their mid-20s or 30s (Shetty, Chunoo, & Cox, 2016), an age where individuals are beginning to build personal foundations and belief centres and have experienced situations and contexts where these beliefs may be used (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The intersection of being a young (age) and new (emerging) professional could therefore influence or impact the development of an identity that centres around one’s work in the field and as a potential or perceived member of the CoP. A criterion for participation in this study was therefore that each participant is under 35 years of age to account for the typical career trajectory of completing an undergraduate degree and obtaining a first position in the field, or having moved through one or two positions early in their career. Information was also collected regarding each participant’s place of employment (e.g., public or private, institution or organization), and the type of work they do (e.g., their own description of what they do for a living).

An identification of other communities of practice that participants may have engaged with in the past and currently helped to provide a more fulsome narrative of this developmental journey. Interview questions were also used to explore any perceived challenges or barriers participants encountered in engaging with, achieving membership
in, and moving between or out of these communities. Taken together, these ideas and goals for the study created a final set of 12 interview questions for the initial interview.

Data Analysis

Although the experience of each individual within this CoP may be unique, the goal of this study was not to compare the experience of professional identity development between individual members. Rather, data analysis focused on describing the lived experience of the development of a professional identity as a function of engagement with and within this professional association, through the eyes of members who are beginning their journey of learning to be (Duguid, 2005). In line with the tenets of phenomenological research, analysis involved interpreting the reported, lived experiences of participants as the overall essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

Interview data were analyzed to discover emerging themes that underpin the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. The first research question, which sought to explore how emerging professionals perceive the tacit knowledge negotiated, developed, and communicated in the CoP, was answered through an analysis of interview questions 2, 3, 5, 8, and 12, which emphasized the participants’ perceptions of the beliefs, values, and other ideas that may inform the field and influence the professionals who work within it. The remaining seven interview questions (questions 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11) emphasized a more personal, individual experience with the CoP and the tacit knowledge of identity development, and were analyzed to inform the second research question that explored how participants perceive the development and negotiation of their professional identity as part of their participation in the CoP. Table 1 summarizes the connection between each interview question and how it contributed to exploring the
study’s research questions. A list of interview questions in the order they were asked is available in Appendix E.

Table 1

Alignment of Initial Interview Questions and Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity that is negotiated, developed, and communicated within the community of practice?</td>
<td>2. How would you describe the beliefs and values that guide your professional practice?</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of beliefs, values, and other ideas (tacit knowledge) that may inform the field and influence its (emerging) professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How would you describe a student affairs professional? What values, beliefs, or attitudes inform their practice?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*5. How might you define a professional identity? What features or characteristics might be used to define a professional identity?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Describe a time where you witnessed a difference of opinion between or among members of this community. What happened? What was the outcome? What did that teach you about what behaviours are valued and/or frowned upon among the community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*12. After completing this interview, how might you now describe the beliefs and values that guide your professional practice?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice perceive the negotiation and development of their professional identity?</td>
<td>1. When asked about what you do for a living, what do you say? How would you describe your job and your work?</td>
<td>Participants’ experiences with/within the community of practice and factors that influenced joining, participating, and/or leaving the CoP and other CoPs/professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. How would you define a community of practice [for the field of student affairs]? What does it look like? What does it do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Why did you choose to become a member of CACUSS? What factors,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
criteria, or other rationale influenced your choice?

*7. How might you know whether or not you are a member of this CoP? What criteria, in your view, define your membership?

9. What other professional communities of practice would you currently consider yourself a member of?

10. What professional communities have you been a part of in the past? Why are you no longer a member of this community/these communities?

*11. How has your identity and/or identity development been influenced by your participation in this CoP?

Note: Questions marked with an asterisk (*) are the interview questions (#5, #7, #11, and #12), which informed both research questions.

Four interview questions informed both research questions, as a personal exploration of the development of a professional identity gave insight into what tacit knowledge informs or makes up this identity. For example, Question 5 sought to discover how the participant may define, for themselves, an important concept for the study, including what it is and how it might be developed. An exploration of membership criteria in Question 7 offered insight into how membership was subjectively defined and what tacit knowledge, if any, is perceived as being important to participants’ understanding of being and becoming a student affairs professional.

The intersection of the journey and the destination was also explored in an analysis of responses to Question 11. This question integrated an opportunity for participants to reflect on the development of their professional identity and the tacit knowledge perceived from their participation in the CoP that may have informed this
process. Question 12 was included as an opportunity to capture any additional insights gained from the reflective nature of the interview process. Participants could, for example, reinforce previously stated values or articulate new ideas generated from our discussions.

The ‘About Me’ statements posted by the participants on professional websites were used to triangulate data from the interviews, providing a means to further explore both research questions. These statements represented, in part, how participants organized and communicated the perceived tacit knowledge of professional identity, while also serving as an explicit point or marker in their journey as emerging professionals. A fulsome analysis of all data served to help the researcher “seek a confluence of evidence that [bred] credibility, [and] that allowed [me] to feel confident about [my] observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110).

The process of data analysis began with a detailed, repeated review of interview transcripts and participants’ ‘About Me’ statements. I first identified statements that seemed to describe the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), before creating groupings of specific statements or units of significance (Sadala & de Adorno, 2001). It was important in this analysis to find common themes amongst the six participants, while also identifying any unique experiences or ideas. An example of how data were organized into themes is available in Appendix F. These units were then incorporated into summary findings that explicated and highlighted the phenomenon of professional identity development within communities of practice.

Findings from this research are reported in Chapter 4, through a narrative that describes the perceived participants’ unique world experiences (Zinker, 1978) while
working to bracket the researcher’s personal views or preconceptions (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). Results are reported as a synopsis reflecting the key themes that were common across most or all of the interviews while also highlighting an overarching idea that was deemed as potentially unique to this context or CoP. The narratives or stories from participant interviews “capture[d] the important elements of the lived experiences” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376), and formed the foundation of the reported analysis alongside the documentation of the researcher’s emerging reactions to and impressions of the data (Cutcliffe, 2003) to further reinforce the subjective, social constructivist lens through which these reported experiences are analyzed.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study attempted to explore how emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice (CoP) perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity. This tacit knowledge was thought to be negotiated, developed, and communicated within the community of practice, contributing to how participants perceive their professional identity as emerging professionals in the field.

The final data set consisted of 12 transcripts derived from two interviews (i.e., an initial interview and a follow up) with each of the six participants who volunteered to take part in this study. Participants were all new professionals according to criteria defined by the literature, having between 0-5 years of full-time experience (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006). During the 2019-20 when the data collection took place, all but one of the participants were employed at a Canadian university in roles defined by their institutions as under the administrative umbrella of student affairs. The remaining participant was employed at a private organization that supports the work of campus residence operations. All but one participant identified as female, and all but one participant worked in Ontario (the remaining participant was employed in Vancouver, BC). A summary of participant demographics is provided on the following page.
Table 2

Summary of Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
<th>Role (Area)</th>
<th>Area of Employment</th>
<th>Place of Employment</th>
<th>Province of Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>ON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Educator/Advisor</td>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>ON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Residence Life</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>ON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>ON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Residence Operations</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>ON</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following each initial interview, participants were provided a copy of the transcript for their review. This review served two purposes: to help ensure the summarized findings accurately represented their perspectives and to inspire additional reflection and conversation in a follow-up discussion. An analysis of the data began with a detailed, repeated review of all interview transcripts to identify statements from participants that seemed to describe the phenomenon of developing a professional identity as a function of engagement with and within a CoP, defined for this study as the professional association (CACUSS). These statements were then grouped together under a set of common themes, reflecting those experiences and ideas that were common across most or all of the interviews. Where applicable, themes unique to a particular individual or context were highlighted, along with any themes or observations that may be of special relevance to the stated structure and function of this CoP.

In this chapter, a common or overarching theme is further described using emergent subthemes to provide an overall synopsis of all key themes. Quotes from
participant interviews are used to illustrate these themes in a narrative that captures the perceived participants’ lived experiences (Starks & Trinidad, 2007) while they are learning to be (Duguid, 2005). All quotes in this section are taken from the participant interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

**Drawing the Map During the Journey: Tensions and Complexities in Developing a Legitimate Professional Identity**

The most salient, common idea was a perceived desire amongst participants to be seen as identifying with the CoP values and, concurrently, doing the work expected of them by the CoP. Participants described aspiring to actively, visibly, and reciprocally engage with other members of the CoP to legitimize or validate themselves as professionals. This was done alongside attempting to understand and align their evolving professional identity with the perceived values of the field and the identified criteria that marked their membership in the CoP.

For example, Participant M1, a male who has worked in the field for almost five years, described

> this unspoken, unwritten rule that as a student affairs professional, your professional identity is tied to the effort … if you’re a part of an association, then you are therefore putting effort into your career … and it adds validity to who you are.

Participant F1, a female who described her role as, in part, “work[ing] on large scale events for all students on campus” described their understanding of a professional identity as “[being] part of a bigger community that has, kind of, as a group, as a whole, [been] striving towards a common goal or a common hope or vision.” Participant F2, a female who described her work in career services as “supporting students with their career development” also perceived a professional identity as related to “a community or
group that you belong to that is tied together based on the work that you do and hopefully also the values that you believe are important for that work to be done.”

This connection between identity and community was echoed by Participant F3, a female coordinator in student life who described her work as encompassing “basically any touch point that students have with the school in a social capacity.” Amongst other components of a professional identity, including years of experience, size of current institution, and prior education, F3 related that “[who is around you] really impacts your professional identity.”

Participant F4, a female coordinator within a residence life department identified a tension or division between their perception of a professional identity and how it is seen by others, noting “professional identity could either be like how the work that you put in … [is] seen by others or [for one] to be … a part of [a] community of professionals.” F4 noted further that describing an overall professional identity is difficult because “in my head it’s very segmented… I often think about the very thin line that exists between my personal identity and my professional identity.” This line was in part drawn in attempting to achieve balance in living with the students F4 served, who “see [my] daily life [yet I] have to be a professional always,” but was also described as different “from what I show my fellow student affairs professionals … [At a conference] I definitely see my persona there to be different than my persona when I’m at work.” Participant F5, a female who “provide[s] one-on-one appointments and group workshops to university students to help them with all things related to careers” introduced the term ‘align’ or ‘alignment’ to describe professional identity as “the way that somebody aligns themselves with their
work and … the sort of underlying beliefs or values of their field of work do align with their own identity.”

In further reviewing the data guided by this initial, overarching idea, three themes emerged. The first theme describes the work and the field of student affairs as perceived by the participants (i.e., Theme 1: Building the Foundation: Defining the Field and Describing the Professional). Within this theme, a subsection is devoted to the CoP and how participants perceive it as the site of the negotiation, development, and communication of the tacit knowledge of professional identity (i.e., Theme 1A: Defining the Role of and Work within a Community of Practice).

The second theme describes how participants ascertain the tacit knowledge of professional identity (i.e., Theme 2: Setting the Standard: Beliefs and Values that Guide the Work), including a subsection outlining what participants viewed as critical or essential criteria to be seen as legitimate members of the CoP and professionals in the field (i.e., Theme 2A: Raising the Bar: Membership and Defining the ‘Shoulds’ of the Field).

The third theme describes challenges and potential barriers identified by members for entering into and interacting within the CoP (i.e., Theme 3: Opening the Doors: Representation in the CoP and Access). This theme is discussed separately from defining the role of and work within the CoP as a way participants described factors that influenced how or if they could engage with the community of practice (see Figure 1 that contains a visual summary of these themes).
Theme 1: Building the Foundation: Defining the Field and Describing the Professional

When asked how they might explain their role and the field of student affairs to others, each participant drew on some variation of ‘student-centered’ or ‘student-focused.’ Participant M1 described their work as being “a resource for students.” Participant F1 described this work as “very student-facing,” with Participant F2 described a student affairs professional as “being student-centered, [and] putting the student first.” Participant F3 further specified that these roles could be described “by saying ‘student engagement’ or ‘student experience’”, emphasizing “enhance[ing] their student experience throughout their degree.” For F3, “a student affairs professional is anyone who is working within an educational system that has an effect on a student’s experience.” Participants F4 and F5 also described their work and the field as
encompassing work with students, noting “I work with students and I provide them with extracurricular learning” (Participant F4) in a field that can also be described as supporting “postsecondary student life” (Participant F5).

As Participant F2 summarized “the only thing that’s really tying us together is that we are in service to students and so there’s no other umbrella term for that, rather than student affairs”, which Participant F3 further explained in noting “[student affairs] is vague in the sense that it is quite an overarching term … the definition of the words themselves literally mean ‘anything to do with students’.”

As a way to further distinguish themselves, participants indicated that they would explain their role by saying that they work at the university but not as a faculty member or instructor, noting “I work in the university, [but] I’m not faculty” (Participant F4) or that “a student affairs professional is someone who works to support students throughout their academic journey, usually in areas that aren’t strictly academic” (Participant F2). Participant M1 described this work as giving students “the opportunity to engage in learning opportunities outside of the classroom.” This work outside the classroom also encompasses, in part, work in residence life, with one participant noting, “it’s overwhelming how many people got into student affairs through that path” (Participant F1). This pathway represents a common entry point for many individuals into the field, as Participant F1 described

a lot of people have gotten into this field through residence life, through paraprofessional roles as students … [they] were super engaged student leaders that … enjoyed their undergrad experience purely because of a lot of the co-curricular, extracurricular stuff they were involved in, that they were a Don [upper year student working on residence in paraprofessional role] or an RA [Residence Advisor] and then become a ResLife [Residence Life] coordinator and then got into roles that allowed them to be Deans of Students and, you know, VPs [Vice Presidents] of Students.
The notions of a pathway, journey, or similar descriptors defining the support of students over time were used frequently to describe how the work of these participants impacted or supported students. In particular, participants noted that they support students “throughout their academic journey” (Participant F2), including “transition programming” (Participant F1) in “a place of learning where [for] a lot of folks, particularly, undergraduates, this is a time of big change in their life, big transition” (Participant F4). Their work was described as organizing offerings that “enhance their student experience throughout their degree” (Participant F3) or being a resource for “students who are looking to navigate their experiences within the higher education realm” (Participant M1). Several participants described themselves as “a guide or a support or a mentor” (Participant F4), who serves as “a wayfinder … So our job is to support students on their journey” (Participant M1).

This notion of being a guide on a developmental journey was also found in the ‘About Me’ statements participants had written for a professional networking site. These statements have been paraphrased and anonymized to prevent identifying participants. For example, one participant shared being passionate about creating programs that support students, while another participant described how they enjoyed and appreciated helping students navigate higher education. Taken together, the role of a student affairs professional was described by a third participant as designing and facilitating institutional offerings that support student development.

A more concrete way of describing these programs and services involves what Participant F3 explained in the interview as “[looking] at the job description and almost like taking apart what is it exactly what you do, and how does that effect the student’s
journey and their degree.” Several participants highlighted aspects of their job

descriptions that they shared to help further clarify what this work may look like in

practice, including “plan[ning] orientation, [working with] student groups” (Participant
F1), “advising, facilitating” (Participant F2), “[working with] clubs … student

association, social events, and even their health insurance” (Participant F3), and “run[ing]

conferences and workshops and provid[ing] resources” (Participant F4).

Participants also noted that describing their role to others “often changes
depending on who I’m speaking to” (Participant F2). Participant M1 noted that if “[this
discussion] is outside the field … it’s a very, very low level.” Similarly, Participant F1
explained, “If it’s to someone outside of the field of student affairs … I try to think of

things that I know they may have been a part of when they themselves were in
postsecondary education.” However, Participant F3 noted that her parents, as an example,
might not understand the work she does because “both my parents went to university in
[country redacted] where the student experience really, still hasn’t really kicked in in
terms of importance … so … it’s kind of strange for them.”

Overall, participants described the field and their roles within it as programs and

services supporting students’ journeys into and through their university experience. These
terms were thought to be most accessible to those who are outside of the field and who

lack the experience with this work, and also offered some additional substance to the
umbrella term of student affairs as supporting, guiding, and advising students in spaces
outside of the classroom. One participant summarized this well in their ‘About Me’
statement, sharing that they enjoy supporting student leadership development and

facilitating student success.
Participants also mentioned the particular challenge they faced in understanding the field and their role in supporting students while being new to the field during a global pandemic. Participant F3, for example, argued:

> It’s definitely been more challenging because I think when you’re given this responsibility almost of the student’s experience … it was almost like going through unchartered territory of how do I create this new student experience virtually for this university, but at the same time trying to stay true to what little I know of the existing identity of student experience.

Participant F4 expressed that new values or traits have arisen from this experience, as “it’s made everyone more flexible, adaptable, you know, being able to think of creative solutions, like on the fly,” while Participant F5 noted that:

> [these experiences] reinforced for me the importance or the value I should say of having colleagues and having people with whom you share some aspects of common ground and people who do similar work because it has been helpful to learn from each other during times like this.

In fact, Participant F4 went on to note that “[this experience] might end up being the standard or benchmark that I compare a lot to other experiences in regards to sudden change or reacting to an ever changing or uncertain situation.”

**Theme 1A: Defining the Role of and Work within a Community of Practice**

The theme of a developmental journey guided in part by sharing resources with a group of colleagues who are like-minded and doing similar work was a common theme in how participants defined a CoP. Participant F1 described a CoP as “a group of individuals that have either common objectives or common challenges, or common pieces in their portfolio … that are all kind of looking for input and feedback and ideas and the opportunity to learn from one another.” Similarly, Participant F3 defined a CoP as “[a] group of working professionals in a similar field of work who are able to convene and share their best practices, their experiences, and even ask questions,” a description
echoed by Participant F4 in noting that “a community of practice is like a collection of folks who have similar professional interests and are also able to either ask for support or an opinion or sharing of resources.” These ideas, experiences, and best practices may help to “bring in student perspectives” such that those participating in the CoP are “all more informed about the holistic student experiences that happen” (Participant F2).

This group of professionals who do similar work being brought together to share best practices may be working under “the general goal … to support the exchange of knowledge and the development of professional competencies and an ability to work effectively in the field” (Participant F5). Participant F2 also noted that these people coming together to share their knowledge and share issues that they’ve been dealing with [are] hoping for support, advice, resources, tools, whatever they need to kind of move things forward on their end and contribute to and be a part of a learning community that advances not only their own work but the work of the profession broadly.

Participant M1 also noted that “participating in a community of practice looks like continually seeking new information, developing yourself as a person and as a professional.” M1 went on to describe that a “true community of practice” is one that is “always looking to innovate and change for the betterment of the student experience.”

The CoP can also offer a way to learn more about the profession. Participant F1 described personal motivation for engaging with the CoP as “trying to find any way to get a foot in the door to meet more people in the field [and] to kind of understand more about this field that I really didn’t know very much about.” Participant F2 noted that “as a new professional, I thought it would be good to be a part of that, especially as someone building my own capacity and myself as a professional in a field that I was very new to.” Participant M1 also saw CACUSS as a way to observe the greater community and as an
opportunity that “allowed me the opportunity to see that there was more out there than just the realm of residence life.” Similarly, Participant F5 joined the association “to connect with and learn from other student affairs professionals” but also “to really learn a lot about every area of student affairs rather than picking an association for just one specific area of student affairs.”

Continuing the theme of learning, participants also noted that they joined the association because they “wanted to be able to learn from others” (Participant F4). As Participant F3 explained, “if we needed help, it would be really nice to have a community to rely on.” Expanding on this idea, F3 noted that

I wanted to be a part of CACUSS because I knew the value of skill sharing and also networking and being able to make those connections at other universities, whether they were in similar situations or even in very different situations … [I wanted] to be able to have that support system.

**Theme 2: Setting the Standard: Beliefs and Values that Guide the Work**

The Setting the Standard theme emerged in the interviews. For example, in one participant’s opinion, “Student affairs professionals … often place a pretty high value on community and the role of being connected to others” (Participant F5). Participant F1 mentioned “the power of a team,” and M1 argued that “[we] value genuine connections and relationships with students and colleagues.” Participant F4 mentioned that, especially during a global pandemic, “everyone is looking for more connection” in part because “we’re stronger together and we get a lot out of connecting with each other.” These themes were also found in participants’ ‘About Me’ statements, where participants described dedication to building supportive relationships and enjoying meaningful interactions with students.
The belief expressed during the interviews that “[an] entire students’ experience at university can be tainted so quickly based on a single interaction” meant that “[we] do our best to make their university experience as smooth as possible” (Participant F3). This belief that “the entire student experience matters in a postsecondary setting, and students develop as a result of their experiences, not just in classes but across many domains” (Participant F5) seemed guided by the associated belief in the importance of education as “an equity promoting force in students’ lives” (Participant F5). To that end, participants described themselves and their colleagues in noting that “they value education, they value community development, they value genuine connections and relationships with students and colleagues” (Participant M1).

Participants further identified several principles, values, and beliefs that guide their work in supporting and creating a meaningful or ‘smooth’ university experience. For example, participants noted that student affairs professionals demonstrate being student-centered by “putting the student first and being empathetic” (Participant F2). This was echoed by Participant F4 who noted that student affairs professionals have “a great amount of empathy for students” and “a desire to help and support, and bring somebody to the next level of what they can achieve.” This was further emphasized in noting that student affairs professionals “really value the development of others” (Participant F1).

Participant F3 noted that “the biggest belief that guides me is to have zero assumptions,” further explaining that she “really appreciated the professionals who … really looked past any assumptions we had, that came into every conversation with a very open mind.” This led to a realization that “how [student affairs professionals] approach student affairs … [is] different based on our experiences and based on our backgrounds.”
Participant F4 said that the time in the CoP “taught me that this professional association is all about learning … from others and taking what is helpful to you and just, you know, respecting what is not helpful to you.”

The value of having few assumptions, or an open mind, pointed to the work of a student affairs professional as guided by “really getting to know our students to understand them instead of just trying to put off whatever agenda I think is right from my student experience” (Participant F3). This participant further noted that in the community of practice “[I] really pushed my professional identity to ask more questions and to be open about sharing my experiences and receiving that from others.” This approach to understanding students and their journeys was described as gaining insights into an occasional

…tension between what students think they might want to do or what students think they’re good at, and what they feel they’re supposed to do as, sort of, imposed on them or more or less explicitly internalized by them through family or cultural or social expectation. (Participant F5)

**Theme 2A: Raising the Bar: Membership and Defining the ‘Shoulds’ of the Field**

A discussion of the beliefs and values that the participants described as guiding the work of a student affairs professional also surfaced a conversation about legitimacy or credibility and belonging in the field. Participant F4 noted “[CACUSS is] such a small community…. And so, it definitely makes me feel that I’m a part of a community and a part of something that ties all student affairs professional together.”

However, this membership and belonging was seen as both desirable and an expectation. Participant F3, in describing reasons for joining CACUSS, explained “this is
just what you do as a student affairs professional … well, you’re in this role now. This is the natural thing to do.” Participant M1 articulated this expectation or assumption as

It is almost flipped [now], where [in the past] you were [seen as a] a student affairs professional before you even began to consider being a part of an association. And now it’s almost like, well, you’re not actually a student affairs professional unless you are a member of an association like CACUSS.

M1 further noted

It is a requirement in this field to be dialed in and to be connected … It’s this unspoken, unwritten rule that as a student affairs professional, your professional identity is tied to the effort, and I put that word loosely, like if you’re a part of an association, then you are therefore putting effort into your career and you are connected in some way, shape, or form, and it adds validity to who you are.

This idea was echoed by Participant F4, who asserted, “If I were to be a student affairs professional who is not a part of CACUSS, I would be questioning my own status as a student affairs professional. I feel that it adds a lot of credibility.” F4 further argued that “I would still consider myself a student affairs professional if for whatever reason I got fired, was out of work, and in between jobs. I’d still be like I’m a student affairs professional ‘cause I’m in CACUSS”. Participant F2 also noted

I’m not particularly aligned with anything aside from CACUSS right now because that was something that early on, I guess, I internalized as the place where I’m supposed to be for a student affairs professional, and should I stop being a student affairs professional, I’ll probably, I guess get told again, what is the association for me.

Which Participant M1 similarly described by explaining “I don’t know that I would have pursued a membership if it wasn’t for the expectation placed on others … It’s just, I never felt that I had a decision to make that was actually my own.”

In attempting to define what it means to belong, however, Participant F3 described the challenge inherent in reviewing the wording on the CACUSS website describing the association’s membership criteria.
There is no one answer, [the wording] is very open and very welcoming and almost vague in terms of how exactly is meant to be a part of CACUSS … I think for new professionals it can be quite daunting because you almost don’t know whether or not you belong in this realm of student affairs and whether those resources that are available to you or those communities that are available to you are actually available to you because you don’t know if you fit in that group.

Wording or language was also mentioned in describing engagement with and membership in the CoP. As Participant F5 explained “[the] biggest influence was probably that I’ve picked up some language … [it has] helped me learn some new terminology and learn how to perhaps speak about my role or speak about the field.” Participant F1 further described the importance of learning this language of the profession in noting that

I was always told before I got into student affairs … that there’s a language you need to learn, there’s way you describe concepts and ideas that is very, kind of, unique to student affairs, and it’s absolutely true. And so you do have kind of the vocabulary to feel less like an outsider.

Participants also emphasized a perceived need for active, reciprocal engagement with and within the CoP. Participant M1 described this idea in asserting “there’s this unofficial expectation that you do, or at least there is for me, this expectation of giving back and participating.” Participant F1 noted that by being more involved with the association it has really made me identify more with CACUSS and more with student affairs than if I just paid my membership due every year…; getting so involved in a community of practice, and kind of building a little bit of a name has helped me feel more or a greater sense of belonging in the field.”

Participant F4 argued “when you’re entering a community of practice, you’re entering a reciprocal relationship with your fellow professionals who are interested or specializing or want to develop further.” As Participant F3 noted, “I think that’s a huge part of that membership feeling, that almost belonging, that either you can contribute or
participate in something.” This reciprocal relationship was further described by Participant F1, who asserted “if I’m taking ideas or taking suggestions from other people … I should be paying that forward or I should be reciprocating in some capacity [or] matching other’s contributions in some capacity.” In other words “am I really a member of that community of practice if all I do is read the emails and soak in some of the information that other people are producing?” As Participant F4 shared “I really see it as a reciprocal relationship where I’m gaining a lot, but I also want to contribute my fair share.”

This active membership may look like “people who are … more openly sharing their experiences or soliciting questions and answers from others or leading webinars … to connect people [and] being the ones who take action to move things forward” (Participant F5). Participant F3 further explained,

I feel I’m a part of the group because I’ve been either attending webinars or trying to take part in discussions where possible and I think that’s like a huge part of that membership feeling, that almost belonging, that either you can contribute or participate in something … those would be my two biggest markers … the contribution element and then the participant element.

This value of being actively involved or engaged was perceived as being of particular importance to new professionals. As Participant M1 noted, “A younger professional is going to be more hungry and more willing to put more of an, a higher, a greater amount of investment than perhaps some who are in the middle stages of their career.” In considering why this might be the case, Participant F2 mused, “if you don’t per se identify as a student affairs professional and you aren’t doing all the things that go along with identifying as it … I’m not sure that you will advance professionally in the field.”
In considering where these expectations may come from, Participant F3 mentioned that

A lot of your identity is really marked by your experience … [the] ideal of what a student affairs professional looks like … all of those ‘shoulds’ are partly dictated from your experience as someone going through the education system and seeing what other student affairs professionals have done. But I think it also has to do with either colleagues you’ve worked with or the interactions you’ve had with other student affairs professionals.

F3 further noted that as a student affairs professional, “you’re working with students a lot of the time and a huge marker of helping students is being welcoming” which may mean “a lot of those traits or a lot of those ‘shoulds’ have come out of just the apparent need of behaviour in the role.” During the global pandemic, Participant F5 argued that these ‘shoulds’ may manifest as “people’s character or organizations’ characters are more intimately or more quickly revealed” such that

there’s a lot of nice words out there, particularly in higher ed people who sort of talk a big game … but might not actually follow through on being the institution or department or person or team that they claim to be, or perhaps they aspire to be … I think it’s a lot harder to hide in times like these.

**Theme 3: Opening the Doors: Representation in the CoP and Access**

When asked about student affairs, participant M1 described it as “a very cliquey field,” while for Participant F2 “it can be highly monolithic in nature in some ways in terms of the composition of the field.” These statements highlight issues with membership and access to the CoP. Participant F2 further elaborated on the label ‘monolithic’ in noting that,

we can talk about this in terms of whether it’s like primarily women or primarily white or primarily the socioeconomic background and primarily people who are very extroverted … There are certain stereotypes of what does it mean to be a professional in this field.
Similarly, this observation was also shared by Participant F2, who “noticed at my first CACUSS [that] there were very few people of colour present … I don’t think I’d realized how White the profession was until I saw, I guess, the makeup of CACUSS.”

Several participants further discussed inclusion as a desirable value and practice that was not always considered in their interactions with the professional association. Participant F1 shared the observation that, following the association’s annual conference, “post-conference feedback was about how uncomfortable and unwelcome some members of our profession, and of our community of practice, felt at that [CACUSS] conference,” noting that CACUSS is meant to represent all of these diverse voices and represent the people that are serving these diverse student populations and yet at the one place that you anticipate people feeling so welcome and energized and appreciated at this annual conference, it’s a place where people felt actively excluded. Participant F1 furthered this discussion of representation in asking, “who is in our profession? Who has historically been included as a member of this community of practice or this profession? Who is leading the communities of practice? And what about them gives them the ability to do that?”

Participant F1 also reflected on “how much effort is put into actually broadening the scope or the membership within CACUSS and the association that represents this profession that is, I don’t know, very homogenous in some capacities.” Participant F2 did, however, note “I do see with CACUSS a willingness to improve and a willingness to be more inclusive” but that “historically, it [CACUSS] wasn’t necessarily a space that took into consideration certain identities.” In continuation, F2 shared an example explaining that “just that there are a lot of women in the field, men in the field might feel a little bit differently about their identity as a man, compared to other spaces, just simply
due to a minority status.” As Participant F1 conveyed, “I imagine it would be difficult to feel like a valued member of a community of practice if you are the only person like you in it.”

These discussions were also characterized by what participants perceived as the benefits associated with their status as a member in the CoP. One important benefit was described as what participants saw as being available to or for them by virtue of their membership status. Participant M1 observed that those [who] have the ability to obtain additional education, can, and those that don’t, what do they do? I know some people treat CACUSS as an opportunity to supplement education and learning because there aren’t other avenues [for them]… I work with professionals who will never be able to pursue additional education because their grades were really bad or they didn’t go to university. So, their options are limited to certificate and diploma programs at a college. So, they don’t feel that that puts them at a competitive edge.

Several other participants expanded on this discussion of degrees and credentials as a potential barrier to membership in the CoP. Participant F1 observed how “only recently the Master’s level of ‘knowledge’ [has] kind of been valued as it is now, perhaps overvalued.” It was also emphasized that “joining CACUSS and seeing what the greater community looked like in the early stages of [my] development … quickly ushered in the realization that credentials mattered and that you had to play the game in order to succeed” (Participant M1). Participant F2 similarly noted, “[how] there’s also credentialism and how credentialism can also pose a barrier to access, particularly from people who don’t have the socioeconomic resources to pursue that as a field.”

Furthermore, “the whole reason I pursued my Master’s was that I was told that if you want to enter this field, then you need to have a Master’s because you’re not already bringing many years of experience.”
More concretely, Participant F4 perceived membership in the CoP as “having a forum to communicate with other members, that is not open to others … being able to attend conferences and have access to various professional development opportunities that if you are not a member you don’t have access to.” Access to other communicated benefits of being a member of the CoP, including, for example, voting rights, was described by Participant M1, who works for a private corporation supporting the work of student affairs professionals, as “problematic … overarchingly the narrative was coming from a space of exclusion” where “people whose jobs were to advocate and to support spaces of inclusion were literally excluding their colleagues and friends in some cases because they were under this umbrella of ‘this could be harmful for the association’.”

Participant F5 also noted that discussions amongst members “often indicate that social justice is a pillar of this profession,” yet she also expected members to demonstrate being on board with social justice at all times to exhibit a commitment to the field. However, these aspirational values, based on her observations, were not perceived as being congruent with the tone used in these conversations.

These criteria for membership may “expand or become less formal [during a pandemic or other big world events] … because more people are involved in both formal and informal ways in trying to learn and trying to educate others” (Participant F5). This participant further noted, “I think when massive world events hit, there are less, or sometimes even no, I guess, criteria for membership to partaking in a conversation.” F5 continued to say, “I also recognize that that may be idealistic or naïve of me to assume that [in such situations] a lot of organizations, particularly well-established ones, might suddenly change or lessen their criteria for a formal membership, particularly where that
involves money.” The criteria for membership as a student affairs professional may also change as a result of the pandemic, as Participant F4 explained,

we don’t know [how] the nature of jobs are going to perhaps change, so the jobs that perhaps we might have been looking forward to applying to or jobs we were expecting to be open may not exist or may exist differently and all of a sudden new skills are needed.

Identifying as a member of the CoP may also surface challenges of the degree of or (over) investment in a professional role and identity. For example, Participant F2 noted, “I think in defining yourself as a student affairs professional because it becomes who you are, it’s hard to say ‘no’ to certain things because it becomes who you are.” F2 further reflected how “to some extent I wonder if it’s detrimental to so strongly identify with a professional identity because it limits your ability to take care of the rest of your identities and the rest of your roles.” This may be beneficial, as “those who strongly identify with the overall mission or purpose of the work that they’re doing …that strong level of identification can perhaps allow people to get through the less enjoyable tasks on a day-to-day basis” (Participant F5). However, “the expectation of this [job] is [that] your identity [will cost you, it] will essentially boil down to exploitation of labour” (Participant F2). This participant further noted that “[if] you aren’t doing all the things that go along with identifying as [a student affairs professional] such as overwork, essentially, a lot of emotional labour, all of that, I’m not sure that you will advance professionally in the field.” This emotional labour may be necessary for advancement as “there are a lot of often casual roles and contract roles. So, if you want to get that permanent job, you are trying to prove yourself … You will say ‘yes’ because you feel like you can’t say ‘no’.”
Participant F3 summarizes the challenges other participants mentioned regarding representation in and access to the CoP, observing:

“I think for new professionals it can be quite daunting because you almost don’t know whether or not you belong in this realm of student affairs and whether those resources that are available to you or those communities that are available to you are actually available to you because you don’t know if you fit in that group.”

Participant F2 further highlighted the question of whether “identifying as a student affairs professional [is] a natural thing to do.” She also raised a possible intersection between membership and legitimacy in noting “sometimes I wonder how much of this whole discussion is really based on the profession trying to assert that, ‘I’m legitimate’, ‘I’m real’; ‘Look at me’.”

The themes described in this section represent an observation of how participants perceived the tacit knowledge of professional identity and the negotiation and development of this knowledge as it informs their professional identity and perceived CoP membership. The real work for these professionals seemed to be twofold. Participants described the challenge of integrating the definitions of the field as it is being defined for them and the definitions they are constructing for themselves as emerging professionals into some coherent, viable model that guides their professional practice. They were also, simultaneously, determining how to navigate and whether to align themselves with perceived expectations of how they should move into and through this field and how to actively, visibly demonstrate that they truly, legitimately belong. A discussion of these findings is shared in Chapter 5 as a means to develop assertions and assumptions related to the participants’ reported experiences and what tentative theories arose from these interpretations (Lester, 1999). In that chapter, I will reflect on the significance of these findings for emerging professionals in the field, including how these
findings connect to the definitions of communities of practice and membership from the literature. I will also explore how the literature describing professional identity and identity-work are highlighted in how participants describe the process of learning to be.
CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, I will explore how the stated experiences of six participants, emerging student affairs professionals, help to describe the phenomenon under study, namely, how they perceive participation in CACUSS, the community of practice (CoP), as professional identity development. The themes described in Chapter Four will be used to provide answers to two key research questions.

The chapter will then offer reflections on the potential implications of this study for theories of professional identity and communities of practice. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the study limitations, its contribution to theory and practice, and provide some recommendations for future work. As a potential contribution to the literature, this chapter will include a visual model to summarize and synthesize these findings as a representation of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants.

RQ1: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity that is negotiated, developed, and communicated within the CoP?

When attempting to define a CoP, nearly all participants described it as a group of people in similar professional roles or responsibilities, gathering around a common interest in student affairs. Their involvement in the CoP was described as both a knowledge seeker and a knowledge provider. This initial definition is similar to how the literature describes communities of practice as organized around a domain, which Wenger (2004) refers to as the knowledge that binds the community together and gives it identity. The work of both seeking and providing this knowledge could relate to what
Wenger (1998) called mutual engagement, involving the collective work of jointly creating a common understanding of professional practice.

For the participants, however, this common purpose was not explicitly linked to a shared goal or joint enterprise, but tied together instead by the tacit values and beliefs that this work was inherently good and professionally necessary. The joint enterprise of sharing explicit knowledge and developing professional competencies was perceived as essential to reinforcing and demonstrating the student-centered values meant to guide the work of a student affairs professional. Participants’ observations of the purpose or goal of the CoP mirror the postmodern and social constructivism lens through which participants saw desired competencies defined and mutually negotiated. Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) describe this as a social process of negotiating competence over time, highlighting that this knowledge is communally developed as part of the desired collaborative work within the CoP.

**Centering the Student by Centering the Self: Past Experiences and Current Professional Identities.** Defining student affairs as a field that is guided by a student-centered or student-focused philosophy can offer some insight into what can be perceived as the beliefs and values that guide professionals in doing this work. Most participants came to the field with past experiences of engaging in similar roles designed for student employees or volunteers, and benefiting from the work of other student affairs professionals. Their observations that these past relationships and experiences have influenced their participation in the CoP and how they moved through the profession is in line with research that indicates that one’s identity evolves as contexts and relationships change (Omi & Winant, 1994). More importantly, how the individual expresses
dimensions of identity through their behaviour is also fluid and highly dependent on context (Jones & McEwen, 2000), which may explain why several participants noted speaking or behaving differently about themselves and their roles depending on who they were with, where they were, or what they were doing.

In particular, participants who worked in or had knowledge of residence life perceived that it was easier to explain their role to others, particularly to those outside the field of student affairs. Upon reflection, this could be because of the narrow social norms that are often stereotypically portrayed and highlighted in popular culture and media representations of the university experience, which Yakaboski and Donahoo (2015) found in an analysis of recent Hollywood films. This stereotypical representation of college and the college student may make it easier for even those who did not attend post-secondary institutions themselves to have a basic, if perhaps less nuanced, understanding of this part of the field. Such assumptions and ideas may have also be similar to beliefs and values that these participants brought with them to the field, while also contributing to their emerging understanding of what it means to be a student affairs professional. This may be of particular importance to those participants who are continuing to work in residence life, and for all participants who would often in interviews note or describe the large proportion of residence life professionals in the field. This majority may have influenced the subsequent negotiation, development, and communication of the tacit knowledge of professional identity toward a smaller subset of ideals or assumptions. The tacit knowledge of professional identity in this CoP may have been subject to habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), where only a certain, pre-existing set of ideals (e.g., induced by connections with residence life and people) may be reinforced. This habitus (unconscious
assumptions that are resistant to change) may generate potential tensions within the community as part of the individual’s continual negotiation of ‘self’ (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006) as “the development of knowledge within a community of practice may become path-dependent as new knowledge reinforces an existing preference or predisposition” (Roberts, 2006, p. 630).

These past experiences and unconscious assumptions seemed to prompt participants to reflect on the values that guided their work and how this tacit knowledge should, in theory, direct how they offer other students the same important opportunities that were afforded to them. Those who held roles as student leaders (e.g., student government, or similar committees and clubs) or who were past or current residence life professionals, were perhaps even more engaged in student affairs. This often included sharing resources with and offering support to fellow students while being actively involved in their campus community. Related participants’ recollections echo some of the literature on transferring knowledge between settings, particularly in what E. Wenger-Trayner describes as “limit[ing] expressibility and … narrow[ing] accountability so much that people have to almost forget who they are in order to belong [in the CoP] … [until] only certain very narrow ways [remain] that count as competence [in the CoP]” (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, p. 156). An overabundance of residence life professionals and past student leaders or paraprofessionals may not offer a truly representative view of the field of student affairs, as the tacit knowledge of identity development may be reflective of only the dominant source of power, which Roberts (2006) identified as a challenge for communities of practice. McLean and Syed (2015) also identify what they call powerful structures both within and outside of the CoP where
“[individuals] can construct and tell alternative stories – [but this] does not make those structures entirely negotiable” (p. 336). This literature provides a way to interpret what my participants identified as the pressures new professionals face both inside their institutions and through other external forces researchers identify as coming from the broader society and system (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000). These pressures may be a barrier to effectively make meaning from and of experiences that can inform the development of a professional identity.

Sharing resources and offering support to other members of the CoP extends the theme of active engagement as a visible demonstration of the tacit knowledge of professional identity. The tacit knowledge of professional identity that participants perceived as being negotiated, developed, and communicated within the CoP included the active, reciprocal exchange of ideas gained from current or recent experience in the field. Those who are actively contributing and openly sharing their experiences can reinforce the tacit value or expectation of having and, in fact, needing to contribute something. Most participants used the term ‘giving back’ to describe this active, reciprocal relationship which one participant termed ‘meaningful engagement’.

What was being shared was identified by participants as primarily explicit knowledge posted on forums or shared in webinars (e.g., best practices, past experiences with common challenges, or resources). The CoP was perceived as an important site for this social, contextual learning and knowledge transfer, yet, as Levin and Cross (2004) aptly note, the CoP is still subject to challenges inherent in the structural and relational variables that impact how, or if, knowledge is shared. The open, ready sharing of knowledge may, however, demonstrate and reinforce trust as a key factor for supporting
the less costly transfer of knowledge (CurraInll & Judge, 1995). By the same token, Polanyi (1996) notes that one’s tacit knowledge cannot be separated from one’s relationship to the knowledge source. In this case, participants recognized that in order to be a trusted member of the CoP, they needed to demonstrate the value of willingly sharing knowledge, such that they could be seen as ‘buying in’ to the goal of shared, collaborative learning. They were also able to demonstrate competence in sharing useful or valuable information, which Levin and Cross (2004) recognize in noting that “if the knowledge received was to be of any use … the knowledge receiver [must] trust the competence of the source” (p. 1485).

This expectation of ‘meaningful’ engagement demonstrates the tacit knowledge of this group’s professional identity; it encompasses the importance of them both engaging with and giving back to the community. In other words, participants perceived that they could equally benefit from this reciprocal relationship with the CoP while also being expected to contribute to this exchange. Participating as an active member within the CoP (i.e., CACUSS) in this way is meant to therefore help one to advance in the field by gaining both credibility and visibility while demonstrating that they are concurrently learning from and supporting the learning of this community of peers. Participants could therefore be seen as working to influence a subjective view of intellectual competence and personal trustworthiness, which researchers have identified as important for the successful, smooth transfer of tacit knowledge (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003).

This engagement within the CoP can also be perceived as needing to be meaningful in both action and content – the act of sharing is just as important as what is being shared. What this meaningful content could be was perceived as relevant or timely
examples from recent field experiences that can support current or anticipated challenges for members of the CoP. This form of engagement echoes the sharing of explicit knowledge, which Bruner (1996) describes as the competency building and explicit knowledge acquisition of learning how or learning about. Alongside the act of “learning to be” (Duguid, 2005, p. 113) as the acquisition of the tacit, often unspoken knowledge of the field, this exchange of explicit knowledge was seen as also helping to identify an active member of the field. This active engagement in knowledge sharing and simultaneous active employment as a means to generate relevant, timely knowledge are equally valued and uniformly critical to legitimacy in the field.

The perceived importance of being willing to actively participate, engage, and share can be seen in the foundational motivations of a CoP, namely, as Wenger (1998) defines, the mutual engagement in the joint enterprise of building a shared repertoire. The glue that holds these processes together seems to be the core values and beliefs identified by participants as this joint enterprise and mutual engagement, around the shared domain of student affairs, is essential to doing good work in the field. Emerging student affairs professionals may then find a natural affiliation for the expressed work of the CoP, finding a validation of current or previously held beliefs and values. This comfortable setting may also more easily encourage feelings of belonging, which the literature describes as an alignment between the values demonstrated by the CoP and the individual’s personal, evolving values and sense of self (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006).

These emerging student affairs professionals described bringing with them the values learned or internalized as student leaders that were reinforced as possibly
contributing to their success as an emerging professional or paraprofessional. However, they described the need to now recognize that these values, while perhaps continuing to guide their work and being reinforced by the shared past experiences of many others in the field, may be at odds with current or emerging trends in the field. While their application may look different depending on institutional context and current professional trends or student needs, the values and beliefs that guide this work may be nearly identical between those of a past student staff member and a current member of a professional staff team, meeting under the common umbrella of a desire to support student success.

The CoP’s members’ values and beliefs are then reinforced by the continued, constant interaction with colleagues who are engaged in these reciprocal dialogues across contexts, often facilitated and supported by the CoP leadership and activities. Here again is a possible example of the potential challenge of habitus or the reinforcing of unconscious assumptions (Bourdieu, 1990) in the closed ecosystem of the CoP. However, the professional association can also, according to researchers, serve to articulate values and standards for the profession (Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, & Pasquesi, 2016), through what Gardner and Barnes (2007) see as the work of defining and modeling this tacit knowledge that then informs the profession and daily, professional practice.

Inherent in these identified values of the active, reciprocal exchange of ideas was also the expectation that, as a student affairs professional, one will or must be open to these ideas and potentially new ways of being or behaving, even if these concepts do not come from the same institutional context. This assumption was further specified in the perceived values of being open-minded and demonstrating a curiosity in sharing
approaches and practices, and not making assumptions based on past experiences.
Several participants noted that assumptions from past experiences might be more often
based on time spent as an involved student or student leader, further noting a potential
tension between past values and current expectations. Regardless, the tacit knowledge of
professional identity was perceived as being influenced by working to make meaning at
the intersections of past experiences and new opportunities, often through the
postmodernism lens that Grenz (1996) describes as subjectively ‘reading’ the ‘text’ of
these experiences. This work is also, as Lave and Wenger (1991) described, socially
situated and therefore highly influenced by the communal interaction and exchange in the
CoP. New student affairs professionals seem to be tasked with navigating the
development of a professional identity as charting a course through new territory using
a familiar, yet perhaps outdated lexicon.

Learning the Language of the Field. Participants described how they learned to
identify, understand, and communicate the tacit knowledge of professional identity as
learning a new language. While some of the explicit language inherent to the field is
taught in Master’s degree courses (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009), membership in a CoP
was perceived as being able to help new professionals navigate the tacit knowledge of
professional identity by learning the language of the field. This language may be a
particular vocabulary or terminology, but can also represent how, as Nonaka (1994)
describes, these tacit beliefs and values are explicitly communicated in the artifacts
collectively created by the CoP. These artifacts of the joint enterprise of the CoP
(Wenger, 1998) are further shared amongst both the in-group and various out-groups
external to the CoP, which are again subject to what Huckle (2019) describes as individual perceptions as a way to negotiate meaning.

For example, participants shared that they may use different vocabulary or examples if the person they are speaking to about the field and their work has been attending university before and is, at the very least, aware of activities that may fall under this student-focused umbrella (e.g., new student orientation, career services). This notion implies that those who have studied at a university or who are currently employed at an institution speak the same professional or field-specific language, making it easier to provide context to a complex definition. However, this does not guarantee that these same individuals will be able to identify or understand the work of a current student affairs professional, as, according to one participant, they may have attended university in a time or place where student affairs did not look the same or were not given the same perceived level of importance they might enjoy nowadays.

Participants also explained that engaging with this CoP offers opportunities to both learn the language of the field and to practice using this vocabulary in context. Becoming a student affairs professional may then involve becoming fluent in the lexicon of terminology and, by extension, associated behaviours needed to be a successful, productive student affairs professional. Becoming conversant in the language of student affairs offers another avenue for demonstrating the behaviours associated with the tacit values and beliefs of being student-centered (e.g., describing theories and concepts using particular terminology) while also showcasing that one can both walk-the-talk and talk-the-talk of other members of the CoP. Duguid (2005) relatedly suggests that learning about the profession “confers [only] the ability to talk a good game, but not necessarily
to play one” (p. 113). This common language can signal that emerging professionals have learned how to be a student affairs professional within a CoP that provides the “interpretive support” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98) to negotiate, develop, and communicate the tacit knowledge necessary for the development of a professional identity.

Having a common language or shared vocabulary can also create a more visible, defined boundary between the in- and out-group. Those who have learned and are fluent in this language can readily access resources or fully engage in reciprocal, active discussions. Overcoming the professional language barrier is reinforced by continued and consistent interactions amongst the membership. This aspect of community involvement was perceived by participants as being an important benefit to early access to and engagement with the CoP, yet again implies a challenge of reflecting, according to Roberts (2006), only the dominant source of power in the CoP and, potentially, the profession as a whole.

Membership Matters: Belonging and Legitimacy for Professional Identity. It was telling that several participants used their standing as a paid member in CACUSS as a necessary criterion for calling themselves a student affairs professional. Despite being somewhat critical of the more common pathways into and through the field participants still found legitimacy or validation as a professional through this form of membership. This could be interpreted to mean that the CACUSS membership may be enough to demonstrate the values of a student affairs professional (e.g., sharing knowledge and best practices, engaging in the reciprocal exchange of ideas, working collaboratively in community), and that being a member allowed them a large, visible platform to exhibit
that they are in line with these expectations. This may then help new professionals to identify themselves as members of this CoP even without a formal title or role as an active employee in the field.

The platform that the CoP provides for professionals in primarily online, as CACUSS offers membership to student affairs professionals from across Canada. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, these online platforms and technological tools were identified by participants as especially important to remain connected to the CoP and their colleagues while still engaging in ongoing professional development. This use or application of technology, however, “does not free us from consideration of social processes” (Endersby, Phelps, & Jenkins, 2017, p. 84) as according to Rogers (2010), using technology for social purposes is itself a social process that relies on social structures and norms. The important work participants identified of sharing novel information or explicit knowledge may in fact be more easily shared amongst what Aral (2016) calls, the weaker social ties formed online. Bakshy, Roseen, Marlow, and Adamic (2012) found that these weaker ties lack intimacy or constant interaction; yet they still provide an important forum for sharing this novel information that may support CoP members in problem-solving and professional development.

Within a CoP like CACUSS that facilitates a large majority of its knowledge exchange and community connections online, it may be possible to see the effects of what Andrews and Delahaye (2000) define as the psychosocial filters that mediate knowledge-sharing. These interpersonal connections and social reinforcement can influence the trust and other factors for relationship building that Rogers (2006) deem as important to the successful and perhaps more equitable transfer of knowledge. The use of
technology to identify and organize the “community of practice design elements” (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003, p. 184) may then aid in the demonstration and negotiation of the tacit knowledge of professional identity. CACUSS can also be seen as adapting to a new way of working and learning, as this CoP may be one of several associations or CoPs able to “assemble together people with digital network technologies [to engage] in professional identity generation” (Evans, 2015, p. 32).

It is important to note here that these opportunities for engagement, as described by the participants, echo the literature describing legitimate peripheral participation, defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a potential pathway to move toward full membership in a CoP. On the surface, full membership may be a simple dichotomy – you are a full member if you have paid the membership fee and therefore not a member if you have not. This dichotomy, however, hides a more nuanced understanding of the “inherently socially negotiated character of meaning” (p. 50) where, according to Carpenter (2003), both professionals and the association must work to define full membership in their particular field. A paid membership in CACUSS and their name in the association’s directory seems to provide some early yet essential legitimacy for these participants, yet the ongoing identity-work of negotiating, developing, and communicating the tacit knowledge of professional identity remains inherent in the mutual engagement in the joint enterprise of negotiating, defining, and communicating tacit knowledge in a broader professional, national, and cross-institutional context. Being actively engaged in this work may provide the legitimacy or credibility needed to move closer to full membership in the CoP.
The tacit knowledge of professional identity seems to include the belief that membership matters. This internalized belief seems to connect the association as a CoP to a larger assumption that membership in CACUSS (or at least being aligned with the association by participating in the activities it offers) is where student affairs professionals should be. An expectation of membership in CACUSS or any other association may therefore serve to indicate how a new professional is meant to learn about the field and, more importantly, what is expected of them as a new professional.

The coming together as a group of individuals with a shared interest and common professional responsibilities described by the participants was not, however, immediately perceived as requiring more formal structures or the payment of a monetary fee. The value of a more formally structured and facilitated CoP, defined in this study as a professional association, seems to include access to a greater pool of and more diverse resources and opportunities for professional development. Participants also repeated the importance of achieving visibility and legitimacy in the field by contributing to this collection of resources through active, reciprocal engagement on a national platform and in the company of other influential professionals in the field. These more senior professionals may act as mentors, who Young (1985) describes as providing another means of demonstrating the tacit knowledge of professional identity. Hackman (1992) notes that this tacit knowledge is often more easily identified through observable behaviours, which means that these younger professionals may use their observations of the more senior members of the CoP to define the tacit knowledge of the field and, as Mason (2016) notes, use it as an opportunity to enhance their own professional identity. These ‘older’ professionals may therefore, according to Isopahkala-Bouret and Niemi,
(2017), offer an observable way of demonstrating a strong commitment to the professional community which may further enhance or validate this tacit knowledge.

Participants perceived that visible engagement within the CoP offers legitimacy for a student affairs professional through demonstrating an observable alignment with the tacit knowledge of professional identity. The literature defines this important observable behaviour as engaging in professional development for learning and skill development (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006) that Bandura (1977) argued is very much dependent on an expectation of observation by the individual and interaction in a communal context. Participants were therefore describing the negotiation and development of the tacit knowledge of professional identity as a “shift from emphasizing the individual’s learning contexts to a focus on what it means to learn as a function of being a member of a community of learners” (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003, p. 267), highlighting that this is not simply an accidental phenomenon but rather an expected, conscious choice for emerging student affairs professionals.

Similar to Wenger’s (1998) definition of a CoP as a place to share knowledge amongst people with a common interest who are engaging in similar work or roles, the participants interviewed for this study perceived the negotiation and development of the tacit knowledge of professional identity as tied to the expectation that this identity-work would and should be done communally. Inherent to the successful, productive, ideally equitable exchange of ideas and support is the tacit belief in and value of investing time and energy in building these strong relationships. This investment was perceived as a non-negotiable aspect of the tacit knowledge of professional identity, which participants saw as demonstrated and communicated by other members of the CoP.
The Value of More: Over-Work and Over-Investment as the Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity. The ‘shoulds’ of student affairs represent, as perceived by the participants, a more compelling identification and demanded alignment with the beliefs and values of the field. Saying that new professionals in student affairs ‘should’ do or be something means that it may not be enough to simply believe in the same things as fellow professionals and to occasionally demonstrate alignment with these beliefs; instead, one must actively, overtly, and constantly demonstrate a commitment to the field. This may be especially necessary for new professionals who are still working to develop a professional identity that, for Young (1985) demonstrates a commitment to the field or as Carpenter (1980) describes, a commitment to the emerging professional’s first professional role. This need for or emphasis on standards may also be the motivation for attempting to create a set of professional competencies, similar to the work of CACUSS in 2011 as part of the Identity Project. These competencies are meant to communicate explicit knowledge about standards for professionals in the field and may also be a visible representation of tacit knowledge that Dhanarai, Lyles, Steensma, and Tihanyi (2004) describe as the glue for integrating and embedding learning within context-specific, non-standardized processes.

This tacit knowledge of professional identity communicated within the CoP was perceived to cause professionals to hold themselves at a high standard believing that their work is fundamental to the goal of student success. To be asked to invest time in achieving and maintaining these high standards concurrently for themselves, their students, and the community may feel particularly difficult in the face of multiple, competing priorities both professionally and personally. This over-emphasis on the
necessity of membership and the demonstration of alignment with the tacit knowledge of a professional identity may then become problematic, as participants described internalizing expectations that can be unhealthy. For example, the intimate alignment between the perceived tacit knowledge of the field and one’s professional identity may also cause a degree of cognitive dissonance for an emerging professional. A new professional who identifies strongly with the student-focused goals of the profession may not see the same support or affordances offered to them in roles Young (1985) identifies as being perceived on campus as subordinate or secondary.

This dissonance may further arise in an attempt to negotiate the development of a professional identity, where the explicit behaviours that are deemed required to demonstrate an alignment with the tacitly communicated values of the field might prove unsustainable. Many participants shared that this may prove unsustainable alongside the effort required to support other, emerging elements of the self and the other roles and priorities a student affairs professional must tend to outside of their (potentially unlimited) working hours. This tacit knowledge of professional identity within this CoP was specifically defined as a need for labour – an active, emotional, often immense investment in the lives of their students and regular contributions to the continued development of the CoP and the field as a whole. In order to do this work, however, there is an implicit or tacit value that professionals will find, make, and invest the time necessary to actively and reciprocally share knowledge, connect with, and give back to their community. Emerging student affairs professionals may therefore feel they are being called to do everything, to do it all at once, and to do everything well! This ideal may be communicated via the importance of lifelong learning, which Field (2000) notes
as shaping our understanding of membership in a learning society. Participants, however, perceived that this ongoing, lifelong process must be their primary focus, at the possible exception of other responsibilities or priorities, given the critically important work of the field.

Participants also described the perceived intense emotional investment in their work as characterized by the identified value of having a great amount of empathy for their students. This may again cause new professionals to demonstrate these beliefs and values as a strong emotional and effortful (over) investment into their job. In practice, this investment may demonstrate dedication to a professional identity, described by Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, and Pasquesi (2016) as “[the] investment of personal resources (e.g. time, money, effort) that emanates from an internalized congruence between one’s personal and professional values” (p. 560). Kegan (1994) identified that some of this early empathy or investment may be emphasized in Master’s degree programs that serve as entry points to the field, where students must learn to balance their own needs with those of others as part of the social construction of identity. The language of service or servant leadership described by one participant also intimates a perceived high degree of responsibility for students in supporting their meaningful development throughout their studies.

When the field, as represented by the association, is observed as representative of only a subset of people who may have the privilege to do this work (e.g., no children) or who hold identities seen as particularly good at demonstrating this emotional labour of nurturing and support (e.g., female) (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009), it may be difficult for all new professionals to truly see themselves as members. Interestingly, however, the
majority of participants in this study identify as female, and none mentioned having children, which may mean that it was potentially easier for them to see themselves as members of the field in their current roles or at this current stage in their careers. Participants did mention, however, foreseeing considerable challenges in career advancement should they, for example, wish to start a family sometime in the future knowing that very few senior executives that they know or have seen have children.

Conversely, early notions in student affairs of what Lee (2011) identifies as ‘loco parentis’ (acting in place of parents), may now imply that there remains a tacit need to leverage the same traits that may be desirable for parenthood in support of the care, guidance, and way-finding for students (e.g., empathy, emotional investment, and giving back). Participants mentioned this challenge of integrating rather than adding together - the notion that Smith and Watson (1992) identify as multiple vectors of identity or what Reynolds and Pope (1991) describe as the formation and expression of multiple identities. These individual dimensions and collective identities evolve rather than disappear when, according to Omi and Winant (1994), the individual moves between personal and more professional contexts. This may mean that professionals have a more difficult time advancing in the field if they are parents themselves, while still being expected to negotiate and demonstrate these tacit values of care, support, empathy, and concern as if the students were or could be thought of having similar traits to familial offspring (e.g., needing guidance, support, and reassurance throughout their developmental journey). However, none of my study participants have children yet several identified the potential challenge for their career development if they chose to start a family. This tension between acting like a parent (i.e., demonstrating care)
considered to be a valuable behavior for a professional, while actually being a parent feared to be a potential detriment to professional development highlights the difficulty of integrating the desirable and expected elements of identity into a coherent whole.

It is noteworthy that participants would often argue the need for students to be and feel supported in their own identity-work, but rarely commented that this same support may be of considerable benefit to them. This could imply that the tacit knowledge of professional identity in student affairs includes a high degree of selflessness, which seems at odds with the tacit knowledge that investing in themselves through professional development and lifelong learning in the CoP is critical for their success (i.e., advancement in the field). This success, however, is again defined by how successfully student affairs professionals support students and the CoP but not, worryingly, how they support themselves.

The expressed values of being heavily invested in the student experience to the point of potential burnout, may mean, paradoxically, that student affairs professionals could negatively impact the student experience. Those who do not or cannot invest in themselves (not just professionally but also personally) may not be able to offer a robust, well-planned experience that would benefit more from a well-rested professional with time and resources to carefully plan, facilitate, and assess these student-centered programs. Participants noted that, much like many other professionals in the field regardless of years of experience, they must adapt quickly between multiple, ever-changing priorities, making the CoP especially essential in its role of gathering like-minded, supportive professionals to share best practices and discuss common challenges.
However, this same CoP may not espouse values of self-care and care for each other, focusing instead of doubling efforts to encourage active, visible, reciprocal engagement to help those that may in fact need the most support themselves. These overlapping pressures may then give rise to a tacit expectation for an even greater investment in and engagement with the CoP during times of crisis, both as legitimizing the CoP as the priority place for obtaining these supports and resources and for giving back to a community that is equally and deeply struggling to keep pace with the ever-changing work, field, and world.

The overarching definition of the tacit knowledge of professional identity was perceived by participants as being a visible, active, selfless member of the CoP. This membership is important for access to shared experiences and learning about the field, but also as a way to see and be seen – to show that, as a new professional, you are engaged in the work of developing yourself while meeting the expectation that you will also support others in their own professional pathways and, equally, support students in their developmental journeys.

This seems to extend the definition of a student affairs professional as a navigator or way-finder for students to a person who also shoulders similar responsibilities for peers. This collegial, communal support is demonstrated in the active, reciprocal exchange of best practices and offering opportunities for professional development for the betterment of colleagues and, by hopeful extension, improved supports and experiences for the students they serve. Here again the value of investing in the care and development of others is on full display.
RQ2: How do emerging professionals in student affairs who participate in a community of practice perceive the negotiation and development of their professional identity?

Emerging professionals are tasked with navigating the complexities inherent in understanding what the professional association describes as an ambiguous field (CACUSS, 2011), while also working to integrate tacit knowledge into what Smith and Watson (1992) describe as multiple, complicated vectors of identity. Participants also described the challenge of determining how, when, and if they could demonstrate what they identified as the behaviours needed to exhibit an alignment with the goals of the field. There are indeed a myriad of features encompassing the process and demonstration of identity development, including, according to Halford and Leonard (2006), gender and age. These and other aspects of identity may be further influenced or influence whether new professionals take advantage of opportunities for full membership in the CoP through what Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006) refer to as negotiating whether these opportunities best fit with their current and evolving sense of self.

Benefits of the CoP: Membership, Belonging, and Identity Development

Participants’ perceived criteria for membership in the CoP (i.e., as a way to further define their professional identity) seemed to be developed and negotiated within the CoP itself. The CoP was perceived as having some power to define membership by virtue of a platform and structure that can offer a monetary entry to belonging, while also acting as a representation of what a student affairs professional may look like and how they should behave. Access to the larger, national platform of the association was also perceived to provide participants with the opportunity to display, for a large and
important audience, how they are aligned with the larger value of being student-centered or student-focused. Conversely, this same platform provides a wide, diverse array of examples of how these values should be demonstrated in ongoing participation in the CoP and daily work in the field.

Feelings of belonging or membership, however, go well beyond the more tangible concept of exchanging money for membership for these participants. Instead, it does not feel like enough to merely attain membership by a single financial investment, as participants perceived the negotiation and tacit knowledge of identity development to include a demonstration of ongoing and active, visible engagement. This may mean that membership is ongoing and evolving, such that the CoP reinforces values of reciprocal engagement and lifelong learning while also allowing student affairs professionals to make a name for themselves as someone who truly, legitimately belongs.

New professionals, as defined in this research, are at an age when they are often engaged in what Erikson (1974) calls the early stages of identity development, and what Kinser (1993) describes as rapid, immersive development while entering new professional roles that may contradict or complement other identities. These early stages of tentative membership in the CoP were therefore perceived as critical to participants’ immediate effectiveness as a ‘good’ student affairs professional and eventual legitimate standing in the field. The CoP therefore offers what regular, average movement through a collective of professionals cannot: access to mentors who can support the enhancement of their professional identity (Mason, 2016), and a platform that exemplifies and amplifies sharing and demonstrating the tacit knowledge of the field (Isopahkala-Bouret & Niemi, 2017).
As Levinas (1981) aptly notes, this development as a professional is not done in isolation, particularly as a community of like-minded colleagues offers the opportunity to observe what Zizek (1989) calls the mandates of these positions and the manner in which professionals carry out their daily, assigned or prescribed tasks. Buying into and reinforcing the value of collaboration and community, rather than only engaging with the community, are therefore critically important for membership and identity-work. This tacit knowledge of identity development guides the work of the CoP in helping new professionals learn about the field while also, through explicit behaviours that demonstrate alignment with its values, show that professionals are willing and able to actively engage and contribute. This process of developing and negotiating the tacit knowledge of professional identity was perceived as being guided by the belief that sharing knowledge and resources is essential to the work of and in the field, and that it makes the community stronger and more productive together. These observations run somewhat counter to what Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger- Trayner (2016) describe as “a secondary phenomenon” (p. 143) of communities of practice, as participants in fact placed considerable value on the social relationships that emerge in communities of practice. This value was demonstrated by the tacit knowledge that it is necessary to explicitly and intentionally cultivate peer-to-peer relationships for the good of the CoP, the profession, themselves, and their students.

**Who We Are is What We Do: Negotiating the Explicit Knowledge of the Field.**

Participants also discussed moving in and out of other professional associations that were more or less relevant if, for example, they were no longer employed in residence life or other sub-fields. These responses were an early indicator that the participants may begin
to negotiate and develop their professional identity by aligning themselves within explicit structures and roles that organize the field by distinct areas, rather than, as Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) argue, focusing only on the alignment between their values and the expressed goals of the CoP. Participants described attempts to integrate what they saw as the goal or purpose of their work and the field (i.e., supporting and serving students) into an explicit definition of tasks and responsibilities that can define what it looks like to do this work at a practical, day-to-day level. In fact, some participants noted that a review of portfolios or job description, which could be, according to Nonaka (1994) examples of explicit knowledge, might be the quickest way to share information and learn about the work of the field. It could be that participants were using the defined tasks and responsibilities of a student affairs professional as a way to package the tacit knowledge of being student-centered. In this way, participants were able to negotiate and develop a professional identity that includes observable behaviours meant to exemplify fulfilling the responsibility of supporting student success.

Participants’ ‘About Me’ statements were also an attempt to reconcile and integrate the explicit knowledge of the field with the tacit knowledge of professional identity. Their statements included mentions of credentials, skills, and experiences that demonstrated what Bruner (1996) describes as learning how or learning about the explicit, readily available knowledge of the field. However, these statements were also highly reflective, offering an understanding of the professional values through a social constructivist lens that Panahi, Watson, and Partridge (2013) describe as residing with the subjective view of the individual. How the participants described their roles and guiding professional philosophies again demonstrated what Dhanaraj, Lyles, Steensma, and
Tihanyi (2004) refer to as the glue of the tacit knowledge that integrates and embeds learning into a specific context (e.g., the participant’s defined role). This process helped them to do what Sugrue (1997) illustrates as internalizing the cognitive tacit knowledge of the CoP into, what Duguid (2005) terms, their “art of practice” (p. 113). The process of writing, and rewriting, these statements may offer another opportunity for negotiating and developing the tacit knowledge of a professional identity.

Participants also raised the question of whether or not someone could identify themselves as a student affairs professional if they are not a member of the association or if they are not currently employed in the field. Several participants used the term ‘alignment’ in describing the negotiation and development of a professional identity, noting that their professional identity can be defined as an alignment between the underlying beliefs and values of the field (e.g., the stated overall mission or purpose) and the many aspects of their identity. These comments reflect the literature that describes forming a commitment to the values and practices of the profession (Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, & Pasquesi, 2016) or an alignment between the values demonstrated by the CoP and the individual’s evolving sense of self (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006). The question raised by participants, however, was whether or not this commitment or alignment can occur in the absence of current, active employment in a student affairs role.

It may be easier or more accessible for participants to first see themselves as a part of or aligned with particular associations (or CoPs) based on a more readily identifiable aspect of their work (i.e., having a job and therefore a place within the student affairs structure of their institution) or their imagined long-term career plans.
These roles may offer opportunities for professional socialization where, according to Perez (2016), new professionals may narrow the gap between expectations and experiences. Participants described this narrowing as shortening the gap between the perceived institutional culture and their early expectations about the work and the field. This may then contribute to what Young (1985) describes as a new professional’s commitment to the field that helps them through formal preparations for and entry into the early stages of their career (Carpenter, 1980). This may also represent an early or peripheral participation in the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where participants are engaged in “both intellectual development and socially embedded learning” (Calhoun & Green, 2015, p. 56).

The CoP, however, may be a place where this explicit knowledge may at once be devoid of institutional context yet contextualized far more broadly as a demonstration of the more tacit beliefs and values of the field as a whole. This may then allow participants to eventually move more freely between different areas or associations. If the field itself is, broadly, driven by beliefs and values related to supporting the student experience as a means to encourage meaningful growth and development, the identity-work done within the CoP may help participants to not only align their beliefs with those espoused by the profession, but also to understand belonging as identifying with someone who contributes to these ideals, regardless of where and how they work. This negotiation and development of a professional identity is then derived individually, socially, and communally, combining the individual’s unique conceptual frameworks alongside demonstrating an alignment with these values through, as Kogan (2000) describes,
performing roles that are defined or outlined (in the explicit knowledge of job
descriptions) by institutions where they work.

The descriptor of working or works, used often by participants in interviews to
describe a student affairs professional, could be perceived as a way to imply that current
employment in the field is a necessary condition for active engagement and a non-
negotiable criterion for being a member of this CoP. Without the ability to actively
participate in the CoP through sharing experiences and asking questions about challenges
that other members of the CoP may be also experiencing or can at least identify with, it
may be difficult for a new professional to easily navigate the tacit knowledge inherent in
identifying as a member. While individuals may be able to do what Watson (2008) calls
the identity-work of shaping a relatively coherent personal identity with the information
and context derived from interpersonal engagement in the CoP, there is an assumption
that they must continue this work by putting these ideas into practice in their daily work
in order to make meaning in (professional) context. This active, current work in the field
may then offer new and renewable opportunities to discover best practices and other
knowledge that they perceive as being tacitly encouraged to share as part of the
expectation of reciprocal, active engagement in the community of practice. The literature
describes this process as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where a relational
view of knowledge implies the active negotiation of tacit knowledge, rather than the
passive perception of the explicit knowledge or information being shared.

It is also important to note that participants perceived that a large majority of new
professionals may have or appear to have a common background or may be
overrepresented as current professionals in the field (i.e., residence life). This imbalance
of explicit and tacit knowledge may mean that some members of the CoP may contribute to the saturation of knowledge generation and consequently stagnation of innovative practice, as a select subset of tacit beliefs and values may disproportionately contribute to the institutionalized, routinized practice (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Roberts’ (2006) critique of communities of practice is again relevant here, as this institutionalized practice and related values perpetuate a narrowly aligned set of knowledge and values that are more likely to be adopted than those that challenge members’ current identities and practice. The CoP members may be observing and subsequently negotiating and developing the ongoing perpetuation of a set of values that are reinforced over time by those who have longstanding, historical ties to the profession and now identify most strongly with this tacit knowledge that will continue to be reinforced and rewarded (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Having access to mentors and opportunities for visible, active engagement are still useful, but may socialize professionals into a CoP that perpetuates Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus as unconsciously acquired biases and beliefs that are resistant to change.

**Who You Are is not Who I Am: Insecurity in Identity Development.** Participants tended to perceive that members of the field (e.g., those already ‘in’ the CoP) bring with them their own values that may influence how, or if, the observed values in the CoP are expressed and internalized. This observation is indicative of an early understanding of how different aspects of one’s identity, identified as important for identity development by Reynolds and Pope (1991), may influence an emerging professional identity and a subjective understanding of one’s membership in the field. Participants perceived that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the beliefs and values that may guide a new
professional in other roles or identities from influencing their work on the job. This echoes the work of Smith and Watson (1992), who argued that these multiple vectors do not fit neatly together, creating an active and integrative, rather than passive, additive, view of the development of a professional identity.

These aspects of their personal identity, as some participants perceived, may be heightened or become more important based on whether or if these parts are represented in the visible composition of the field and the CoP (e.g., racial identity, gender identity). This is similarly identified in the literature as multiple, intersecting aspects of identity among various dimensions (Jones & McEwen, 2000). These new professionals perceived an opportunity and a challenge in attempting to integrate this new tacit knowledge of the beliefs and values of student affairs into other aspects of the self. This integrative identity-work was seen as crucial for belonging in the CoP where their intersecting identities were perceived as outwardly represented and noticeably valued.

Several participants even mentioned feeling as a fake if they had not followed this or other common paths (e.g., volunteer, paraprofessional or student staff/leader roles) into the profession, as Participant F1 describes:

I think part of it can be attributed to impostor syndrome … it’s the element of feeling like I’m behind, I think, compared to perhaps other people my age or other people in similar roles that I feel like I don’t have the same foundational background or experience or understanding of a lot of things that would come up in communities or practice that I’m a part of.

This feeling, first defined as impostor phenomenon by Clance and Imes (1978), who presented it as intense, often damaging thoughts of being an intellectual and/or professional fraud despite verifiable achievements or other evidence to the contrary may further colour how emerging professionals perceive the negotiation and development of
their professional identity. Emerging professionals who have come to a student affairs career through more common pathways may have an early advantage in being able to understand the basic vocabulary and fundamental behavioural standards of the field, but may still find it challenging to learn a new professional dialect demanded by their new positions as staff rather than paraprofessionals or student volunteers. Those who enter the profession through other paths may feel lost in a completely new professional land with an entirely new lexicon to master, feeling as though they are already at a disadvantage before they even begin.

Knowing as well that much of the research exploring impostor syndrome originated in studies of high achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978), and that women make up the majority of this study’s participants (5 out of 6), this phenomenon may have coloured many of the reflections shared in research interviews. Participants may have automatically and subconsciously placed themselves in the out-group or as undesirable for membership based solely on their early self-perceptions as failures or frauds well before they have even begun to negotiate the development of a professional identity.

Ultimately, participants’ perceptions of the negotiation and development of their professional identity within a CoP were intimately tied to the perceived purpose and function of the CoP. In particular, CACUSS and other associations do this work in the development of professional competencies, which Eaton (2016) noted as a renewed means for professional associations to negotiate and communicate some tangible form of a professional identity. This may require the opportunity to come together as a group of like-minded professionals to share, model, and reinforce best practices while also engaging in the work of collectively communicating and negotiating this tacit knowledge.
The potential repackaging of professional identity as a set of professional competencies provides an opportunity to use explicit knowledge as a way to communicate the tacit beliefs and values of the field. Several other professional associations have based these competencies on what it would look like for professionals to demonstrate values in their behaviour (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), which may be how emerging professionals will perceive this tacit knowledge of professional identity. This may be of particular importance given disruption to how the work of student affairs is completed and perceived due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the ongoing and renewed emphasis on equity and inclusion in the CoP.

Access and Equity in the Negotiation and Development of a Professional Identity. The negotiation and development of the tacit knowledge of professional identity within this CoP can be seen as a powerful influence on the identity-work for new professionals, due in part to the privileged opportunity offered by membership in the CoP. Participants perceived privilege of having access to opportunities for observing, understanding, practicing, and demonstrating the behaviours required of an active, engaged, and thereby legitimate student affairs professional. However, this privilege was perceived as potentially creating less equitable criteria for membership in a field that purports to value a welcoming, inclusive, and open-minded approach to supporting student success. The mere fact that these participants are learning about themselves and the field in a CoP implies the relevant issue of power, which for Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) is “when the definition of competence is a social process taking place in a community of practice, learning always implies power relations” (p. 151).
Participants’ responses to the question of whether or not they were in fact members of this CoP were telling of the confounding description of a clearer boundary between those who are and those who are not (yet) members, despite recognizing the importance of tacit values of equity and inclusion. Participants perceived membership in the CoP as, at least initially, the result of paying the association’s membership fee, which grants special, privileged access to resources and opportunities that others who may be working in similar roles may not enjoy. These privileges included having a forum to communicate with members that is open only to them and an opportunity to attend conferences and other professional development events designed specifically for those who have paid the membership fee. The context and structure of the CoP may then influence how knowledge is shared, particularly coloured by what Roberts (2006) describes as the dominant source of power represented administratively, socially, or otherwise by what researchers identify as both internal and external forces (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000).

The active, reciprocal engagement expected from paying members may be more easily accessible for newer professionals, who may have the time and privilege to devote to the labour of consistent, frequent knowledge exchange in the CoP. Even without the expected time and resources to dedicate to this work of maintaining active engagement, participants described examples of the impact of these expected behaviours on, for example, the perceived gender identities of the majority of the field (e.g., mostly female) and the family structures of those in more senior leadership positions (e.g., no children). The privilege inherent in these identities and lifestyles was perceived as potential barriers to advancing professionally by being unable to act as an active member of the CoP.
Navigating the need to be inclusive and open to a diversity of potential members alongside attempting to provide new professionals with a structured means to learn about the field was highlighted in how a Master’s degree was seen as a mandatory gateway into student affairs. Participants aptly noted that the tacit or perhaps now explicit requirement of a Master’s degree for entry-level positions in the field poses a barrier to access due to a variety of factors including socioeconomic status (SES). The ability to dedicate financial resources to both a Master’s degree and a paid CACUSS membership may define the privilege several participants noted as inherent to membership in this CoP.

Having access to resources and networks that are perceived as helping to do the student-focused work of the profession seems contingent on having access to the resources and networks necessary to do the work at all. Particularly during and in the eventual aftermath of a global pandemic, participants noted that these paid opportunities for professional development might be designated as superfluous or in excess of immediate needs both in the workplace and at home. Participants perceived that there were, in fact, explicit criteria for navigating and demonstrating the tacit values of knowledge exchange and active, reciprocal engagement – namely, membership in a designated association and connections to a well-defined subset of professionals (i.e., other CACUSS members).

The benefits of privileged access may then also offer a unique challenge to the development of professional identity, as while “individuals can interact with powerful structures … they can construct and tell alternative stories – [but that] does not make those structures entirely negotiable” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 336). In other words, the structures and systems held within the CoP may be, conflictingly, a supporting
foundation for negotiating and developing a professional identity while also constructing considerable barriers to the formation, integration, and expression of multiple aspects of a new professional’s identity. Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) argue that both individual agency and a shared, negotiated sense of meaning must be present and working together to support learning within the CoP. If this individual agency is missing, this learning may be an additive rather than integrative process where an individual’s identity work is driven by external expectations rather than internal, personal goals.

It is therefore noteworthy that participants described the explicit knowledge of the field as contained in a Master’s degree, a necessary requirement for employment as a student affairs professional, and the tacit knowledge of the field that a paid membership in CACUSS implies legitimacy and credibility as a professional. Taken together, this may mean that defining the field of student affairs as being open to all may be at odds with these criteria that potentially exclude prospective members. Participants therefore perceived the challenging, confounding task for new professionals of attempting to traverse the structural, systemic, and financial barriers to becoming, identifying, and being a student affairs professional.

In addition to the challenges of divergent socioeconomic status of potential members, the explicitly visible representation of diverse identities in the association may prevent some new professionals from aligning themselves with the CoP and the field as a whole. If they cannot see their likes or people like them visibly represented as a member of the CoP, any attempts at reciprocal, communal knowledge sharing to support professional development may prove difficult or nearly futile. This perceived lack of representation may contribute to an individual sense of lacking or, at the very least,
desiring some agency over what McLean and Syed (2015) describe as resisting the dominant narratives communicated by this subset of a larger professional culture making the formation and expression of multiple vectors of identity far more challenging.

A formalized, monetized membership in the CoP may therefore offer feelings of belonging for new professionals as it is important for “aspiring professionals [to] … acquire the explicit knowledge of the community but also the identity of a community member” (Duguid, 2005, p. 113). This community was perceived as offering the resources and connections deemed necessary to do, and be seen as doing, the important work of supporting student learning and development. A noticeable tension here may be the desire to create a common or standard definition of membership to invite new professionals to join the association (and, by extension, to gain the financial resources necessary to continue the work of the CoP), while attempting to practice and model values of diversity and inclusion. This value of diversity within the field is important, yet may only be further cultivated once professionals have made it past the initial hurdle of entering into the CoP. There is a noticeable paradox here of access, inclusion, and equity only being accessible to paying members who are perceived as legitimate professionals. However, entry into the CoP and the field does not guarantee that these values will be practiced or demonstrated equally amongst all members of the CoP.

Some participants mentioned an observable disconnect between these tacit values of inclusion and equity when engaged in or observing conversations amongst professionals. Discussions as knowledge sharing or regarding the procedural workings of the community of practice were paradoxically perceived as being facilitated in such a way that these notions were not explicitly demonstrated in colleagues’ words and actions.
These observations can be connected to a larger discussion in one participant interview related to the association’s annual conference, and how several members expressed disappointment in the lack of visible representation of several groups, including Indigenous and LGBTQ+ colleagues. Whether intentional or not, the perceived exclusion of members from a signature event in the CoP runs counter to values of equity and inclusion, while also making it difficult for certain emerging professionals to truly see themselves as actual or even potential members. This may also cause newer professionals to make particular assumptions about the tacit knowledge of professional identity in the field, noting that the values of community and active, reciprocal engagement are in fact only available to a select or privileged few. The stereotypes cultivated by the representation and subsequent behaviours of the membership can influence how individuals perform tasks or roles in the field (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999) and, according to Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996), influence individual and communal perceptions of others. These generalizations, expressed in what members choose to do or communicate, may further widen the gap between who is and is not considered a legitimate student affairs professional.

A field that expresses a value of openness and inclusion may then tacitly value diverse approaches to the work of supporting student development, while struggling to define membership in such a way that can maintain the desirable privilege of having special access to people, resources, and platforms. As participants described, attempting to define oneself as a student affairs professional might be necessary to feel part of the in-group rather than be left as an outsider or as Wenger (1998) describes, identifying with the guidelines of the CoP for “what it is to be a competent participant, an outsider, or
somewhere in between” (p. 137). The CoP may then be the explicit indicator of this desirable membership in order to be, and remain, inside and legitimate rather than outside and somehow less productive, less relevant, or less committed to the perceived essential work of student affairs.

It is also telling that many professionals may be looking for connection and community even more during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Being apart and not having the same in person opportunities for connection and conversation may lead to, as some participants expressed, questioning whether they are seen, heard, or even thought of amongst their peers. Communication technologies may help them to connect with their colleagues, but it can prove difficult to offer the spontaneous, informal opportunities for casual networking that the literature identifies as valued ways to share explicit knowledge (Elliott, 2017) and to socially reinforce aspects of identity (Centola, 2010; Lin, 2017). Those without equal access to this technology, and those who have seen their priorities or responsibilities dramatically shift during the pandemic may now be even more greatly disadvantaged in both benefiting from and participating in the tacitly held values of reciprocal knowledge exchange and community conversations. Here again notions of equity and access are brought to the forefront of ideals of membership and belonging.

The positive feelings participants described as related to being a part of a community, of something bigger, exclusive, or privileged, and the work of innovating or changing the profession amongst a group of like-minded, equally passionate professionals, represent a fundamental human need that these participants are seeking through membership in this CoP. However, as mentioned previously, obtaining the credential required to enter the field (i.e., a Master’s degree) can raise issues of access
and equity before a new student affairs professional can even consider membership in the CoP. Access may be further impeded once a paid membership has been obtained, if only certain platforms or people are ultimately represented or visible.

The tensions inherent in explicitly identifying values of inclusion and equity while tacitly offering and expecting belonging and legitimacy seem to draw sharp boundaries between an in- and out-group. This perceived conflict between ideals and behaviours shows that participants are perceiving the negotiation of the tacit knowledge of identity development as desirable yet difficult. The tacit values and beliefs demonstrated in the CoP are seen as at odds with the concurrent identity-work of integrating a myriad of influences, pressures, and ideas that offer legitimacy as a visibly engaged professional who must do and be all things at all times. In other words, a ‘good’ or legitimate student affairs professional must: (a) be supported and supportive; (b) contribute and receive; (c) learn and teach; and (d) change and conform. Participants were therefore describing a considerable commitment to and investment in the field, which Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, and Pasquesi (2016) use to describe professional identity as “the commitment to values and practices of the profession plus investment of personal resources (e.g. time, money, effort)” (p. 560). This demonstration of a professional identity includes a perceived assumption that this commitment must be overt and that these investments must be large, which participants saw as being somewhat devoid of any consideration for cultural, societal, systemic, or personal barriers.

It is notable that even in the early stages of their careers, these participants were quick to point out the challenge for and potential risks to a CoP that relies on monetary memberships and considerable, ongoing effort for survival, yet still seeks to be open,
inclusive, and diverse. What is reinforced in the interactions within the CoP may support a student-centered approach to the work of a legitimate student affairs professional, yet mirroring these values in the negotiation and development of a professional identity may benefit from contingent supports dependent on a privileged access to an expected, desired pathway into and through the field.

These challenges of access, equity, and inclusion are not lost on the CoP. A recent review of the CACUSS website revealed that the association is offering new and returning members the opportunity to share barriers to joining the association or renewing their membership (“Barriers to Renewing/Joining?”, 2020). The goal seems to be to “facilitate removing barriers to [members’] renewal” (para. 2). Interestingly, the site goes on to note “As a non-profit corporation that relies on membership fees and income from member events such as our annual conference, CACUSS anticipates that the financial impact of COVID-19 will be challenging for us as well as for your institutions. We hope we can rely on your support” (para. 3). The CoP recognizes that the global pandemic may cause financial challenges for their members, demonstrating tacit values of giving back and hoping for a reciprocal exchange of support.

The CACUSS website also indicates several types of membership that may help potential members navigate challenges of access and inclusion. For example, the association offers a reduced rate for full-time students, and the option of an institutional membership where a senior student affairs officer (SSAO) can purchase a yearly membership that allows other colleagues at the same institution to become members at a reduced rate (Membership, 2020). These options may help potential members navigate the barriers participants identified that could prevent an emerging student affairs
professional from actively engaging with the association. In addition, these potential pathways to membership indicate that an emerging professional’s journey into the field may begin even earlier – in the graduate programs where emerging professionals can begin to develop identified competencies for the field (Eaton, 2016) and engage with peers while developing important social connections (Kegan, 1994).

**Negotiating and Developing Professional Identity During a Global Pandemic.**

What the perceived negotiation and development of a professional identity may actually look like in practice is changing more rapidly than ever. At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 global pandemic was swiftly demanding for the nature and work of jobs in the field to nearly entirely change to meet a new host of student needs through several novel, technological platforms. Participants with an eye toward a long-term career in the field described seeing timelines for their desired career advancement pushed back due to hiring freezes and budget cuts while they navigated novel skills that were needed.

As three of the six study participants were interviewed in the midst of the pandemic, the multiple pressures for visible, active investment in the CoP and the particularly challenging attempt at negotiating the tacit knowledge of a professional identity were plainly apparent. Participants described attempting to facilitate experiences for and provide resources to students who are themselves navigating a new way of learning and being, while also working to adapt longstanding institutional or departmental structures and procedures that they know very little about. The ambiguity of the field may then become a consistent, moving target that makes the negotiation and development of a professional identity particularly complex. The rapid shifts in the explicit knowledge of the field and the tacit values of the profession may require
CACUSS to lead the reinforcing of the larger umbrella of student-centered identities under which a multitude of professionals can find their own path to success.

One participant also noted the rise of, other, more informal or less structured communities, perhaps more aptly defined in the literature as collectives or networks (Lindkvist, 2005). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these groups might grow in size and number as a response to large-scale world events when people are seeking connections and communities to engage on a certain subject. Without the perceived barrier to access of a paid membership structure, these collectives offer, what could be considered, an alternative to larger organizations that one participant noted are not likely to change their monetary criteria for formal membership. Instead, the rise of these informal networks and groups, especially in times of crisis, may provide a quicker, more nimble response to the heightened demands for dialogue, action, and change.

Senior administrators and those with a longstanding history in the CoP, who Young (1985) says may serve as mentors in the CoP, may find themselves held to an even higher standard during this time of global unrest. Participants described looking even more closely to these individuals as examples and leaders who will overtly, explicitly demonstrate those values of the open, reciprocal exchange of knowledge in an equitable, inclusive, supportive community. The CoPs, particularly those that hold this historical tacit knowledge of professional identity, may now be tasked with the difficult expectation to protect emerging professionals from burning out and leaving the field far too early in their careers. In such cases this same CoPs should downplay communicating the need for overinvestment in work and the CoP.
While relying on the common goal of remaining student-centered, explicit knowledge and tacit values may be reinforced or revised in this new way of working. Those who have typically relied on past experiences in the field to have an advantageous opportunity to easily identify as a member of the CoP may now find themselves back on equal, foundational footing with new professionals. These different backgrounds or more unique, divergent experiences may now influence more of the explicit and tacit knowledge of the CoP, particularly in the heightening demands that the community work even more closely together to meet the new, evolving needs of the students they serve and the professionals who will continue to be called upon to support them. Those aspiring professionals may find themselves wanting and needing to belong even more while being socially distant from their work and colleagues, and may seek out this or other CoPs to develop the sense of belonging that may also be tied to what Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) describe as the expressed cultural practices of the community (in this case opportunities for connection and participation) necessary to become and behave as a full, functional, identifiable member of the CoP.

**Looking Ahead: Critical Reflection in the Negotiation and Development of a Professional Identity.** While the tacit knowledge of professional identity was perceived as being in service of a noble mission of supporting student success, participants perceived the considerable labour and unspoken pressures involved in demonstrating an unwavering commitment to these goals. Perhaps, as one participant mused, it is in these emerging professionals that we will see a renewed call for and commitment to change. Importantly, it may now be that this identity-work is done first for themselves before, as
the priority communicated in the tacit knowledge of the CoP, their attention, energy, and resources are invested in others.

In demonstrating that they are meeting the expectation of the active, engaged, open exchange of knowledge, participants described need to demonstrate that they value and can meaningfully contribute to this active, reciprocal way of working within the CoP. These contributions, however, may no longer be a part of maintaining the status quo or simply accepting this tacit knowledge as a fixed set of values or expectations. Encouragingly, participants described themselves and other younger, newer professionals as now becoming bolder in how they approach the profession and how they navigate CACUSS as a professional association. These participants are no longer accepting being on the sidelines or being underrepresented and, as a consequence, are visibly pushing for important changes in the field.

These comments underlie an interesting and important shift to towards an ideal flattened hierarchy within the CoP, while also feeling empowered to take these ideas farther up the organizational or institutional chain of command. This may run counter to new professionals’ initial expectations of needing to respect and move solely within the perceived hierarchy of their individual roles and institutions, where conformity may be valued over innovation. Engaging in innovative work within a CoP that expresses deeply held values of inclusion and reciprocal engagement may, on the surface, be easier for emerging professionals than attempting this work within the stricter boundaries and power dynamics of their roles at their home institutions. These institutions may reinforce what Young (1985) describes as supporting, subordinate roles, or what Jackson and Ebbers (1999) identify as the lesser side of the academic-social divide. At this early stage
of their careers, participants may have not yet seen themselves as agents of change, but the current global climate and a renewed emphasis on inclusion and equity (at least explicitly) by the CoP may offer an important opening for a renewed sense of agency and additional, intentional contributions to the CoP and the wider field of student affairs.

Extending this reasoning to the CoP, it may be that the work of these new professionals is now changed from initially conforming to the standards set by the CoP to gain entry and to then commit a subtle subterfuge in changing these historical and deeply held values from, as it may be colloquially labeled, ‘the inside’. Even the work of observing and analyzing the criteria for entry into this CoP, however, was not a passive process. While all participants at one point or another spoke of how they learned about their roles and the field through interactions within the CoP, their own past experiences, or common understandings and stereotypes of student affairs, their responses were highly reflective, demonstrating an early and active internal discourse. These reflections were at times both at odds with what they saw as the standard values and beliefs meant to guide the work of student affairs professionals while also attempting to legitimize, for themselves, their place in a complex field through an expressed, visible alignment with these ideals. These ideas align with the individual agency Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) identify as part of the process of identity-work, yet also echo the argument made by Wenger, White, & Smith (2009) that both individual agency and community support must be present to support learning in the CoP. When these values and observed practices are at odds, or being questioned, there is an opportunity to prevent the challenge of stagnation Roberts (2006) identifies, as a way to mitigate “the issue [of]
the interaction between habitus and practice, rather than its creation through practice” (Mutch, 2003, p. 389).

**The Inner Sphere: Courageously Moving Closer to the Centre.** The ‘shoulds’ of the field perceived by participants in this study attempt to draw sharp boundaries around full membership in the CoP. Participants noted a formidable barrier between only or ‘just’ working in the field and active engagement with the CoP, particularly in navigating the need to invest resources of time, money, and effort into active participation in association activities. Active engagement may assist the CoP in avoiding the challenges of habitus or, as Nelson and Winter (1982) describe, institutionalizing mutual engagement and joint enterprise within routines of ongoing practice. However, this institutionalized engagement and enterprise has, according to participants, made it difficult to fit within the narrow conception of an equal, expert member of the CoP.

The agency of moving between CoPs based on a perceived alignment of values was described by Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) as happening in degrees across space and time. Importantly, the individual is seen as having considerable agency or control over whether or how they identify with the tacit knowledge being shared. This agency, however, also extends to the CoP, which can establish guidelines for “what it is to be a competent participant, an outsider, or somewhere in between” (Wenger, 1998, p. 137). The competent participant in this case is a full member of the CoP, and the term ‘competent’ can imply expertise in their chosen field. While participants perceived themselves as having some agency in navigating and interpreting the tacit knowledge of professional identity, the CoP was pushing back in this process. As
participants attempted to move from the periphery (peripheral participation) to the centre (full membership), a competing force seemed to be working to keep them away.

This force, or pressure, was in part built from structural barriers to access, as participants perceived several issues related to the CoP’s values of equity and inclusion. The tacit knowledge of identity development, however, also communicated a perceived need for active, visible, reciprocal engagement that was meant to be recognized by other CoP members. These perceptions align with the literature, which suggests that competence or expertise is recognized by others based on the mutually defined understanding of mastery of the CoP’s domain (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayer, 2016). The community is therefore both a sage and a stage, defining full membership in the field and providing a platform for individuals to demonstrate this expertise.

Engaging on this CoP stage implies a need for supports and even temperaments that may make this journey easier. Participants perceived identity as tied to effort, and noted that this effort was meant to be seen by and in service to others in the CoP. In an attempt to be seen and remain visible, participants saw what Tams and Arthur (2010) described as the “need to engage in external networks and build personal connections” (p. 631). Building networks and personal connections, however, may require a degree of self-confidence and courage to put oneself on the metaphorical stage of the CoP, particularly as an emerging professional who is still learning about themselves while exploring the field through, often, their first paid, professional role.

This confidence and courage may be necessary to move closer to the inner sphere, as participants perceived the need for active, visible engagement that may surpass initial
anxiety or apprehension. For example, individuals may already possess considerable agency in the subjective, personal work of identity development, yet may still, according to McLean and Syed (2015) desire agency over the master, dominant narratives defined by the broader society that are replicated or reinforced in the CoP. These powerful structures or systems may not be entirely negotiable (p. 336), and may rely in part on the psychosocial filter Andrews and Delahaye (2000) argue is important for mediating the process of knowledge sharing and in perceiving whether others are approachable and trustworthy. In addition to supporting strong, social relationships, being approachable and trustworthy may also help individuals to be perceived as experts in the field, particularly in student affairs where the tacit knowledge of professional identity includes being open-minded, candid, and enthusiastically engaged.

Becoming or learning to be a student affairs professional seems to require achieving full membership through navigating increasingly impermeable boundaries. The CoP communicates the tacit knowledge of professional identity, and the field as a whole, as having open, porous boundaries in its outermost sphere. Moving closer to the centre, this boundary becomes more rigid, where working in the field is necessary but not sufficient for recognized, active engagement. The innermost sphere, or full membership in the CoP, is marked by achieving equal, expert status amongst others in this clique (as one participant described). The inner sphere may be particularly inviting, but emerging professionals may need to be invited by senior members or mentors who hold the power to define standards for full membership. As Lave and Wenger (1991) describe, achieving this embodiment and identity of mastery may mean that, as Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner (2016) argue, emerging professionals will need “to almost forget how
they are in order to belong there” (p. 156). An anxious, apprehensive move toward full membership may require courage and confidence that is meant to develop over time, yet is expected to appear nearly immediately to actively and openly engage with the CoP. Here again, participants and the literature offer a contradictory, ambiguous notion of an inclusive field with restrictive, bounded criteria for membership.

The Third Sphere: Accounting for Nested Communities and Networks. In attempting to define for themselves an ambiguous, complex field, new student affairs professionals see this negotiation and development of a professional identity as at once quite simple and yet frustratingly difficult. The explicit knowledge that there are multiple points of entry into this field and the complementary tacit values of diversity and inclusion may imply a porous boundary that nearly anyone with a passion for and interest in supporting students may be able to cross. However, this ambiguity cultivates a desire to draw clearer, well-defined boundaries around the profession to legitimize roles that have not always enjoyed the same societal and institutional standing as the academic workings of higher education. Attempting to be open and inclusive while also professionally legitimate bolsters these tensions between the values held by or communicated to new student affairs professionals and how the CoP may impose different, competing standards for what it means to truly be a member of this evolving community.

This notion of ambiguity is also present in participants’ dual or nested view of the field, where they described learning about their own role and its associated responsibilities while also negotiating the perceived tacit knowledge of professional identity inherent in the wider CoP. Participants’ perceptions of their identity-work
mirrored the description offered by Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, and Pasquesi (2016) as coming to a place of organized, internalized congruence between their own values, the values within their roles, and an associated commitment to the wider values of the profession. These values were demonstrated and negotiated in a variety of contexts (e.g., past professional experiences, and their current engagement with the CoP), yet participants described another layer of both explicit and tacit knowledge defined by the institutional and departmental communities in which they perform their daily tasks. This sub or small, insular communities were perceived to inform and provide sites for participants to subsequently demonstrate what Tull, Hirt, and Saunder (2009) describe as emerging professionals’ initial, informal socialization into the field.

The explicit knowledge that these emerging professionals may gain from the CoP is valuable, but may therefore be missing the nuance of institutional context, stated responsibilities, and departmental expectations. Participants’ identity-work was perceived as needing the knowledge that can only be gained from investing at least some attention and time to learning how to be a student affairs professional at their institution and in their identified department or office, while integrating their externally-defined responsibilities and expectations. This implies a perceived complexity in the tacit knowledge of professional identity that could be interpreted differently between the larger CoP and the narrower context of the institution or the employee’s direct supervisor and department. There may then be an issue of ‘broken telephone’ in understanding what it means to be a professional in the field, as these participants described working through many layers of tacit knowledge through a process Day (1999) sees as a unique, constant interpretations of experiences. Henkel (2000) notes that these interpretations draw on
individual histories and their participation within identified communities of professionals, which, for participants in this study, included several overlapping influences and communities.

The ‘third sphere’ of membership in the CoP could therefore be situated in an individual’s role at an institution, or as part of a learning community, which for Cox (2004) is a site for mutual engagement toward a shared goal. Engagement in this third sphere, however, implies that the individual is currently employed and working in the field in order to be influenced by close proximity to contextual knowledge and networks. Participants also described a clear distinction between being ‘just’ a member and being an ‘active’ member in the CoP, where ‘active’ was defined as contributing to the work and overall goals of the association. Their contributions were typically marked by sharing knowledge generated from their current employment and past experiences, yet was specifically defined as doing visible work with and for the CoP in addition to fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

A form of legitimate peripheral participation, described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as moving from being a newcomer to gaining full membership as an expert in the field, may then be participating in the work of student affairs without actively contributing to the work of the CoP. This movement toward the ‘centre’ or full membership may then be paved with what Bruner (1996) describes learning about the field and how to do the work of a student affairs professional, coupled with what Duguid (2005) calls “learning to be” (p. 113) as the internalization and expression of the tacit knowledge that full membership and expertise must be cultivated, demonstrated, and recognized for these emerging professionals to truly, legitimately belong.
The emerging student affairs professionals interviewed for this study are a case study in hopeful complexity. In addition to navigating the already elaborate identity-work of discovering and defining themselves, they were also engaged in perceiving, negotiating, and tentatively communicating of the tacit knowledge of a professional identity. Their potential membership in the CoP offered important opportunities for this work, yet they were also quick to trouble the inclusive, privileged criteria for membership while rapidly adapting to a world in the throes of a global pandemic. The pandemic has accelerated an already fundamental change in the way participants may negotiate and communicate what it means to be student-focused in a world that is demanding an increasingly distributed, diverse focus on multiple people and priorities. This identity-work is essentially and ultimately communal, simultaneously influencing and supporting the CoP and ensuring that agency is actively encouraged rather than passively permitted. Participants’ work to practice these values and instill them in the students they support is particularly admirable when faced with such competing pressures, and deserves to be recognized. While they may still perceive the development of a professional identity as difficult or even problematic, these participants perceived the need for a CoP that will grow with them. The field, then, must also be supportive, as its values are meant to encompass and offer a compassionate yet critical approach to assist student development and success. This approach, according to participants, must extend to how they and other emerging professionals are guided on their unique journey of professional development, negotiating the complexities of bringing them ‘into the fold’ while also encouraging their critical contributions to discussions of what this fold, or field, looks like now and how it might develop in the future.
Contribution to Theory: A Nested Model for Professional Identity Development

This study’s participants offered an important extension of how a CoP might be defined. More than simply a group of people who do the same work or share similar professional titles, the CoP is an influential place for and integral aspect of the development of a professional identity. In student affairs, the CoP is particularly unique as it extends the tacit knowledge of the field; particularly the high value placed on community for its social connections and shared support. The CoP, then, is more than just the secondary phenomenon of forging social connections (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016), offering the important interpretive support (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for negotiating and integrating the tacit knowledge of a professional identity. The CoP in student affairs is also a source of this tacit knowledge, such that Lave and Wenger’s notion of interpretive support is not just in knowledge translation, but also in (tacit) knowledge generation.

Figure 2 provides a visual model of the phenomenon of developing a professional identity for young, emerging professionals in student affairs. This model integrates both the literature and an analysis of the data to contribute to the theory of CoPs and professional identity. In an attempt to move closer to the centre (defined here as a place where the recognized experts reside), participants perceived the development of a professional identity as working to integrate explicit and tacit knowledge. Building on the foundational lens of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and more modern notions of situated learning where individuals learn as a function of being a member of a community of learners (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003), the model represents this process as occurring within the context for situated learning. This context includes the pathway of
an individual who embarks to negotiate knowledge within their current role and institution, as well as the larger culture and climate of higher education while progressing through the increasingly less porous layers in the CoP.

The considerable agency that each individual brings to this process is carried in what the Figure refers to as the identity backpack. This backpack holds tacit and explicit knowledge gained from a variety of sources, including past professional experiences, other life (personal) experiences, and expectations or the ‘shoulds’ that may, according to participants, compel them to want to move toward the centre or full membership. Other aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race) are also carried in this metaphorical backpack, as participants identified these aspects as important influences on the development of a professional identity and whether they could see themselves as a member of the CoP. The bi-directional arrow moving to and from this ‘backpack’ indicates, again, the reciprocal nature of the development of a professional identity, as aspects of an individual’s identity inform their movement toward full membership in the CoP, while their interactions throughout this process influence how they see themselves and how others may see them. The dashed line encompassing the shaded CoP represents the participants’ observations that even just entering or getting into the CoP is not without its personal, professional, and organizational challenges.

All types of knowledge and each experience also influence and are influenced by the other, due in part to participants’ subjective, socially constructed interpretations. The CoP and the institution or department where the individual is employed also overlap to form tacit knowledge that either competes or complements the emerging professional’s evolving sense of self. This model expands the concentric, nested model of community
(Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, & Pasquesi, 2016) in the profession where these spheres of influence create increasingly exclusive areas for demonstrating and recognizing professional competence. These spheres are seen as having increasingly solid membranes, representing that it may be or feel easier to belong on the outside, in the larger, less exclusive group of professionals. As participants moved closer to the centre, they perceive encountering many barriers; systemic, communal, or personal; that made it difficult to obtain full membership and acknowledgement of visible competence in the field.

Put another way, the tacit knowledge of a professional identity in student affairs was perceived as learning to be a visible expert of equal standing with others in the inner sphere. Movement toward the centre (full membership) is a ‘tug of war’, as participants attempt to move through the outermost sphere (working in the field but not contributing to the CoP), to the middle (participating on the periphery, defined as working in the field and contributing to the CoP). Entering and remaining in the ‘inner sphere’ involves contributions and recognition of visible, reciprocal expertise that demonstrate an identity of mastery in the field. This mastery comes with an expectation that a full member ‘should’ give back, and ‘should’ invest considerably in the work of the CoP.

While individuals have considerable agency in moving through these spheres or types of participation, the CoP will also push back, defining a strict set of criteria and restricting access to the platform held for visibility as an expert through structural and philosophical (tacit) barriers. This tug of war is represented by the broken, curved arrows moving into and out of the centre, as the path to full membership is not easy and may not even be equally accessible due to challenges of habitus, trust, and imbalances of power.
Some individuals may reside on the cusp of full membership by engaging in peripheral participation as they negotiate whether the CoP is a good ‘fit’ for their evolving sense of self. This individual agency is one of many instances where personal and collective power heavily intertwine to influence moving to the centre. Power imbalances and negotiations exist at every point in this process, as individuals who can more easily navigate structural, systemic barriers to access (e.g., disparity in financial resources, competing personal or professional priorities) may more quickly and easily move to the centre.

While it may not be novel to consider agency and power in the process of identity development, this study’s contribution to theory emphasizes that the CoP is not a site, nor a place, nor a simple collection of people who are bonded together by a common interest, position, or purpose. This study’s participants described the phenomenon of the development of a professional identity as a) situated – inescapable from the influences of the larger contexts and relationships in which people live and work, b) nested – these influences radiate inward and outward, informing the tacit knowledge gained from an emerging professional’s first role in the field and their interactions with the broader landscape of student affairs and higher education, c) communal – the development of a professional identity cannot happen in a vacuum; others in our communities can act as models and mentors demonstrating the tacit knowledge of the field, and d) personal – each emerging professional has considerable agency to move through this process, while also recognizing the barriers that may create unique obstacles for professional development and personal growth.
Figure 2. Moving Closer to the Centre: A Nested Model for Professional Identity Development for Emerging, Younger Professionals in Student Affairs
Implications

**Implications for Professional Identity and Communities of Practice.** The act of social, situated learning is a defining feature of a CoP, where learning can be defined, in part, as negotiating competence in a particular area (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Learning with and alongside others implies the active negotiation of knowledge and ideas (Stein, 1998), often with the goal of creating a shared repertoire of artifacts and tools that make up a common practice (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

This concept of active engagement, however, seems to be far more important than simply relying on each member of the CoP to be active in their individual pursuit of identity development. Much of the literature in this area defines active as the opposite of passive (e.g., Bandura, 1977), implying that individuals have some agency or influence over the development of their professional identity. However, it can be argued that much of this action may remain hidden, left to the individual to actively negotiate and critically reflect on the tacit knowledge of professional identity rather than merely accepting what they are told and perceive as inalterable fact. The individual may be recognized through certain behaviours as engaged in the active pursuit of their professional identity (e.g. attending professional development offerings), or, at the very least, we can observe the result of this active process in what we may deem to be critical, reflective, or well-articulated observations about themselves and the world around them that represents some adherence to a social constructivist worldview that values complexity and diversity of perspectives (Creswell, 2007).
The participants interviewed for this study offered a critical extension of our understanding of active engagement in learning and identity development. This action is, for emerging professionals in student affairs, a tacit expectation and a critical indication: an expectation tacitly communicated within the CoP and a vital indication of membership and belonging. Participants further noted that this active engagement must also be reciprocal – they must give back to their community rather than only, or perhaps passively, taking in or benefiting from the exchange of knowledge amongst other CoP members. While these values of being actively invested in one’s professional development and in giving back to a community that you have benefited from are noble, an important implication of this study is that these emerging professionals have identified that they must be seen as doing this work. The CoP, in this case CACUSS, can therefore provide a platform or stage for gaining visibility as doing what is expected.

These observations may also imply that being seen and, by extension, validated for giving back to the community (e.g., by opportunities for career advancement) can support a renewed sense of agency over multiple aspects of this process of identity development. The research already suggests that individuals have significant agency in determining how and if they identify with the knowledge communicated and negotiated in a community of practice (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016) and that the CoP also holds considerable agency in establishing criteria for membership (Wenger, 1998).

This bi-directional, reciprocal relationship between the community and the individual in defining membership criteria is now, however, far more networked and nuanced, and extends far beyond the agency inherent in joint enterprise and mutual
engagement. The agency participants demonstrated in negotiating, developing, and communicating the tacit knowledge of professional identity inspires conversations about and reflections on the very concepts they are defining or using as foundational elements of this identity-work. While the field of student affairs is being defined, in part, through the CoP, these emerging professionals are defining the field in how they are being seen and what they are giving back. It can no longer be said that what they are giving back is simply a repackaged version of the same knowledge they are taking in. The expectation of actively, visibly giving back is being met by critical observation and bold action that will continue to shape the field for years to come. The term ‘negotiation’ then becomes especially apt in our understanding of communities of practice and professional identity – there is give and take, action and reaction, and yet, at its emerging core a joint enterprise and mutual engagement around a domain that must itself negotiate the tacit knowledge of its own professional identity.

**Implications for Emerging Student Affairs Professionals.** On the surface, this performative expectation for emerging professionals appears problematic. The apparent need or demand to be seen as doing this work creates a hierarchy or boundaries that may be difficult for emerging professionals to navigate if they, for example, cannot afford the paid CACUSS membership that grants them access to this professional stage or if they cannot invest the requisite amount of time to remain regularly, consistently, and visibly engaged.

However, there is also a more positive implication for the perception of this tacit knowledge of professional identity. The emerging, ongoing conversations on equity, inclusion, innovation, and adaptability, that have risen to particular prominence during
this time of a global pandemic and widespread civil unrest, are as much an opportunity as they are a challenge. The same participants who identified the expectation of giving back to their CoP were negotiating and contributing new knowledge and novel ideas to the field, rather than passively taking in and reinforcing what may be considered older standards or ways of doing.

In fact, these participants were not simply learning what or how, but were deeply invested in a new way of learning how to be a student affairs professional (Duguid, 2005). These emerging professionals have charged themselves with, as Duguid suggests, not just talking a good game, but also being able to play one. There is a sense of radical hope and shared motivation to circle back to the why of the profession. These participants remain steadfast in their focus on a student-centered approach to their work, and perhaps these students may soon come to include themselves and their colleagues in the necessary learning and reflection that is to come.

These and other emerging professionals may now also be more likely to work within, rather than against, the tension of being in a supporting role on paper yet a supportive role in their CoP. The roles of student affairs professionals may still take on a supporting nature (e.g., acting as way finders along a student’s journey through their university career), but the term ‘support’ may no longer imply a secondary function or less impactful place in institutions and the wider professional community. The expectation of giving back in a visible way may serve to solidify the important role of these emerging professionals in boldly challenging the know how or what (explicit knowledge) of the field (Duguid, 2005), and these professionals may in fact have
considerably more agency to decide what they choose to make and remain visible in the negotiation and communication of the tacit knowledge of the field.

**Implications for Degree Programs in Student Affairs and Higher Education.** As one of the first sites for engaging with student development theory (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) and in the social construction of identity (Kegan, 1994), graduate programs help emerging professionals to learn what it means to be a student affairs professional. Many graduate programs may structure their curriculum to emphasize seminal authors and valuable skills that, taken together, are meant to assist professionals in navigating through the field. This study found that learning in a small, supportive cohort is an important component of the graduate programs. Degree programs may benefit from more explicit and ongoing dialogues around what it means to look like or behave as a student affairs professional, particularly as emerging professionals are increasingly focused on issues of access and equity in the field.

These notions of access and equity are also impactful ideas for the recruitment of students in these degree programs. There is an inherently tacit knowledge communicated in how these programs are marketed, from the photos meant to represent the diversity of the program’s students to the language used to describe an ideal program candidate. Assessment methods also communicate tacit knowledge of what knowledge, theories, and beliefs are most valued for ‘good’ or ‘successful’ student affairs professionals. Degree programs may now need to pay closer, more careful attention to what assumptions students are bringing into the
program, and whether these assumptions are being ignored, challenged, or embraced.

**Implications for the Professional Association (CACUSS).** The expectation of visible, active, reciprocal engagement is particularly advantageous for CACUSS and other professional associations, whose business model can rely on providing a platform where this can occur at a local and national level. However, the privileged access to these spaces and platforms can be challenging for those who cannot afford the necessary resources to become and remain engaged. The expectation of visible engagement also renews important conversations on what it may truly look like to be actively involved in the negotiation and development of a professional identity, and what voices and associated tacit criteria for this professional identity are elevated and communicated.

Visibility is also an important implication for the CoP in terms of visible and diverse representation of the profession within the association. Maintaining a visible presence in the field, and demonstrating an ongoing commitment to active, reciprocal engagement with the community and its explicit knowledge or shared repertoire, was identified by several participants as being a challenging if not nearly impossible task for certain individuals or identified groups. In fact, the paid membership structure of the association can tacitly imply criteria for membership that fundamentally contradicts the messaging meant to demonstrate the tacit values of community and inclusion. This and other barriers to accessing the privilege of information, resources, and community connections, including the absence of the visible representation of certain groups in the wider membership and in positions of leadership within the association, may unwittingly make it harder for emerging professionals to envision themselves as members, and they
may then actively disengage from a CoP that does not visibly align with other, intersecting aspects of their own identities.

This can put CACUSS and other professional associations in the middle of a confounding dilemma: Can a professional association be both a business and a CoP? What are the implications of using the term CoP to define a corporation as a shared, social network for knowledge management and mutual engagement? Early implications may be that it is possible to be both, as professional associations offer space for formal and informal socialization into the field (Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009), while creating physical and digital spaces for the shared management of considerable amounts of knowledge, information, and resources. The ongoing challenge, however, lies in mirroring the seemingly easier work participants identified of defining membership by a role, title, or organizational chart rather than tackling the tacit knowledge of professional identity that is at once defined by the CoP yet influenced by conversations and communities outside of these potentially privileged spaces. CACUSS and its peer associations may soon be tasked with the work of learning to be (Duguid, 2005), not only as a more diversified representation of the field but also as a forum for critical conversations around who might own, support, and, most critically, be missing from the negotiation and communication of our evolving definitions of the student affairs profession and those who perform this service to the community alongside the demands of their individual identity-work.

**Limitations**

Any study that attempts to describe a phenomenon is subject to a myriad of challenges in attempting to negotiate subjective observations and objective or research-
based information to describe an inherently complex phenomenon. Working to describe what is occurring as accurately as possible (Groenewald, 2004) from the perspective of those involved (Welman & Kruger, 1999) required an attempt to observe and analyze participant data from an objective distance while simultaneously seeking to intimately integrate these observations into a robust description of a lived experience that has closely mirrored my own professional and personal journey. In this section, four key limitations of the current study are discussed, including methodological limitations and identified personal challenges in data collection and subsequent analyses, as well as broader philosophical and situational factors that warrant further exploration.

**Inserting Myself: Personal Bias and Subjectivity in Data Collection.** The choice of a phenomenological approach to this research was borne from a desire to explore professional identity development from the perspective of those involved (Welman & Kruger, 1999). The intent of this study was not to generalize or draw conclusions, but to instead surface potential patterns or possible insights into this complex phenomenon. In doing so, however, it became readily apparent that attempting to understand the essence of this phenomenon for and from the individuals who experience it (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012) caused me to draw heavily from my own past experiences and ongoing reflections. Reviewing several interview transcripts, I saw numerous instances where I would relate a participant’s lived experience to my own, often providing specific examples or externally processing half-formed thoughts related to the study’s research questions that were inspired by our discussions. This ran counter to my early goal of bracketing my own biases (Miller & Crabtree, 1992) to avoid sharing
my own anecdotal experiences and the associated tacit knowledge I myself may have perceived.

Recognizing and communicating these shared experiences may have helped me to structure a valuable, positive relationship with these participants, as indicative of the secondary phenomenon of structuring such relationships often borne from the social process of negotiating competence and identity (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). As mentioned in Chapter 3, I was also concerned with establishing an early rapport with participants to support discussions that may be highly personal in nature. This type of rapport-building, however, may be more in line with how I have been trained in my full time work as an Educational Developer, where consulting conversations are complex opportunities for communicating empathy while establishing both rapport and expertise. While valuable for professional dialogues, these actions run counter to Creswell’s (1998) apt note that “a good interviewer is a listener rather than a speaker during an interview” (p. 125).

These interviews were also highly reflective opportunities for myself and the participants to surface or notice tacit knowledge that can often remain hidden from our consciousness (Polanyi, 1962; Tsoukas, 2011), and which may have led to some of the valuable insights discussed in this dissertation. However, inserting my reflections, experiences or opinions into these dialogues may have moved these interviews away from studying how participants construct meaning from as close to inside the experience as possible (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). My opinions and biases may have potentially confounded initial findings to be more of an exploration of how participants interpreted my experiences rather than how they perceived their own experiences in negotiating and
developing a professional identity. Future research could mitigate this challenge by creating a more structured and stricter interview protocol, or by collecting written responses to initial interview questions as a way to remove early bias and subjectivity before engaging in a follow-up conversation for more in depth reflection and exploration.

**Narrow Contexts: Representation in the Final Participant Group.** The defined, research-based criteria for inclusion in this study as a participant were meant to ideally offer an informed view of the phenomenon of identity development for new professionals yet also purposely generic to cast a wide net within the identified participant pool. With an original goal of 10 participants, this strategy was intended to balance the need for a representative sample while also attempting to generate diverse perspectives and experiences.

The final group of six participants was partially and potentially representative of the field in terms of gender identity (all but one participant identified as female), yet may have missed other key considerations for a truly inclusive or representative sample. For example, 5 of the 6 participants identified themselves as employees of a university, which means that the colleges, as a professional context, are completely lacking from this study’s results. Future research should endeavor to include college professionals in the participant group, as student affairs as a profession and division in the college context may offer unique influences on the negotiation, development, and communication of tacit knowledge through a unique context and perhaps distinct set of values and beliefs.

The remaining participant (Participant M1) identified his place of employment as an organization supporting the work of residence life at institutions rather than a university or college. While, arguably, still working in support of student success, the
context, goals, and tacit values of an organization can be unique compared to an institution in higher education and may have influenced this participant’s perceptions of the negotiation of the tacit knowledge of identity development. In fact, this participant described his role as “a little unique”, perhaps recognizing an important perspective that was still valuable in “supporting institutions from a consultation side.”

There was also no specific recruitment of or accounting for other aspects of identity, including race, sexual orientation, or religion, which research strongly suggests make up some of the intersecting elements of identity and identity development (e.g., Jones & McEwen, 2000). Future research could narrow the scope of these explorations of professional identity development to more intentionally and explicitly account for one or more of these aspects, as many current studies, alongside the ongoing civil unrest in Canada and across the world, are bringing the challenges and opportunities associated with professional identity development for individuals in several identified groups into sharper relief.

It is also worth noting that even with such a broad definition of eligible participants for this study, it still took over half a year (October 2019 – April 2020) to recruit and interview participants. This may have been due to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic discussed below, or related to competing with the considerable amount of information and invitations shared through CACUSS to its members on a regular basis. However, it is also possible that emerging professionals may not feel that they have enough or the right, best, or most valuable ideas to contribute to research in and about the field. Specifically, attempting to describe and discuss identity development with new professionals may surface tensions related to these professionals already feeling
secondary or subordinate in a student affairs role that may be emphasized by encounters with peers or assumptions about more senior administrators (Young, 1985). This may give rise to symptoms of the imposter phenomenon discussed earlier, while also triggering feelings of cognitive dissonance that Young attributes, in part, to expectations of offering support to students after having challenging experiences navigating their own university careers. Any future studies will need to take this insight into special consideration and reexamine the messaging and wording of invitations for participation that focus on both the practical elements and the philosophical or emotional tenants of discussing such a personal topic or journey.

**Broad Definitions: How ‘New’ is a New Professional in the Field?**. One specific criteria for research participants was age, defined for new professionals as being 35 years of age or younger. This criterion was set in part subjectively to cover the assumed trajectory of completing an undergraduate and Master’s degree along with some years of experience in the field, while also informed by research suggesting that many emerging professionals are typically in their mid-20s or 30s (Shetty, Chunoo, & Cox, 2016). However, this age range may have in fact been a confounding factor in this study, as alongside attempting to define new professionals as having 0-5 years of experience (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006), the language used by an emerging professional with closer to 5 years of experience varied considerably from someone who indicated having only a few months of professional experience in the field.

For example, Participant F4 noted more than once that she had only been a paying member of CACUSS for two months, using words like ‘only’ to qualify or justify an early, tentative understanding of the CoP. In contrast, Participant M1 noted that “I’m at
this really weird cusp … I will be soon in my fifth year as a new professional … So I’m able to reflect on both what it felt like in the beginning and a bit later on.” These two extremes of the participant spectrum indicate that this range of 0-5 years of experience can still offer a near lifetime of variation in how individuals perceive, interpret, and negotiate identity development. Participant F4 also aptly observed that the term ‘new’ does not only apply to younger professionals:

I think any new person, not even just student affairs, […] and even they could have been in student affairs for years and years and years, but if they were starting at a new university or in a new team, I think that would be very difficult.

Alongside the challenges of rapidly adapting to new ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, moving between roles, institutions, or responsibilities offers new tacit and explicit knowledge that must now be negotiated and, ideally, integrated into a developing professional identity. Drawing again on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), movement between different contexts also means that professionals will be newcomers to different organizational conditions, social groups, and communities of practice. Each setting will then offer new knowledge and a novel environment to explore that may equally help and hinder the subjective meaning making inherent in identity development (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2013).

An important consideration for future research must then be a more in depth exploration of the dual, reciprocal influences of new environments and experiences on or for new professionals, instead of relying on a narrow, aged and experience-based understanding of the impact of newness on identity development. Practically, these insights should also inform further research in a revised definition of a new professional,
taking into account that ‘new’ does not always mean young or employed in one’s first full-time role.

**Rapid Shifts: Collecting and Analyzing Data During the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

Much like with every other facet of daily life, the COVID-19 pandemic was at once a limitation and opportunity for this research study. On a more practical level, the pandemic reached its peak about halfway through data collection, such that by random accident three participants were interviewed prior to the pandemic, with the remaining three completing their interviews during perhaps the height of the pandemic’s immense impact on our work and way of life. This created challenges in availability and scheduling, but also shifted the conversation to the additional challenges and opportunities related to working as a new professional in higher education and student affairs amidst a pandemic. Future, perhaps longitudinal research could take advantage of these early insights to further explore how new professionals have continued to negotiate and perceive the tacit knowledge of professional identity in a field that is undergoing immense, rapid changes to its own sense of self.

The global pandemic has also offered increased prominence to questions of personal reflection and self-improvement, often tied to how we might be ‘making the most’ of our quarantine experiences or how these uncertain times may change or challenge us. Similar to Participant F5’s assertion that our beliefs and values are often most readily apparent in times of crisis, the important, contextual variable of a pandemic could have been more readily integrated into this data analysis. While this study’s research questions did not explicitly incorporate the impact of change, challenge, and conflict on the development of a professional identity, it may be important for future
research to centre onto the impact of the pandemic. In particular, the pandemic can be seen as a key influence on the development of a professional identity and its impact on the myriad of other variables (e.g., professional roles, aspects of personal identity, life experiences) that contribute to this phenomenon.

**Concluding Thoughts: A Modern Approach to Professional Identity**

This study combined the seminal ideas in student affairs (e.g., community and holistic development) with a more modern approach to understanding how ideals of the field are developed, negotiated, and communicated for emerging professionals. The development of a professional identity was described by study participants as situated within a particular community and context, emphasizing the role of a community in shaping a new professional’s journey beyond advising or mentorship. It can now be understood that both what is explicitly said and what is only implicitly or tacitly communicated shape how an emerging professional finds their place in the field, or if they feel they truly have a place at all.

This situated notion of professional identity is also, importantly, nested within increasingly impermeable circles. The act of moving toward the smaller, more exclusive centre of a CoP is a challenging process of obtaining full membership in the field, marked by intersecting, and sometimes conflicting, notions of expertise defined by the community and by the individual. This tacit knowledge and the process by which it is developed, negotiated, and communicated is far more complex that was perhaps originally understood. This study calls for more fulsome and critical examination of where ideals for the field come from and whether our work to be inclusive may actually exclude a significant portion of potential professionals.
Though discussed in some detail in this study’s literature review, several participants mentioned the influence and impact of technology as critical to their professional identity development. The demands of social distancing practices and policies during the pandemic meant that the entirety of these new professionals’ work was moved online, including any opportunities for connection and conversation within their CoP. Several participants did mention that CACUSS was offering online or web-based professional development sessions for explicit knowledge sharing and communal, situated learning. However, these webinars seemed to lack some of the characteristics of informal or spontaneous face-to-face interactions that had, in the past, solidified feelings of membership.

These considerations offer a potential extension of the study’s research questions, exploring how tacit knowledge is negotiated and communicated virtually. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of the more modern development of a professional identity and the collaborative, communal learning facilitated in online environments that may heavily impact identity development (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). Participants’ lived experiences also offer an important, additional contribution to the field, recognizing that virtual environments have a significant influence on the development, negotiation, and communication of both the explicit and tacit knowledge in student affairs.

It was, at times, difficult to both separate and integrate the site of the development of a professional identity and the aspects that make up this sense of self. The use of the Internet and other technologies is not necessarily new to the field of student affairs, but its implications for how emerging professionals learn to be or work toward being a full member of the CoP are still a novel area for study. The data that were collected, and how
they were collected and analyzed, cannot entirely be separated from this context, nor should the phenomenon itself. This research provides a foundation for understanding the development of a professional identity as a multi-faceted, nested phenomenon that influences and is influenced by its diverse contexts. As these emerging professionals take in the many stimuli and information that can shape a professional identity, they are also pushing back – shaping and reforming the very spaces that are trying to maintain some coherent structure, norms, and boundaries. While this study may have only explored, in detail, one aspect of this process, we can no longer ignore just how complex, diverse, and important this phenomenon is for the future of our young professionals, the field of student affairs, and the students who entrust them with their own unique developmental journey.
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Appendix A: REB Clearance – University of Windsor

REB Clearance
ethics@uwindsor.ca <ethics@uwindsor.ca>
Thu 2019-09-26 5:06 PM
To: Endersby Lisa (Primary Investigator) <endersby@uwindsor.ca>; Martinovic Dragana (Supervisor) <DRAGANA@uwindsor.ca>
Cc: ethics@uwindsor.ca <ethics@uwindsor.ca>

Today's Date: September 26, 2019
Principal Investigator: Ms. Lisa Endersby
REB Number: 3638Z
Research Project Title: REB# 19-131: "Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice"
Clearance Date: September 25, 2019
Project End Date: March 16, 2020
Milestones:
Renewal Due-2020/03/16 (Pending)

This is to inform you that the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the University of Windsor Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants, has granted clearance for your research project on the date noted above. This clearance is valid only until the Project End Date.

A Progress Report or final Report is due by the Milestones date noted above. The REB may ask for monitoring information at any time during the project’s approval period.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. Minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered when submitted on the Request to Revise form.

Investigators must also report promptly to the REB:
a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
b) all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
c) new information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study.

Forms for submissions, notifications, or changes are available on the REB website: www.uwindsor.ca/research-ethics-board/

If your data is going to be used for another project, it is necessary to submit another application to the REB.

We wish you every success in your research.

Dr. Suzanne McMurphy, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board
University of Windsor
2140 Chrysler Hall North
519-253-3000 ext. 3948
Email: ethics@uwindsor.ca

https://outlook.office.com/mail/deepink?version=20201228001.33&popouv2=1
Appendix B: Call for Participants (Initial and Follow Up)

Hello,
My name is Lisa Endersby and I am currently a doctoral candidate working under the supervision of Dr. Dragana Martinovic at the University of Windsor. The reason I am contacting you is that I am conducting a dissertation research study that seeks to explore how participation in communities of practice, like CACUSS, may influence the collection and negotiation of information and ideas that could make up a professional identity, and the processes by which this identity development may occur. I am interested in conducting individual interviews with new professionals in the field, who are active members of CACUSS.

In a virtual interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes, I will ask you questions about your current and past experiences with communities of professionals (including CACUSS), and your experiences negotiating and developing your identity as a student affairs professional. I will also follow up with you after the interview with a copy of your interview transcript for your review, and will ask you some additional questions to ensure I have captured your thoughts accurately.

Participation in this study will take no longer than 1.5 hours. This research has been approved by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:
- A current, paid member of CACUSS
- A new professional in the field (defined as having 0-5 years of full-time professional experience)
- 35 years of age or under

The following time slots are available for interviews:
*NOTE: These dates and times changed between the initial and follow up calls based on the researcher’s availability
- Thursday, April 9 6pm, 7pm, 8pm EST
- Monday, April 13 6pm, 7pm, 8pm EST
- Tuesday, April 14 1pm, 2pm EST
- Wednesday, April 15 6pm, 7pm, 8pm EST
- Thursday, April 16 11am, 12pm, 1pm EST
- Friday, April 17 1pm, 2pm EST
- Thursday, April 30 11am, 12pm, 1pm EST

If the above dates and times conflict with your schedule and you would still like to participate in this research study, please email me at endersb@uwindsor.ca and we can work to make alternate arrangements.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me (Lisa Endersby) directly at endersb@uwindsor.ca with the statement below:
I (please provide your full name) consent to participate in: Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice.

Please also list your top three choices for when you would like to participate from the list above. I will then follow up to confirm your interview time and provide additional information about how to virtually connect for the interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email.

Below you will find a detailed Letter of Information about the study. By replying to me at endersb@uwindsor.ca, you consent to participate in this study under the conditions outlined in the Letter of Information. Prior to your interview, I will send you a Consent for Audio Taping form that you must sign, scan, and send back to me prior to the scheduled interview time.

A summary of this research will be made available to all CACUSS members via the University of Windsor research results summaries page: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/

LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Lisa Endersby and Dr. Dragana Martinovic, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. This research and its results will contribute to a PhD dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Lisa Endersby at [phone number redacted] or by email at endersb@uwindsor.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The proposed research will explore and enhance our understanding of the professional development of emerging (new) student affairs professionals by investigating how these new professionals perceive the development of their professional identity. Situated within the context of a community of practice that aims to offer opportunities for professional development, this study extends our knowledge of the impact and influence of communities of practice in the development, negotiation, and communication of the tacit, often unspoken knowledge that can contribute to identity development.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview (approximately 45 minutes to one hour) in September 2019 to discuss your experiences as a member
of this community of practice and how they have impacted or influenced the development of your professional identity.

Following the interview, you will have the opportunity to review a transcript of our discussion and you will be able to further expand on or clarify your thoughts in a second, follow up conversation (approximately 30 minutes).

Both the initial interview and follow up conversation will be conducted virtually using Google Hangouts and recorded using a digital recorder. Overall, your participation in this study will take no longer than 1.5 hours.

You will also be asked to share their brief professional philosophy statement (from LinkedIn profile or personal or professional website) if you have one.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is minimal risk involved in participating in an interview. You may experience some minor discomfort in discussing personal experiences related to your career and professional identity development. This study is exploratory and is not meant to judge or assess your professional development but is rather an opportunity to explore how communities of practice can continue to support the professional development of emerging professionals in the field. The interview setting involves only you and the researcher, and anything you share during the interview will be kept confidential. Interviews will also only record audio (no video).

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You will have the opportunity to reflect on their professional journey into and within the field of student affairs and will be able to gain useful knowledge about yourself and your unique pathway in the profession. Since a literature review has informed this research, there may also be an opportunity for you to learn more about the field and the role of communities of practice in supporting professional identity development.

This study will provide valuable information to communities of practice and similar associations/organizations in student affairs around their unique role in supporting the ongoing professional development of new professionals in the field. Both emerging and more seasoned professionals will also be able to learn about and reflect on the implicit, tacit knowledge that is negotiated and communicated in the field, inspiring opportunities to reflect on the core values of the field and how (or if) these are shared with new professionals.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your role and participation in this research study will be kept strictly confidential.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be associated with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only after the names have been changed. All written data and audio recordings will be stored on the researcher’s password protected computer. Once data transcript is completed, all original recordings will be securely destroyed. All participants’ responses will be kept in strict confidence and all names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any communication of research findings.
You will have the opportunity to review a copy of your transcribed interview and to provide any additional information, additions, or changes in the follow up conversation.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any point during the interview, follow up conversation, or at any point between the two scheduled meetings. The audio recording of your first interview will be immediately destroyed and will not be included in any subsequent analysis.

There will be no consequences to you should you choose to withdraw, and your relationship with the researcher and community of practice will not be negatively impacted should you choose to withdraw from the study.

If you withdraw from the study after the data from your interview has been transcribed, or 2 months have passed since your interview (whichever comes first), the data will remain, but you will not be expected to further participate in the study.

After January 1, 2020, as by that time all conversations will be transcribed, and all documents analysed, withdrawal from the study will not be possible.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

You will be provided with a full summary of study results for their review as well as a way to communicate any insights or ideas that may be useful for your continued professional development. This summary will be made available via the CACUSS member update and/or on the CACUSS website.

Web address: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/

Date when results are available: TBD

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Lisa Endersby

October 7, 2019

Signature of Investigator Date
Appendix C: REB Application Addendum Clearance – University of Windsor

1/6/2021
Mail - Lisa Endersby - Outlook

Appendix C: REB Application Addendum Clearance – University of Windsor

Request to Revise cleared
ethics@uwindsor.ca <ethics@uwindsor.ca>
Fri 2019-12-13 11:34 AM

To: Endersby Lisa (Primary Investigator) <endersb@uwindsor.ca>
Cc: Martinovic Dragana (Supervisor) <DRAGANA@uwindsor.ca>; ethics@uwindsor.ca <ethics@uwindsor.ca>

December 13, 2019

Our File No: 36182
Project Title: REB# 19-131: "Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice"
Status: Active

Dear Ms. Endersby,

Thank you for submitting your request to revise for "REB# 19-131: "Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice""

This request has been reviewed and you are now cleared to proceed with the proposed changes as of December 5, 2019.

If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Sincerely,

Suzanne McMurphy, Ph.D., MSS, MLSP
Chair, Research Ethics Board
University of Windsor
2146 Chrysler Hall North
519-253-300 ext. 3648
Email: ethics@uwindsor.ca

https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?version=20201228001.33&popoutv2=1
Appendix D: Audio Consent Form

CONSENT FOR AUDIO TAPEING

Research Participant Name:

Title of the Project: Learning to Be: Tacit Knowledge of Professional Identity Negotiated, Developed, and Communicated by Emerging Student Affairs Professionals within Communities of Practice

I consent to the audio-taping of interviews.

I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the taping be stopped. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping will be kept confidential. Digital recordings will be stored on a secured computer.

The destruction of the audio recordings will be completed after transcription and verification.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the audio recording will be for professional use only.

This research has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.

_________________________  __________
(Research Participant)       (Date)
Appendix E: Research Interview Questions (Initial Interview)

1. When asked about what you do for a living, what do you say? How would you describe your job and your work?

2. How would you describe the beliefs and values that guide your professional practice?

   Possible Prompt: What has been your most memorable experience as a student affairs professional? Why was this experience so meaningful or impactful?

3. How would you describe a student affairs professional? What is the work that they do? What values, beliefs, or attitudes inform their practice?

4. How would you define a community of practice [for the field of student affairs]? What does it look like? What does it do?

5. How might you define a professional identity? What features or characteristics might be used to define a professional identity?

6. Why did you choose to become a member of CACUSS? What factors, criteria, or other rationale influenced your choice?

7. How might you know whether or not you are a member of this community of practice? What criteria, in your view, define your membership?

8. Describe a time where you witnessed a difference of opinion between or among members of this community. What happened? What was the outcome? What did that teach you about what behaviours are valued and/or frowned upon among the community?

9. What other professional communities of practice would you currently consider yourself a member of?

10. What professional communities have you been a part of in the past? Why are you no longer a member of this community/these communities?

11. How has your identity and/or identity development been influenced by your participation in this community of practice?

12. After completing this interview, how might you now describe the beliefs and values that guide your professional practice?
Appendix F: Example of Data Coding Procedure

Table 3

Example of Data Coding Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Building the Foundation:</strong> Defining the Field and Describing the Professional</td>
<td>The field of student affairs and the work of professionals is defined in large part of student-focused/student-centered; Student affairs professionals support students on their developmental journey in &amp; through university</td>
<td>“The only thing that’s really tying us together is that we are in serve to students and so there’s no other umbrella term for that, rather than student affairs” (Participant F2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1A: Defining the Role of and Work within a CoP</strong></td>
<td>The work of and in the CoP mirrors the values of the field – working as a community to develop as professionals &amp; share resources; The CoP is an important site for professional development due in large part to connections to fellow professionals (sharing resources and lifelong learning)</td>
<td>“[A student affairs professional serves as] “a wayfinder … So our job is to support students on their journey” (Participant M1) “participating in a community of practice looks like continually seeking new information, developing yourself as a person and as a professional” (Participant M1) “the general goal … to support the exchange of knowledge and the development of professional competencies and an ability to work effectively in the field” (Participant F5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **2. Setting the Standard:** Beliefs and Values that Guide the Work | Student affairs professionals place a high value on community, connection, and relationships. Being actively engaged in the CoP implies professionals must be open-minded and value the opinions/ideas of others. | “Student affairs professionals … often place a pretty high value on community and the role of being connected to others” (Participant F5) [time in the CoP] “taught
<table>
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<tr>
<th>2A: Raising the Bar: Membership and Defining the ‘Shoulds’ of the Field</th>
<th>There is a compelling, often unspoken expectation that emerging professionals must be a part of the CoP and be actively, reciprocally engaged; The field also has a particular language (vocabulary) that is needed to feel more like a member/insider</th>
<th>“If I were to be a student affairs professional who is not a part of CACUSS, I would be questioning my own status as a student affairs professional. I feel that it adds a lot of credibility” (Participant F4)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>“I was always told before I got into student affairs … that there’s a language you need to learn, there’s way you describe concepts and ideas that is very, kind of, unique to student affairs, and it’s absolutely true. And so you do have kind of the vocabulary to feel less like an outsider” (Participant F1)</td>
<td>“when you’re entering a community of practice, you’re entering a reciprocal relationship with your fellow professionals who are interested or specializing or want to develop further.” (Participant F4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Opening the Doors: Representation in the CoP and Access</td>
<td>Participants identified conflict between expressed values of inclusion &amp; diversity and the observed systemic, structural barriers</td>
<td>“I imagine it would be difficult to feel like a valued member of a community of practice if you are the only person like you in it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to active participation in the CoP (e.g. lack of visible representation at events; inequitable access to CoP based on lack of financial or other (e.g. time) resources)</td>
<td>(Participant F1)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I think for new professionals it can be quite daunting because you almost don’t know whether or not you belong in this realm of student affairs and whether those resources that are available to you or those communities that are available to you are actually available to you because you don’t know if you fit in that group” (Participant F3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vita Auctoris

Lisa Endersby was born in 1984 in Toronto, Ontario. She graduated from Pope John Paul II High School in 2002. From there she went on to the University of Toronto Scarborough where she obtained a B.Sc in Psychology in 2007. She is currently a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Spring 2021.