CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER TRANSITION: OPPORTUNITY, CHAOS OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

by

ANTHONY GORDON BRANTLEY

(Under the Direction of Karen Webber)

ABSTRACT

Forty-seven percent of higher education chief academic officers have been in their positions for three years or less, but there has been no systematic review and exploration into why this level of turnover has occurred. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers to more fully understand the reasons why these senior administrative leaders choose to leave or stay in their positions. Overall findings from semi-structured interviews with 13 Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) indicated that they perceive their job to be the toughest on campus, with significant challenges related to their duties and responsibilities including a large number of direct reports, frequent difficult decisions, grueling meeting schedules, no time for planning, and people management challenges. Participants also identified challenges with work relationships and described how they spent much of their time walking the tightrope between the president and faculty, and with individuals or campus group members who created challenging circumstances for the CAO. In contrast, participants also shared that the most energizing and fulfilling elements of their roles included leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students, developing strategy, building and supporting people, and having positive relationships with the president, vice

presidents, and the CAO office staff. The majority of these CAOs also shared that they were already seeking, or will be seeking, a presidency in the next few years.

INDEX WORDS: chief academic officer turnover, provost turnover, executive turnover, voluntary executive turnover, non-profit executive turnover, higher education turnover, chief academic officer job duties and responsibilities, chief academic officer challenges, chief academic officer titles, chief academic officer organization structures

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Tommie Rowe, who supported me through this challenging doctoral journey, and to my mother, Phyllis Brantley, who helped make my first degree a reality!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Frequent executive employee turnover in higher education can disrupt operations, impact the culture, and add many thousands of dollars in additional cost to the organization (Allen & Bryant, 2012; Cascio, 2006). Replacing an executive in the corporate sector can cost the organization 90 to 200% of the departing executive's salary (Cascio & Boudreau, 2010) and can sometimes cost as much as 40 times the departing executive's salary (Downey, March, & Berkman, 2001). In 2020, the median tenure of U.S. college presidents was six years and the median tenure for senior institutional officers combined was eight years, yet 47% of chief academic officers had been in their current positions three years or less (Pritchard, Nadel-Hawthorn, Schmidt, Fuesting, & Bichsel, 2020). Frequent transition of chief academic officers poses significant challenges for college presidents as well as other senior leaders and board of trustee members who collectively work to ensure smooth, efficient, and effective management and leadership of the institution. Frequent turnover of executive level positions also creates challenges for organizations including employee turnover, employee anxiety, and uncertainties about the future (Knudsen, Ducharme & Roman, 2009).

It is also important to note that sometimes voluntary turnover can have a positive impact on the organization if it occurs to replace an ineffective leader or an effective leader who retires or transitions to another role. Turnover can also improve organization performance and infuse new social capital (Shaw, Duffy, Johnson, & Lockhart, 2005) and top management departures can create the opportunity to eliminate or lessen unproductive or antiquated policies (Staw,

1980). According to Hom, Allen and Griffith, (2019), a turnover rate of zero is neither desirable nor possible. However, these authors also noted that "excessive turnover that is far greater than competitors or simply creating too much human capital churn is almost certainly disruptive and harmful for organizational functioning" (Hom et al., 2019, p. 34).

Chief Academic Officer Roles and Responsibilities

Titles for the senior most academic officer in U.S. higher education vary by institution and include chief academic officer, provost, vice president for academic affairs, vice chancellor for academic affairs, dean of the faculty, or dean of the college. Hence forward, I will use the term chief academic officer (CAO). At many institutions, the roles and responsibilities are focused almost exclusively on the academic vision and priorities. For some institutions, the role also includes oversight of other areas including research and student life. Duties can differ based on many factors including size and type of institution, leadership style of the president, external challenges that require focus of the president, and institution culture (Atnip, 2009). At other institutions, the chief academic officer is the second-most senior position managing the day-to-day operations and making decisions on behalf of the president (Martin & Samels, 2015). These differences in duties and responsibilities necessitate that the president and the CAO work collaboratively to clearly define the CAO's role. As noted by Buller (2015), "Good provosts and deans develop a clear understanding of how they view their roles, what they're trying to accomplish as academic leaders, and who they think they are in terms of their own careers and their place within the institution's overall culture" (p. 34).

Indeed, the duties have been extended by the COVID-19 crisis (LeBlanc, 2020) and this adds to the challenges CAOs at many private and public institutions are grappling with, including the approaching student enrollment cliff (Grawe, 2017). A successful chief academic officer must be adept at leadership and management and be able to adjust to external and internal

challenges, including COVID-19 and the approaching enrollment cliff (Kline, 2019). As noted by Cook, Nellum, and Billings (2015), the actions of chief academic officers impact the success of each college or university.

Pathways to the Chief Academic Officer Position

Although the first chief academic officers served as members of the faculty as part of their career path, and the same is true now, there are typically additional administrative layers today, including the dean role at larger institutions, and more movement between institutions as part of the pathway for many aspiring chief academic officers. Traditional academic career paths in U.S. higher education often include upward movement from faculty or mid-level administrative roles to senior faculty and/or administrative leadership positions. In this path, it is not unusual for academic deans or department chairs to move upward to senior leader positions including the chief academic officer.

Although some CAOs move into their role due to an internal hire, higher education search committees often perceive that the "best" candidates with new and better ideas will come from other institutions. Interestingly, internal hires are less likely to turn over than external hires (Pease, 2014) and planned turnover, including retirement, is typically much more seamless if there is an internal candidate who has already been identified to fill the role (Bidwell, 2011). In contrast, unplanned turnover of internal or external hires can create problems, challenges, and additional costs for the college or university.

Problem Statement

Frequent chief academic officer turnover disrupts campus operations and requires the expenditure of institution resources including costs for recruitment and the time required for committee members to incorporate recruitment and search tasks into their other duties and

responsibilities. More research is needed to fully understand the trends and the reasons these senior-level employees stay in or leave their positions. Lee and Mitchell (1994) posit that "shocks" or events cause employees to *think* about quitting, and Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, and Erez (2001) contend that connections to the organization and community can impact the likelihood that employees stay or leave the organization. While we know that in U.S. postsecondary institutions, 47% of chief academic officers have been in their positions three years or less, we do not know why this turnover occurred (See Figure 1). There is also limited data regarding what job duties, work relationships, or connections to the community increase the likelihood that chief academic officers consider leaving or staying in their positions. A deeper understanding of these factors will enable institution leaders to better define CAO roles and responsibilities and potentially lessen the frequency of CAO turnover. This deeper understanding could also help search committees focus and more clearly define their work to ensure that candidates are evaluated based on the roles, responsibilities, and challenges of the CAO and institution.

Studying chief academic officer turnover during a pandemic could be challenging as CAOs respond to the changing and emerging needs of our institutions and students while managing their ongoing responsibilities. The median age of presidents is 61 and chief academic officers is 59 (Pritchard et al., 2020), thus more CAO turnover will occur as leaders retire, move to president roles, or choose to return to the faculty. We also do not know how COVID-19 and the availability of a vaccine will impact CAO turnover.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers to more fully understand the reasons chief academic officers choose to

leave or stay in their positions. In addition, this study explored whether particular job duties and responsibilities, work relationships, or connections to the community beyond the campus affect the likelihood that incumbents will stay in or leave their positions. Findings from this study will help campus leaders restructure CAO responsibilities and priorities and work more diligently to address the frustrations that could lead to turnover. The findings will also help leaders more fully understand the connections to the organization and community that increase the likelihood that a CAO will remain in the role for a longer period of time.

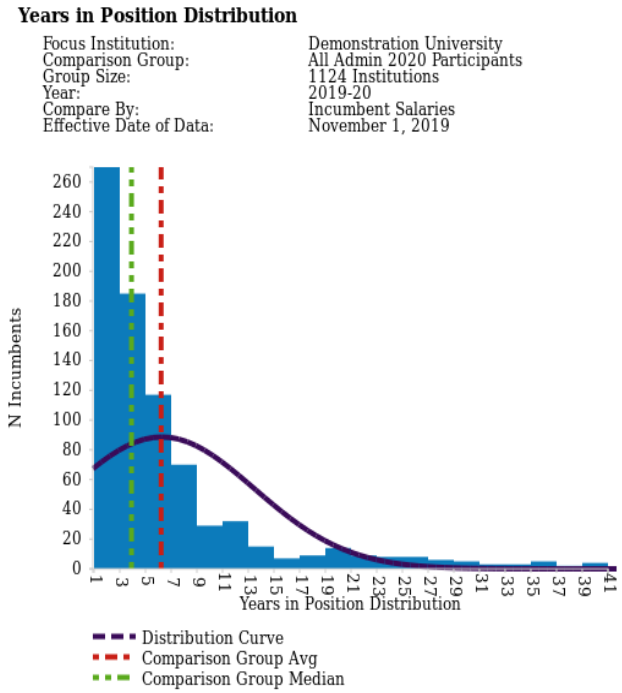

Figure 1. Chief academic officer years in position. From "*Administrators in higher education annual report: Key findings, trends, and comprehensive tables for 2019-20 academic year,"* by A. Pritchard, S. Nadel-Hawthorne, A. Schmidt, M. Fuesting and J. Bichsel (2020). College and University Professional Association for Human Resources.

Research Questions

The overarching question guiding this study asked: Why do Chief Academic Officers choose to voluntarily stay in or leave their positions? This question was supported by the following research questions:

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe interpersonal relationships with work colleagues as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe community connections beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?
- For Chief Academic Officers referencing potential or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

Significance of the Study

According to Stewart (2016), the field of executive turnover lacks an "overarching framework" and a "consistent model" for theory building. Stewart also noted that "nonprofit executive turnover research has primarily described the scale or scope of anticipated turnover" and that the limited research in this area has focused on case studies and small samples (p. 43). Officials in higher education professional associations like the American Council on Education (ACE) regularly dedicate resources to collect and report on the tenure and challenges of college presidents in publications such as *The American College President Study* (Gagliardi, Espinosa,

Turk, & Taylor, 2017) and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) annually collects and reports on data regarding higher education leadership positions in publications including the *Administrators in Higher Education Annual Report,* (Pritchard et al., 2020), but researchers have not systematically reviewed data collected regarding CAOs. Forty-seven percent of chief academic officers have been in their positions three years or less (Pritchard et al., 2020), but very little is known about why this level of turnover has occurred. A greater understanding of the job duties, circumstances, or events that increase the likelihood that chief academic officers stay or leave could lead to more clearly defined duties and responsibilities and clearer, more focused, candidate assessment by search committees. Clearer definition of duties and responsibilities could also help candidates understand how their skills and experiences align with those needed.

In addition, recent surveys conducted by the ACE (Eckel, Cook, & King, 2009) and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) (McBain, 2019) provide useful information regarding the most important, time-consuming, and frustrating job responsibilities for chief academic officers, but the researchers have not explored which, if any, of these responsibilities or frustrations increase the likelihood that CAOs considered leaving their positions.

The next sections provide background information to help understand the origins of the CAO position, the more contemporary roles and responsibilities, potential confusion regarding the position title, and the frequent disconnect between actual duties and responsibilities and those evaluated by search committees.

Origins of the Chief Academic Officer Position

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, college presidents typically served as the primary, and typically the only, administrator for the institution. Their solo status required

them to fill virtually every role including teacher, admissions officer, student records keeper, business manager, scholar, leader, teacher, chief disciplinarian, librarian, admissions officer, keeper of student records, and business manager (Tucker, 1992). Following the Civil War, the student population increased and diversified with the inclusion of women. By the 1890s, the ten largest universities had an average of almost 2,000 students. For these institutions, the average student population increased to around 5,000 by 1915 (Geiger, 1986) prompting the need for more organization and standardization of day-to-day functions and processes. These changes also increased operational complexity and led to the creation of administrative leadership roles, including the chief academic officer position.

Nidiffer and Cain (2004) highlighted the importance of the often-overlooked men who were elevated to chief academic officer roles in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The changes and evolution of institutions during this era were frequently credited to the presidents, the "fathers" of these institutions, while the men who served in the lead academic roles, the "elder brothers" were often overlooked. According to Nidiffer and Cain (2004), specific duties and responsibilities also differed by institution and were often created to fill needs and gaps as defined by the president. The men chosen to serve in these roles also came from different academic backgrounds with varying levels of academic scholarship including many with training and experience as classics professors or as ministers. As colleges expanded, the roles and responsibilities of the chief academic officer position continued to evolve during the rest of the twentieth century as higher education transitioned from elite to mass education in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Contemporary Chief Academic Officer Roles

In today's higher education enterprise, the type of leadership needed from the chief academic officer can vary based on the leadership style of the president and the level of autonomy of deans and department heads. According to Atnip (2009), the CAO must avoid decisions that are focused exclusively on the short-term since this could negatively impact the long-term viability of the institution. Reviewing advertisements for academic officer positions in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* Antip (2009) identified the following background characteristics of the CAO: a strong record as a faculty member, credentials that qualify applicants for full professor, significant higher education administrative experience, appreciation for the mission of the advertising institution, a collaborative leadership style, appreciation for diversity, creative problem-solving skills, commitment to academic quality, and strong interpersonal and communications skills.

Bugeja (2018) noted that the roles of provosts are frequently poorly defined and often not focused on the work that is most impactful and important. Mech (1997) also noted that the qualifications, skills, and abilities that search committees *think* are required for successful chief academic officer candidates often do not match those included in advertisements for vacant chief academic officer positions. Even when roles are clearly defined, the roles of provost and vice president are different and sometimes in conflict (Maghroori & Powers, 2007). They defined the provost's role as leader of administrative and support operations including human resources, budgets, and facilities. Buller (2015) noted that institutions incorrectly use the terms provost and vice president for academic affairs interchangeably. He defined the role of vice president of academic affairs as inward looking and focused on academic programs, faculty, and students and

noted that the title provost should be used to emphasize that the position has responsibility for overall internal institution operations and oversight of the work of other vice presidents.

According to Martin and Samels (2015), CAOs spend the majority of their time focused on academic leadership duties including developing curriculum, and guidance and support of faculty, but emphasized that the work of these incumbents is shaped by challenges and changes that emerge over time. In their work, they identified new challenges that emerged between 2010 and 2015 that impacted the work of CAOs, including pressures to raise institutional rankings; unprecedented student loan default; growing dependence on technological resources, platform and specialists; greater needs for academic accountability in athletics; higher levels of plagiarism among students and faculty; and the impact of social media on academic life. Martin and Samuels (2015) also noted that environmental changes such as student consumer decision making, less faculty engagement, challenging budgets, and frequently conflicting academic leadership expectations also impact the work of chief academic officers.

Forty-seven percent of chief academic officers have been in their positions three years or less, but we do not know why this turnover has occurred. This study explored the degree to which job duties, work relationships, or connections to the community increase the likelihood that chief academic officers consider leaving or staying in their positions. A deeper understanding of these reasons for staying or leaving will help leaders better define CAO roles and responsibilities and potentially lessen the frequency of CAO turnover. This deeper understanding could also help search committees better define their work, including the criteria used to evaluate candidates.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What are the reasons that chief academic officers leave their positions and what motivates them to remain? Are there recent studies that help us understand the challenges, frustrations, and opportunities that increase the likelihood that chief academic officers or other higher education executives stay, leave, or are forced out of their positions? With these questions in mind, this literature review is organized into three sections. In the first section, I will review the key causes of turnover, turnover costs, and benefits. In the second section, I will review studies of executive turnover from outside of higher education. In the final section, I will review some of the limited studies of higher education presidential turnover and other available survey results that highlight frequent challenges and frustrations of presidents and chief academic officers. I will also note the lack of research on higher education turnover and the need for additional studies focused on turnover of chief academic officers.

Causes, Costs, and Benefits of Employee Turnover

Even though there has been limited higher education turnover research, there have been many studies of the causes of employee turnover since the mid-1950s, including three notable meta-analyses in 1995 (Hom & Griffith), 2000 (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner) and 2018 (Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell). Hom et al. (2019) summarized these three meta-analyses with causes of turnover grouped into six categories: individual and personal predictors; overall satisfaction and organizational and work environment factors; job content factors; alternative employment predictors; withdrawal cognitions, and other withdrawal cognitions. These

researchers also noted that voluntary turnover is not always negative. Some individuals leave for better opportunities or because they are changing careers. Others leave for personal reasons including a career opportunity for a spouse or partner, health challenges, or the choice to retire. In contrast, some leave due to workplace conflict, lack of opportunity for career growth, excessive demands of supervisors, or unacceptable compensation and benefits.

Involuntary turnover is initiated by the employer and is typically prompted by unacceptable job performance or personal conduct, but can also be as a result of a layoff or reduction-in-force. According to Hom et al. (2019), some turnover that appears to be voluntary (e.g., a resignation or retirement) might actually be involuntary but ends up being classified as voluntary based on verbal or negotiated formal agreements. Mobley et al. (1979) also emphasized that there can be challenges differentiating between employee-initiated and employer-initiated turnover and that this can lead to inconsistent classification of turnover events as voluntary or involuntary. In addition, Maertz and Campion (1998) pointed out that "mutual separations" often include voluntary and involuntary elements, which makes it more difficult to categorize these events.

Costs and Benefits of Turnover

In addition, involuntary and voluntary turnover also result in separation costs and replacement costs. Researchers, including Allen, Bryan, and Vardaman (2010); Cascio (2006); Griffeth and Hom (2001); Fitz-enz (2002); and Heneman and Judge (2006) outlined the costs and benefits of voluntary employee turnover. For example, Hom et al. (2019) summarized these costs using the broad categories of separation costs, replacement costs, and turnover benefits. Tangible separation costs potentially include staff and manager's time, payment of accrued leave, and the cost to temporarily cover the duties of the vacant position. Intangible separation costs potentially

include loss of diversity, diminished job performance, loss of organizational memory, loss of other employees, and work disruptions. Replacement costs potentially include human resources and hiring manager time, advertising/recruitment costs, formal and informal training, and productivity loss. There are also potential benefits to turnover including organization savings if the position does not need to be filled, infusion of new skills and creativity, promotional opportunities for other employees, finding a better performing replacement, enhancing diversity, and potential reorganization of work duties and responsibilities.

Hom et al. (2019) also noted that some separation costs such as the time spent by managers on recruiting and evaluating candidates are clear, but costs associated with disruption of the organization, loss of workforce diversity, and loss of organizational memory are more difficult to measure. Replacement costs such as search firm fees and advertising are typically easy to measure, but productivity and costs to build relationships with new colleagues are difficult to measure. Turnover may impact work performance, but it may also improve morale of others if a disruptive or poor performing employee exits the organization. Turnover can also result in lost knowledge, but it can also present an opportunity to rethink duties and responsibilities.

Research on Executive Turnover Outside of Higher Education

The work of executive leaders, such as chief academic officers, is often unpredictable and complex with the expectation that these leaders manage and inspire others to help accomplish the goals of the organization (Zaccarro & Kliminski, 2001). Unfortunately, there is limited research focused on executive turnover in the corporate sector (Gordon, 2010). Recent studies of superintendent turnover for K-12 schools (e.g., Schill, 2020) provide some perspective, but the application to the higher education environment is limited due to different organization structures

and primarily local influences for K-12 school systems. Causes of executive turnover could be similar to those of other employee groups, but the internal and external challenges of these positions could lead to voluntary and involuntary turnover for reasons that are different, and some causes of executive turnover could be more or less frequent than those of other groups. According to Landsman (2019), there are many reasons for executive turnover including the executive's performance and failure to adapt to industry shocks and changes. Rutherford and Lozano (2017) also noted that "executive departures often differ from turnover in lower-level positions given the salience of and political pressure on executives" (p. 104).

Andrus, Withers, Courtright, and Boivie (2019) reviewed the departure of executives beyond the CEO role from firms in the S&P 1500 comparing the years 2003 and 2013 using the "shocks" outlined in the Unfolding Model of Turnover, which suggests that "shocks" or jarring events lead incumbents to consider leaving their positions (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Holtom et al., 2005; Griffeth et al, 2008; Trevor & Nyberg, 2008). Previous application of this turnover model had only been applied to non-exempt, hourly-paid positions, so the work of Andrus et al. (2019) provided new information regarding shocks that influence voluntary and involuntary turnover of executives. The researchers acknowledged that other types of shocks can impact executive turnover, but chose to focus on relational and reputational shocks because they believed that these were significant for executive level positions. This work also filled a gap in available literature regarding executive turnover beyond the CEO position. Much research has been focused on departures of CEOs, with very little focused on the reasons for voluntary and involuntary turnover of other executives (Gayle, Goland, and Miller, 2015). Andrus et al. (2019) defined relational shocks as "disruptive events that change the relationships between an executive and those with who he/she works closely," including departure of the CEO and

departures of other executive leaders (p. 1154). They defined reputation shocks as "specific events at the firm level that pose a threat or risk to the executives' and the firm's reputation as viewed by stakeholders outside the firm" (p. 1155). Findings from the study were that relational and reputational shocks increased the likelihood of departures, that executives who were paid more than other executive team members were more likely to stay with the organization following a relational shock, and that higher-paid executives were more likely than other executives to leave following a reputational shock. In other words, the higher pay served as a job embeddedness factor that increased the likelihood that the incumbents stayed following a relational shock, but did not increase the likelihood of staying following a reputational shock.

To fill a gap in scholarly work focused on nonprofit executive turnover, Stewart (2016) selected 40 nonprofit organizations that had recently experienced executive turnover from a national random sample to identify factors that caused executive turnover for these organizations. Using semi-structured interviews of the current executives in these organizations, Stewart explored organizational capacity, the role of the board during turnover, and procedural elements including the climate during the transition. Stewart (2016) found that executive leadership teams can help ensure business continuity during the transition, but that they can also create challenges for the new CEO. Stewart identified the need to more fully explore volunteer board leadership capacity to manage transitions and noted that several interviewees commented that there were singular board members who impacted how well the transition was managed. Interviewees also referenced predominantly forced transitions and involuntary retirements of their predecessors. Stewart (2016) also found that executive turnover events differ based on the size of the nonprofit, but that how these impacted outcomes following turnover remain unclear.

She suggested that more research be focused on the review of organizational and personal factors that lessen the likelihood of involuntary turnover and help new CEOs transition to the new roles.

The next section includes a review of recent turnover research and surveys focused on college and university presidents and chief academic officers.

Research on Higher Education Turnover

U.S. higher education institutions employed approximately 4.0 million faculty and staff in fall 2017 (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2019), but researchers have dedicated little time and effort to the study of turnover of this segment of the workforce, and there have been no recent studies of U.S. chief academic officer turnover. Nearly 43% of presidents served in a chief academic officer role prior to their transition to a president position (Gagliardi et al., 2017), so insight into the drivers of chief academic officer turnover can potentially be gleaned from the outcomes of this research. This section summarizes the work of three large scale presidential turnover studies that were conducted during the last decade. This section also includes summaries of nationwide studies by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) that focused on the most important, time-consuming, and frustrating duties and responsibilities of presidents and chief academic officers.

Studies of Presidential Turnover

Turnover of presidents is a frequent topic of discussions in higher education, but most analyses have been primarily focused on years of service instead of the reasons that lead to turnover. Harris and Ellis (2018) noted that analyzing the reasons for involuntary turnover is particularly helpful to better understand the challenges faced by college presidents. Harris and Ellis (2018) collected data on 1,029 presidential terms, including 775 turnovers, from 256 institutions with Division I athletics programs between the years of 1988 and 2016 and focused

exclusively on the turnovers that they categorized as involuntary. Their findings identified seven primary causes of involuntary turnover: athletics controversy; financial controversy; loss of board confidence; loss of faculty confidence; loss of system confidence; poor judgment; and poor fit with financial controversy and loss of board confidence being the most frequent (see Figure 2).

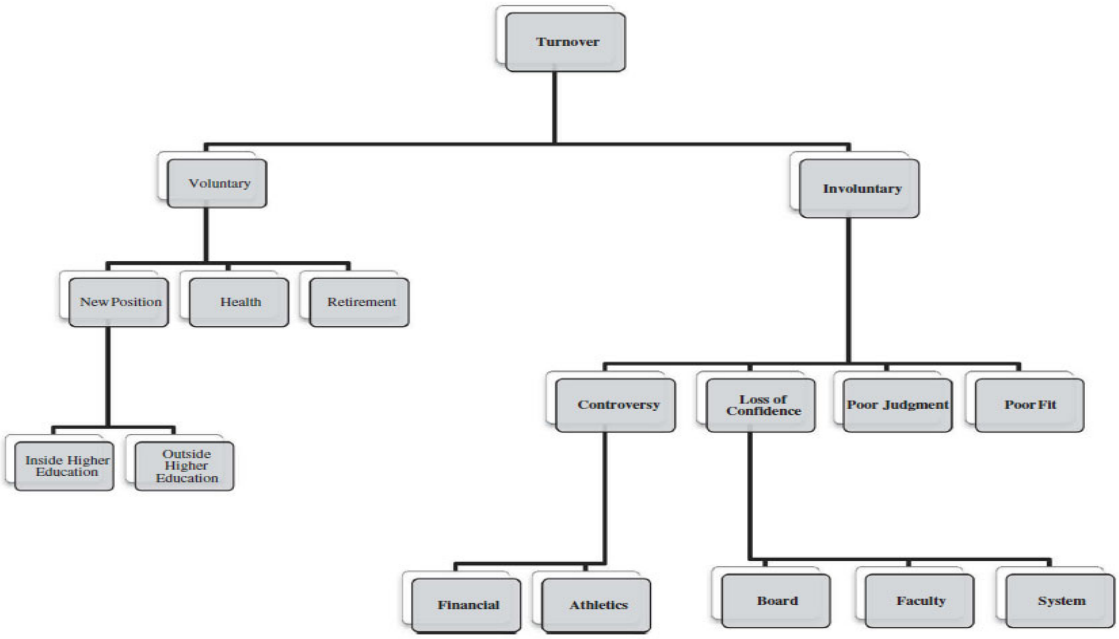

Figure 2. Presidential turnover conceptual model**.** From "Exploring Involuntary Presidential Turnover in American Higher Education," by M.S. Harris and M.K. Ellis, 2018, *Journal of Higher Education, 89*(3), p. 311.

Harris and Ellis (2018) noted that almost one-third of involuntary turnover occurred in the second or third year of employment and that this dramatically decreased following the fifth year. The four primary recommendations from the study were that presidents should be aware of these seven causes of involuntary turnover and develop clear plans to lessen the likelihood of them occurring; that boards of trustees should do a better job of defining roles and expectations of the president's position before beginning the search process; that boards should incorporate an

evaluation of the causes of involuntary turnover into the candidate review process with particular attention to “fit” with the institution; and that candidates be vigilant as they review the campus culture and challenges to ensure the position is the right “fit” for them.

Tekniepe (2014) studied the connection of push- or pull-induced departures of community college presidents to political conflict with governing boards, internal and external pressures, and fiscal stress. Prior research had identified that these factors increased the likelihood of a push-induced departure in the private sector and with government administrators. Tekniepe collected data from 101 community college presidents from 34 states who responded to a national survey. According to Tekniepe’s (2014) study, push-induced departures typically occurred when boards of trustees determined that organizational or community challenges necessitated dismissal or encouragement that the president leave the institution. Examples of factors that led to a push-induced departure included conflict with the board, internal pressures from different areas of the institution, external pressures from the community, and perceptions of fiscal management challenges. Pull-induced departures typically occurred due to other career opportunities. Examples of pull-induced factors were typically positive and helped position the president for another position. Tekniepe also found that the average tenure of presidents who experienced a push-induced departure was five years compared to seven years for those who experienced pull-induced departures and that push-induced departures were less likely if presidents believed that boards were sufficiently trained, that their contract provided adequate protection from politically motivated actions, that faculty and administration worked well together, and that deans and administration worked well together. Tekniepe (2014) recommended that presidents become adept at predicting and understanding internal and external

politics, that they negotiate strong employment contracts, and that they develop strong financial management capabilities.

Similar to the findings outlined by Harris and Ellis (2018) and by Tekniepe (2014), Rutherford and Lozano (2018) found that governing boards impact the turnover of university presidents. These researchers evaluated data from 123 public four-year research universities between 1993 and 2012 and found that a larger board increases the risk of turnover, and that turnover was lower if boards represented multiple institutions or included faculty or student representation. Rutherford and Lozano (2018) also found that presidents who had previous experience as presidents of other institutions were not significantly more likely to leave than internal promotions, but they did find that presidents hired from outside of higher education were much more likely to turnover than those with higher education experience.

Major Issues Facing College Presidents

Nearly 43% of presidents served in a chief academic officer role prior to their transition to a president position (Gagliardi et al., 2017), so the biggest challenges and frustrations of presidents might provide potential insight into the drivers of chief academic officer turnover. In 2017, the American Council on Education (ACE) released the latest version of the *American College President Study* (Gagliardi et al., 2017). ACE is the coordinating body for higher education with membership that includes more than 1,700 colleges and universities. The results from the responses of 1,546 presidents, chancellors, and CEOs of public and private not-for-profit, and private for-profit institutions outlined how presidents spent their time, their biggest frustrations, and the most important issues for future leaders.

Presidents most frequently responded that budget and financial management (65%), fundraising (58%) and managing a senior-level team (42%) required the majority of their time.

Biggest frustrations included never having enough of money (61%), faculty resistance to change (45%), and lack of time to think (44%). Presidents also indicated that budget and financial management (68%) and fundraising (47%) were the most important issues for future presidents.

The American Council on Education (ACE) also published results of pulse surveys in July and October of 2020 (Turk, Soler, & Chessman, 2020) and May 2021 (Taylor, Sanchez, Chessman, & Ramos, 2021) to assess the most pressing issues for college and university presidents in response to COVID-19. Of the 270 presidents who responded to the July survey, the most pressing issues were safety protocols (66%), fall enrollment (56%), mental health of students (39%), long-term financial viability of the institution (38%), and mental health of faculty and staff (33%). For the 295 presidents who responded to the pulse survey referenced in the October report, the most pressing issues were student mental health (53%), long-term financial viability (43%), mental health of faculty and staff (42%), enrollment numbers for the spring (39%), and sustaining and online learning environment (30%). The mental health and wellbeing of our students, faculty, and staff has clearly become a top-of-mind concern for presidents. In the May 2021 survey, student mental health was still the top issue for 73% of presidents, with enrollment for the summer and fall (53%), mental health of faculty and staff (48%), racial equity issues (40%), and long-term financial viability (32%) identified as the other top concerns. Some of these challenges were created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they will continue to impact the work of our presidents and our chief academic officers.

Major Issues Facing Chief Academic Officers

To more fully understand the major issues facing chief academic officers, four nationwide surveys have been conducted since 2009. The American Council on Education

(ACE) surveyed chief academic officers in 2009 and 2013, and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) conducted a survey of CIC chief academic officers during 2019 using ACE's survey instrument. *Inside Higher Ed*, with support of the Gallup Organization, surveyed chief academic officers in 2020.

Chief Academic Officer Census 2009

In 2009, the American Council on Education released the findings from the *CAO Census: A National Profile of Chief Academic Officers* (Eckel et al., 2009). The results outlined how CAOs spent their time, top responsibilities for their roles, important skills for success, and emerging trends. Respondents included chief academic officers from 428 public two-year institutions, 202 public baccalaureate/master's institutions, 99 public doctoral universities, and 44 private doctoral universities. Due to the large number of respondents from two-year institutions as compared to other types of institutions, it is important to carefully evaluate any aggregate data since responses could be skewed toward the opinions of CAOs at two-year institutions.

According to this 2009 survey, activities that CAOs reported requiring the greatest amount of time included curriculum and academic programs (65%), supervision and management of personnel (57%); and accountability, accreditation, and assessment (47%). CAO roles also differed by institution type with CAOs at two-year institutions spending more time on enrollment management and student development than their four-year institution counterparts. CAOs at four-year colleges and universities reported spending more time on strategic planning and budgets than their two-year counterparts.

In this survey, CAOs said their most important responsibilities included promoting academic quality (56%), setting the academic vision (46%), and leading and fostering innovation

(31%). As is true for many higher education leadership positions, the responsibilities that respondents noted require the most time and effort did not always correspond with those that were most important. While the top responsibilities reported by CAOs in this 2009 survey seemed in conflict with those that required the most time, this was not necessarily the case. Promoting academic quality, setting academic vision, and leading and fostering innovation could have been linked to the time dedicated to curriculum and academic programs and accountability, accreditation, and assessment. Supervising and managing employees can be time consuming, but effective management and engagement of employees should have helped the CAOs with their most important and most time consuming responsibilities.

In response to questions related to the skills needed for CAOs to be successful, the five most common responses were general managerial ability, interpersonal skills, budget development experience, strategic planning ability, and accreditation and assessment management experience. These skills aligned with successful performance of the most important and time consuming responsibilities reported by CAOs. It is interesting to note that the skills needed for success were all skills for which most CAOs receive little to no structured education or training. Survey respondents reported that these skills are learned on the job through current and prior roles. The responses to this 2009 survey identified three emerging trends for CAOs: the need for better managerial ability when beginning the position, increased time spent on external funding including grants and fundraising, and the challenge created for some aspiring CAOs who do not understand the managerial and external funding challenges (Eckel et al., 2009).

Chief Academic Officer Survey: The CAO Job 2013

As follow-up to the 2009 survey, the American Council on Education (ACE) collected data from CAOs in 2013. Survey responses were received from 382 public two-year institutions,

188 public baccalaureate/master's institutions, 75 public doctoral universities, and 30 private doctoral universities. Infographics were created focused on some of the data, but no formal report was published. With permission from ACE, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) created a summary report that compared responses from 2009 and 2013 and included specific data applicable to CIC members (McBain, 2018). CIC member institutions include small and mid-sized private liberal arts colleges and universities, as well as two-year independent institutions. ACE removed or changed some of the questions asked in the 2009 survey, but those asked in 2013 were similar enough to compare the two surveys. Due to the large number of two-year institution respondents as compared to other types of institutions, it is important to carefully evaluate any aggregate data since responses could be skewed more toward the opinions of CAOs from two-year institutions.

The most time consuming responsibilities reported by CAOs in 2013 included supervision of deans and other administrators (60% for four-year institutions and 67% for two-year institutions), academic oversight (55% for four-year institutions and 71% for two-year institutions) and accountability and accreditation (43% for four-year institutions and 65% for two-year institutions). CAOs responded that their most important work included setting academic vision (83%), accountability/ensuring student learning and attainment of credentials (58%), and leading strategic planning efforts (44%).

The 2013 survey also provided the opportunity for CAOs to indicate their most significant job frustrations. Forty-seven percent specified stress of institutional financial needs. Nearly a third noted difficulty managing faculty and administration, and 30% noted unrealistic expectations of 24/7 access to the CAO. Other frustrations included curmudgeonly faculty, unresponsive campus governance structures, and faculty and administration infighting.

Study of CAOs at Independent Colleges 2019

As of 2019, ACE leaders had chosen not to conduct a formal CAO follow-up to the 2009 and 2013 studies, but they did give the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) permission to use the instrument to conduct a follow-up study of CAOs at independent colleges (McBain, 2019). The CIC received 241 usable responses for a 37% response rate.

Chief Academic Officers who responded to the CIC survey most frequently said that their most time-consuming activities were supervising academic personnel, including deans (65%); curriculum and academic programs (54%); and budgeting/financial management (40%). For their top priority, 83% chose setting the academic vision. The other two highest priorities were strategic planning (50%) and accountability/ensuring student learning and attainment of credentials (40%). Ninety-three percent of CAOs said they were satisfied overall with their jobs, with 40% of respondents indicating they were very satisfied. McBain did note that the percentage of very satisfied CAOs decreased by 9% from 2013 to 2019. The three most frequently noted frustrations were lack of funding (58%), lack of time to think and reflect (49%) and faculty resistance to change (45%). Respondents noted that their most challenging relationship was with faculty members (32%).

Thirty-seven percent of CAOs in the CIC survey indicated that they were not planning to seek a presidency with an additional 31% undecided. Those not interested or uncertain shared concerns regarding the work of the president's position, work-life balance, and politics. Of note is that CAOs also responded that only 16% of their predecessors became presidents, which mirrored the response for 2013 and was only 1% higher than 2009 (15%). Twenty-four percent reported that their predecessor had retired or did not hold another position. This percentage was 2% higher than 2013 and 8% higher than reported in 2009 (16%). Additionally, 45% of current

incumbents were promoted from within the institution, which represented a 5% increase from what was reported in 2013 and 2009.

Inside Higher Ed 2020 Chief Academic Officer Survey

Gallup collected 597 fully or partially completed web surveys for the *Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Chief Academic Officers* (Jaschik & Lederman, 2020), which was a 16% response rate. Respondents represented 329 public institutions, 259 private institutions, and nine institutions from the for-profit sector. In contrast to the ACE and CIC surveys, this survey focused on overall higher education challenges instead of specific challenges of chief academic officers. Respondents were not asked to indicate the Carnegie classification for their institutions, so this data should be viewed in conjunction with other data sources to interpret implications of the results. Overall higher education challenges reported by CAOs were the need to increase collaboration with other colleges (92%), the need to change funding of programs based on alignment with the institution's mission (88%), and expansion of online offerings (86%). CAOs expressed concern about the trend of eliminating majors and departments (75%), with more than 70% agreeing or strongly agreeing that sexual harassment by faculty had been tolerated for too long. The survey did not collect data regarding duties and responsibilities of chief academic officers.

Literature Review Summary

The old adage, "the cobbler's children have no shoes" is definitely an appropriate phrase to describe the lack of focus on turnover research for higher education and higher education executives beyond the president. Andrus et al. (2019) found that relational and reputational shocks increased the likelihood of executive departures at for-profit organizations, and Stewart (2016) found that reasons for departures of non-profit executives can differ based on size of

organization. The studies conducted by Harris and Ellis (2018), Tekniepe (2014), and Rutherford and Lozano (2018) identified some of the most frequent causes of presidential turnover including financial controversy, loss of board confidence, loss of faculty confidence, poor judgment, and poor fit. Tekniepe's (2014) study also provided helpful perspectives regarding the different factors that push or pull presidents to leave their institutions. Some of these causes of turnover could also be used to guide the creation of studies of chief academic officers since 43% of presidents served in the CAO before moving to the president position (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The surveys conducted by ACE and CIC provide useful information regarding the most important, most time-consuming, and most frustrating job responsibilities for chief academic officers, but the researchers did not explore which, if any, of these responsibilities or frustrations increased the likelihood that CAOs considered leaving their positions.

More study of higher education turnover, particularly of chief academic officers, is needed so that we can more fully understand the trends, the reasons these employees stay or leave, and the costs for higher education. As noted by Allen and Bryant (2012), frequent executive employee turnover can disrupt campus operations, impact the culture, and add many thousands of dollars of additional cost to the organization. We need better data to understand how these disruptions impact higher education. Forty-seven percent of chief academic officers have been in their roles for three years or less (Pritchard et al., 2020), but we do not know the reasons for the turnover that led to these recent appointments or the likelihood that this trend will continue.

Theoretical Framework

The century-long efforts in the study of employee turnover led to the development and refinement of theories on employee turnover. Hom, Lee, Shaw, and Hausknecht (2017) reviewed

one hundred years of *Journal of Applied Psychology* publications and other turnover theory and research literature to outline key phases of this work. The first phase, categorized as "Birth of Turnover Research," was 1917 with the first publications focused on costs and causes of turnover. The second phase, categorized as the "Formative Years," extended from the 1920s to the 1960s. One of the first empirical studies from the 1920s confirmed that clerical workers whose fathers worked in unskilled or semiskilled jobs were less likely to leave their positions than clerical workers whose fathers were professional or business owners. This phase stretched for over forty years because little additional turnover research occurred until March and Simon published the first formal turnover theory, the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium, in 1958.

Other turnover theories in the late 1950s and the 1960s focused on the relationship of test scores and turnover, and the relationship between demographics and turnover. The third phase, referred to as "Foundational Models," lasted from the late 1960s through the 1970s and included studies of job satisfaction and met-expectations links to turnover. Hom et al. (2017) characterized the 1980s as the "Theory Testing" phase with work focused on areas such as job performance, organizational commitment, labor market forces, and turnover as a positive outcome. The fourth phase, the "Unfolding Model," occurred during the 1990s and included tests of prior models and the introduction of "shocks" to refer to events that led employees to think about leaving their organizations. The fifth and current phase of turnover research, "21st Century Research," is focused on the impact of management practices on good-performer and poor-performer turnover and job embeddedness which focuses on the connection between work and community-related factors and turnover.

The first formal turnover theory, developed by March and Simon (1958), focused on organizational equilibrium—the balance between pay and other benefits and employee

perceptions that these equaled, or balanced, employee contributions. March and Simon's theory shaped much of work of future theorists (Hom et al., 2019), but of interest is that few studies directly tested the theory. Porter and Steers also shaped the work of future theorists through the creation of the Met-Expectations Theory in 1973. Through this theory, Porter and Steers argued that although employees value rewards including pay and relationships with supervisors, every employee has a specific set of expectations that if not met increase the likelihood that the employee will leave the organization (Porter & Steers, 1973). This work was also used by other researchers who found that communicating positive and negative aspects of the job to new employees led to longer employment (Premack & Wanous, 1985) and greater perception of organizational honesty (Earnest, Allen, & Landis, 2011). Mobley (1977) created a turnover process model that outlined a decision sequence that acknowledged that employees use multiple models to determine their levels of job dissatisfaction and the potential risks and rewards associated with a decision to leave the organization. Mobley's model has been used extensively as the foundation for other work regarding turnover (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Subsequent researchers did not incorporate all constructs from Mobley's theory, but they did use one or more of them to build their models. The Revised Intermediate Processes model was introduced in 1991 (Hom et al., 2019) and built upon Mobley's model by evaluating pathways that employees take following their decision to leave the organization. According to Mobley (1977), some employees embark on a job search to secure other employment before quitting while others resign with the assumption that they could easily find another job or choose to do something other than work. Hom and Griffeth (1991) and Hom and Kinicki (2001) extended this model by incorporating elements such as the tension between work and non-work demands that

might lead to greater job dissatisfaction and lead employees to quit, and the relationship between job avoidance (e.g., use of sick leave and lower job performance) and the likelihood of employees quitting.

Theories Guiding this Study

The study was guided by two theories that extended Mobley's (1977) turnover process model. These include Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model of Employee Turnover which posits that there are "shocks," or events, that cause chief academic officers to *think* about quitting, and the work of Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski and Erez (2001) that focuses on the elements of job embeddedness, those connections to the organization and community, which increase or decrease the likelihood that chief academic officers will voluntarily stay or leave the organization. Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model references that employees choose whether or not to stay based on multiple factors related to personal values, personal career goals, or strategies to reach personal goals. Lee and Mitchell's (1994) model also suggests that a "shock" leads employees to consider one of four "decision paths," to determine whether or not to leave their positions (see Figures 3 and 4). Decision Path One occurs when employees evaluate their past actions in response to a similar shock and take the same action again. Decision Path Two occurs when employees have no past experience with a particular shock. Employees then use image theory factors (personal values, personal career goals, or strategies to reach personal goals) to determine if the shock is in conflict with one or more of these and whether or not to stay with the organization. Path Three incorporates the elements of Path Two, but then adds a review of alternatives and an evaluation of the pros and cons of leaving the position (see Figure 4). Incumbents using path three are focused on evaluating alternatives and leaving the organization. Decision Path Four acknowledges that a shock is not always the reason that

employees consider whether or not they remain in their jobs. The Decision Four pathway is more closely aligned with theories supported by Mobley (1977) and Griffeth and Hom (1991). Lee and Mitchell's model also acknowledged that employees do not always leave for another job and that voluntary departures are sometimes due to factors like pursuit of full-time education or stay-at-home parenting.

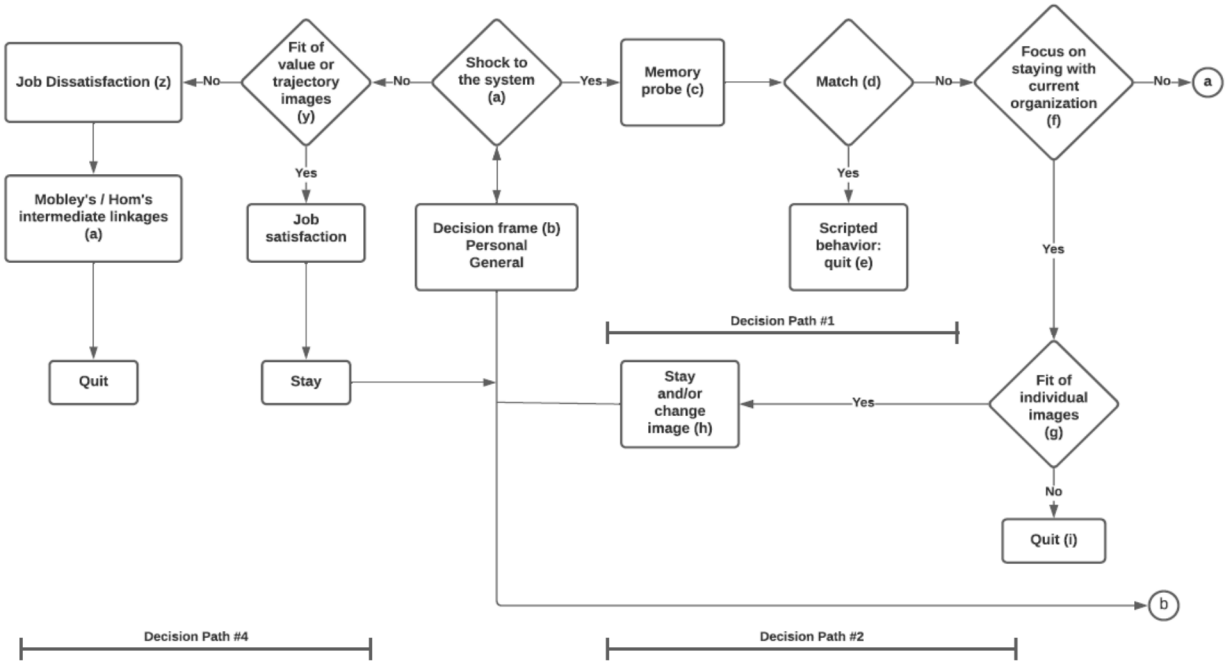

Figure 3. Unfolding Turnover Model Decision Paths 1, 2 and 4. From "An Alternative Approach: The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover," by T.W. Lee and T.R. Mitchell, 1994, *Academy of Management Review, (19)*(1), p. 62.

To assess the degree to which work and personal events that occurred before employees left the organization led to departures, Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, and Ahlburg (2005) developed a scale for respondents to indicate how much certain events increased the likelihood of leaving the organization. Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, and Inderrieden (2005) then used this work to create a methodology to evaluate and measure the shocks that lead to the turnover paths from Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model, and Griffith et al. (2008) built upon Lee

and Mitchell's unfolding model by developing and categorizing voluntary workplace turnover-related events into the following categories: personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, and other opportunity.

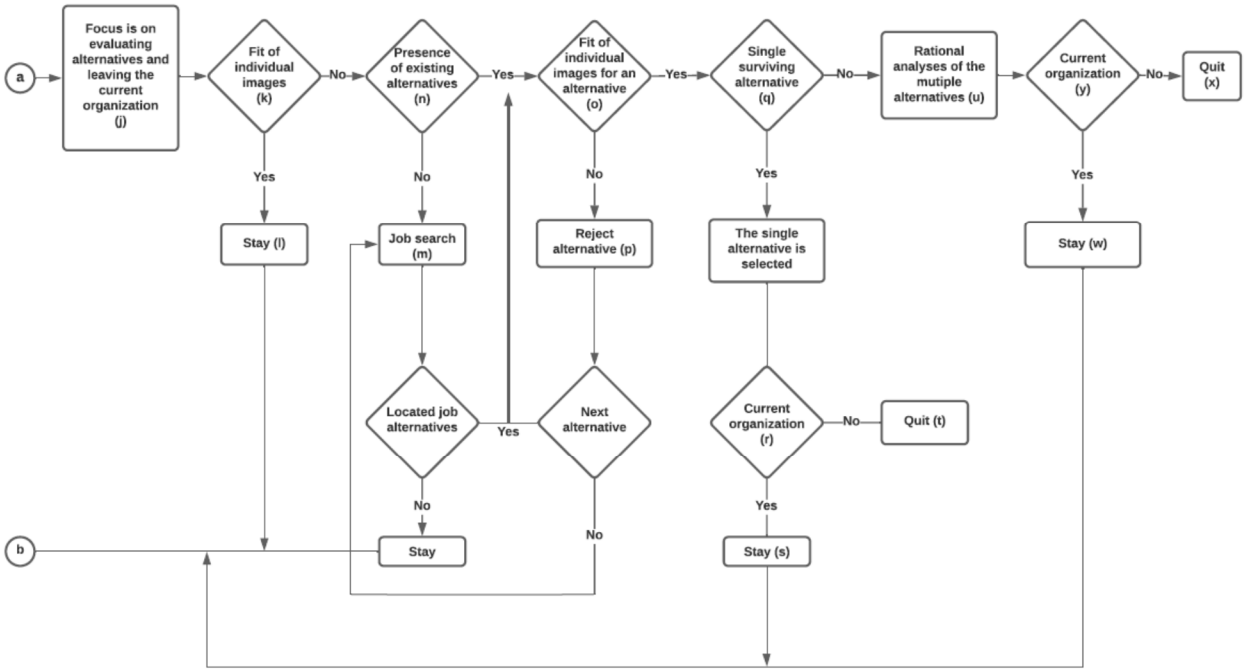

Figure 4. Unfolding Turnover Model Decision Path 3. From "An Alternative Approach: The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover," by T.W. Lee and T.R. Mitchell, 1994, *Academy of Management, (19)*(1), p. 63.

Inclinations and decisions to leave or stay in a position are not always on opposite ends of the spectrum. Building on the initial work of Lee and Mitchell (1994), Mitchell et al. (2001) introduced the Job Embeddedness Theory that posited that on-the-job and community-related factors impact employee desire to leave the organization. Mitchell and his colleagues identified three dimensions of job embeddedness including: formal and informal connections to other people or activities; the employee's fit to the job and community; and how easy it is to break, or give up, one or more of these links by leaving the position. These were labeled as "links," "fit,"

and “sacrifice” connected with the organization and the community. Research by Kiazad et al. (2015) extended this work to emphasize that employee decisions to stay in the position due to one or more of these links does not always lead to positive outcomes. For example, dissatisfied employees might choose to stay in a position because of the perceived sacrifice that would be caused by leaving. An employee might stay in a position for existing benefits instead of the potential loss, or sacrifice, connected with a job change.

Further cementing their theoretical proposition, Lee et al. (2004) reviewed on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness and found that on-the-job embeddedness lessened the likelihood of voluntary turnover and resulted in enhanced job performance and organizational citizenship, and that off-the-job embeddedness decreased the likelihood of voluntary departures. Jiang et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analytic study of on- and off-the-job embeddedness and concluded that a decline in embeddedness increased turnover intentions, which led to reduced effort and more time devoted to job search. Reduced effort and more time devoted to job search, in turn, were directly related to actual voluntary turnover. Jiang et al. (2012) also noted that employers could incorporate programs such as employee career development plans to enhance on-the-job embeddedness and encourage employees to engage in community activities to enhance off-the-job embeddedness. Holtom et al. (2006, p. 329) summarized their perspective of employee engagement as follows: “When employees feel that their organization values the complexity of their entire lives and tries to do something about making it a little easier for them to balance all the conflicting demands, the employees tend to be more productive and stay with those organizations longer.”

Much of the research applying Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) theory has focused on qualitative input from employees who voluntarily left their organizations; however, more

research that includes employees who experienced similar shocks but chose to stay with their organizations might lead to a better understanding of how different employees interpret and respond to similar shocks. In addition, most of the research has been applied to non-exempt, hourly-paid employees and assumes that how an employee responds to a shock will be similar for all employees (Andrus et al., 2019).

Application of Turnover Theory to Chief Academic Officer Turnover

Colleges and universities are complex organizations and CAOs can be motivated to stay or leave based on their work responsibilities, their interpersonal work relationships, or connections to the community. Any of the reasons for turnover identified by Lee and Mitchell (1994) in their unfolding model, including personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missed rewards, and opportunity for career change or advancement could lead to higher education chief academic officer departures. As well, there are shocks or events similar to those outlined by Lee and Mitchell (1994) and Griffeth et al. (2008) that can occur for chief academic officers that can cause them to think about quitting, leading them to the turnover paths from Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model. In addition, any of the dimensions of job embeddedness identified by Mitchell et al. (2001), including formal and informal connections to other people or activities, and the employee's fit to the job and community could impact employee desire to leave the organization and chief academic officer turnover. These theories and the findings by these researchers informed the focus of this study, including the questions asked during the interviews with chief academic officers.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

According to the CUPA-HR 2020 Administrators in Higher Education survey (Pritchard et al., 2020), 47% of chief academic officers (CAOs) have been in their roles three years or less (See Figure 1), but there has been limited research focused on higher education turnover and no recent studies outlining the reasons that this turnover of CAOs has occurred or the factors that increase the likelihood that they will stay in their roles. Guided by Lee and Mitchell's Unfolding Theory of Turnover (1994) and the Job Embeddedness Theory of Mitchell et al. (2001), the purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers to more fully understand the reasons that chief academic officers stay in or leave their positions and whether potential or planned departures were related to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, another opportunity, or other reasons not captured by existing theory and literature. This study also explored whether these decisions were more job-related or community-related. Since there has been limited study of chief academic officer turnover, I understood that other reasons that CAOs stay or leave might have emerged during this study.

Findings from this study could be used to help campus leaders restructure CAO responsibilities and priorities and work more diligently to address the frustrations that could lead to turnover. The findings might also help leaders more fully understand the connections to the organization and community that increase the likelihood that a CAO will remain in the role for a longer period of time.

Research Questions

The overarching question guiding this study asked: Why do Chief Academic Officers choose to voluntarily stay in or leave their positions? This question was supported by the following questions that were guided by the theoretical framework used for this research study:

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe interpersonal relationships with work colleagues as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe community connections beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?
- For Chief Academic Officers referencing potential or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

Study Design and Sample Selection

Using a basic qualitative research design (Creswell, 2018) that employed an interpretivist perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 13 CAOs via Zoom, a teleconferencing platform, to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding CAO turnover. My work with these senior academic leaders focused on interpretation of their experiences and what decisions they made based on these experiences, which fit the basic qualitative research design model (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This one-on-one interview format provided the opportunity for study participants to confidentially share their experiences

and opinions regarding the reasons that CAOs stay in or leave their positions. While this study might eventually inform practice, it was designed to explore a phenomenon, which also fit Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) description of basic qualitative research design. The interpretivist perspective fit this study because reasons that individuals stay in or leave their positions are varied, and there can be "multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 9).

Participants

Stewart (2016) noted that executive turnover events differ based on the size of the nonprofit, and Atnip (2009) found that duties of CAOs can differ based on many factors including size and type of institution. Eckel et al. (2009) and McBain (2018) also found that CAO duties requiring the greatest amount of time differ for four-year and two-year institutions. To help ensure that participants were serving in roles that were similar, I limited my study to CAOs at Doctoral Universities as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2020) who had been in their roles for two or more years. By limiting interviewees to Doctoral University CAOs, all participants were from institutions that award research/scholarship doctoral degrees and have at least $5 million in total research expenditures. There were still differences between doctoral institutions, but the roles of these CAOs were more similar than expanding the pool to include CAOs at institutions that place less emphasis on research as part of the mission. Since the focus of the study was to determine why CAOs stay in or leave their positions, CAOs who had been in their roles for two years or more were included. CAOs who are new to the CAO role were not included since they have had less opportunity to experience all duties, responsibilities, and challenges of the position.

In my role as president of College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), I have a network of human resources colleagues across the country, including CUPA-HR national and regional board members. Ninety-three percentage of the 418 U.S. institutions identified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2020) as doctoral are CUPA-HR member institutions, so I reviewed the websites of all current and recent CUPA-HR national and regional leaders who work at doctoral institutions to determine which CAOs had been in their roles for two or more years. During this review, I identified 37 potential study participants. I do not have work relationships with CAOs, so my hope was that targeted outreach to human resources colleagues could help me connect with potential study participants. Following Institutional Review Board approval, I contacted 21 CUPA-HR leaders from a broad geographic distribution of institutions via email to request their help with my initial effort to recruit CAOs to participate in the study (see Appendix A) with plans to contact the additional 16 if needed. These CUPA-HR leaders then reached out to their CAOs on my behalf to ask if I could contact them regarding potential study participation. Within seven days of my initial outreach, I had connected via email with 15 CAOs, shared the CAO Outreach email and CAO Consent Form (see Appendices B and C), received agreement from the CAOs to participate, and scheduled interviews. Most CAOs connected me with their assistants to schedule the interview. Each CAO was interviewed once. The first interview occurred on February 15 and the final interview was on March 9, 2021.

Creswell (2018) reports that data saturation is reached when "gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties" (p. 186). Marshall and Rossman (2016) also note that we can view data saturation through the lens of "theoretical sufficiency," to verify that no new themes or categories are emerging (p. 229). In other words, we can never know

everything, but we can use this lens to help determine when enough data has been gathered to identify common themes. Fifteen CAOs initially agreed to participate and were scheduled for interviews. Prior to the interviews, two cancelled, leaving 13 study participants. New insights were not emerging at the conclusion of the 13 interviews, so additional interviews were not needed to reach theoretical sufficiency (Guest et al., 2006). Details of the participant sample are included in Chapter Four.

Methods for Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured one-on-one interviews via Zoom teleconferencing. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes with the shortest being 42 minutes and the longest 60 minutes. Each participant was asked the same initial questions, but follow-up questions varied slightly based on responses of participants (see questions in Appendix D). The semi-structured interview format "allowed a systematic and iterative gathering of data" to provide comprehensive information and efficient data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 150). The semi-structured format guided the interviews, but also allowed me to remain flexible and open to discussion.

As noted by Marshall and Rossman (2016), the interviews also enabled me to quickly gather data and seek immediate clarification from participants. I recorded the audio of the conversations to capture an accurate record of the interviews and participants were notified and agreed in advance that I could record the audio portion of each discussion. At the start of each interview, participants were again asked for permission to record the audio portion, and all agreed that the discussion could be recorded. As is standard practice with semi-structured interviewing, I used an interview protocol as recommended by Creswell (2018). The interview protocol helped ensure consistency of approach for the interviews, including the questions I

asked study participants, while enabling me to be flexible to the direction of each conversation (see Appendix D). Additionally, I used a separate protocol for descriptive and reflexive notes taken before, during, and after each interview (see Appendix E). Descriptive notes included the date, time, setting, and comments from the dialog and reflexive notes included my personal thoughts, impressions, and potential prejudices. Notes taken during the interview also served as a backup if the recording was corrupted or lost. Between interviews, I reviewed outcomes to make sure that I did not need to adjust any questions asked based on my experience with the prior participants. No adjustments were needed. In addition, I reviewed institution websites to find information regarding the length of tenure in current position and past positions held for interviewees. This additional information helped me understand more about the backgrounds and experiences of participants and triangulate, or incorporate multiple sources, to add context for interview discussions and findings.

Data Management and Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using Zoom transcription and identities of all interviewees and participant institutions were changed to pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. I completed field notes immediately after each interview and edited the transcriptions within 48 hours of each interview. As recommended by Saldaña (2016), coding of data occurred in two cycles. The first cycle used in vivo coding to capture, segment, and label responses from CAOs using the actual words and phrases they used and a priori codes developed before the interviews from the theories and research questions used to guide this study (Miles et al., 2020). Phrases or words repeatedly used by participants helped identify patterns, experiences, and opinions. The a priori codes, created using Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Theory, Mitchell et al.'s (2001) Job Embeddedness Theory, and the research questions also helped organize and segment the data.

Examples of a priori codes were JOB DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, WORK RELATIONSHIPS, COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, and REASONS FOR PLANNED DEPARTURES. The coding evolved as I reviewed and coded the transcripts. For example, the a priori codes JOB DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES and WORK RELATIONSHIPS were segmented to reflect the positive and negative responses from CAOs:

- JOB DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES—POSITIVE
- JOB DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES—NEGATIVE
- WORK RELATIONSHIPS—POSITIVE
- WORK RELATIONSHIPS—NEGATIVE

The REASONS FOR DEPARTURES was segmented in support of Lee and Mitchell's Unfolding Theory (1994) and the supplemental work of Griffeth et al. (2008) which posit that employee departures are due to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, another opportunity.

The second cycle of transcription coding incorporated pattern coding to group the first cycle in vivo and a priori material into categories, from which the themes emerged. As noted by Miles et al. (2020), pattern coding helped me condense the data into categories, enabled me to begin analysis during data collection, provided the opportunity to evolve the work as I progressed, and helped me identify the themes as they emerged. The pattern codes that emerged included those outlined by Miles et al. (2020, p. 80): categories or themes, causes or explanations, relationships among people, and concepts or theoretical constructs.

As recommended by Saldaña (2016), I created notes throughout the data collection, coding, and reporting process to help me capture my thoughts regarding the data as I was collecting and analyzing it. Using notes also enabled me to identify interactions with CAO

participants to help answer my research questions and write the final report. I primarily used the notes to comment on the very positive and engaging experiences I had during the CAO interviews.

All research records, including a master file that listed interview participant names, other collected demographic data of interviewees, and interviewee pseudonyms; interview transcripts; observation protocols; and interview protocols were maintained in a Dropbox folder that was also synced to a folder maintained on my laptop. The laptop included anti-virus software and was password protected. The Dropbox folder provided secure storage and easy access for my analytic needs. MaxQDA, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), was used to help store, maintain, and analyze the data collected. This software also helped me identify patterns and themes from the data and explore my research questions.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of my research outcomes, I incorporated member checking, peer review, and the creation of a rich, thick description to share my findings. To incorporate member checking, the draft transcriptions were sent to the CAOs within 48 hours of their interviews, and they were given the opportunity to incorporate any needed edits. Four of the interviewees responded with minimal edits. During May 2021, I also shared my initial findings with participants to give them the opportunity to correct errors, challenge my interpretations, provide additional information, and verify that the information I had reported was correct. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify member checking as the most important way of establishing credibility. I also asked two peers to review and provide guidance and feedback regarding the design of the study and the final summary of the outcomes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend peer review and debriefing to challenge the researcher's processes and

assumptions; help ensure the researcher is remaining as unbiased as possible; provide a means of testing changing methodology; and give the researcher the opportunity to share frustrations or concerns that might impact the researcher's judgment. Also, as recommended by Creswell (2018), I created a rich, thick description to share my findings, the procedures used, the "voice" of participants, and information regarding the interview settings and my interactions with the CAOs.

Reflexivity Statement

Marshall and Rossman (2016), noted that "research designs should include reflection on one's identity and one's sense of voice and perspectives, assumptions, and sensitivities" (p. 117). As a part of this study, it was important to acknowledge and assess my connections to higher education and my interest in turnover of chief academic officers. I spent 15 years directing human resources operations for three different campus communities, including the University of North Carolina at Asheville, Davidson College, and the University of Georgia. In each of these roles, I worked closely with other campus leaders, including the presidents and chief academic officers. For the last 16 years, I have served as the president and CEO of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR). CUPA-HR is the non-profit organization that represents campus human resources professionals and includes over 33,000 members from almost 2,000 colleges and universities. Since 1967, CUPA-HR has annually gathered data on administrator salaries from colleges and universities. During the initial review of chief academic officer data during February of 2020, it came to my attention that almost half of U.S. higher education chief academic officers had been in their positions three years or less—a much shorter median tenure than the six years of our presidents. Data were not

collected regarding the reasons for this turnover, so I thought this could be an interesting topic to explore to fill a gap in available literature.

Having worked for many years with chief academic officers and thousands of higher education leaders from across the country, I was able to quickly establish rapport with study participants and create a relaxed atmosphere during the one-on-one interviews. I also believe that my credibility as the president of CUPA-HR, my background as a campus leader, and CUPA-HR's research work helped me engage chief academic officers in the exploration of the reasons why chief academic officers remain in or leave their positions.

As I began my exploration regarding why CAOs depart, I understood that it could have been shaped by my experiences with CAO transitions, including the reasons those incumbents left their positions. With a background in human resources, I understand how transitions can impact the organization, the CAO's direct reports, and the areas of influence, and I have seen how frequent turnover can lead to instability and uncertainty for employees. I have also seen how turnover can lead to positive outcomes, including greater productivity and improved employee morale. In addition, I acknowledged that I had been in my current position for 16 years and that my length of tenure in this position might potentially influence my perceptions of turnover and the reasons that chief academic officers should or should not depart their positions. As emphasized by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), it is important for researchers to acknowledge their positionality, or reflexivity, and engage in an "ongoing process that saturates every stage of the research" (p. 274). I acknowledged my biases and that they might have influenced my work, so I reviewed this positionality statement during my data collection, coding, and analysis. Also, as recommended by Creswell (2018), I maintained an observation protocol to capture my personal thoughts, impressions, and prejudices to heighten my awareness and help ensure these were not

incorporated into the actual results used to code and analyze the data. I recorded these in my observation protocol (Appendix E) and my notes that I recorded during the entire process. Recording the audio of the interviews captured all interview responses and helped lessen the likelihood that transcripts included errors or incomplete information. I also strived to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability of my study processes and results by adhering to the research approach and methodology outlined in this proposal.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations to this study. The study included only 13 CAOs from doctoral institutions, so their views may or may not have been representative of all CAOs across the country. During the interviews, I sought to ensure a comfortable environment so that study participants disclosed their information fully and accurately, but there is the possibility that participants shared inaccurate or incomplete information or responses they believed to be acceptable in a professional context. It was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate different responses by race and ethnicity, sex, age, years of service, or institution type, but I believe the outcomes from this study could be used as the foundation for follow-up research in any of these areas. It is also possible that current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may have impacted CAOs responses. In my findings, I have noted that these data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Guided by Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Theory of Turnover and the Job Embeddedness Theory of Mitchell et al. (2001), the purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers at doctoral universities to more fully understand the reasons why chief academic officers stay in or leave their positions and whether potential or planned departures were related to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, another opportunity, or other reasons not captured by existing theory and literature. This study also explored whether potential or planned departures were more job-related or due to community connections beyond the campus. This chapter presents the themes that emerged from the study organized to support the theories and the research questions:

- Themes related to job duties and responsibilities;
- Themes related to work relationships;
- Themes related to community connections; and
- Themes related to reasons for staying or departing.

Described in Chapter Three, initial requests to participate, consent forms, and interview scheduling occurred through email communication. Fifteen CAOs initially agreed to participate and were scheduled for interviews. Prior to the interviews, two cancelled, leaving 13 study participants. Of the 13 CAOs included in this study, nine were male, four were female, and three were CAOs of color (see Table 1). Time in position ranged from two to 11 years, with a median

of three and an average of four years. Nine of the CAOs had been promoted from within and the other four hired from other institutions. Participants were from all regions of the country including eight participants from Research One Doctoral Universities (very high research activity), four from Research Two Doctoral Universities (high research activity), and one from Doctoral/Professional Universities (Carnegie Classification of Institutions, 2020). Titles of all but one participant included "Provost" with several also including "Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs" or "Vice President for Academic Affairs" as part of the title. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes with the shortest 42 minutes and the longest 60 minutes.

Table 1

Chief Academic Officer Demographics

	Race		
Sex	White	Of Color	Total
Male	7	2	9
Female	3	1	4
Total	10	3	13

Note. Two participants were Black/African American, and one was Asian Indian American. Additional participant demographics are not provided to protect anonymity.

I conducted participant interviews in late February and early March 2021 via Zoom. The COVID-19 pandemic had been raging for almost a year and the first phases of emergency-authorized doses of the vaccines were being administered across the country. Most of the CAOs greeted me from their home offices and, like me, were spending many of their days remotely managing their organizations. Two male CAOs wore suits and ties. Others were dressed professionally but more casually. Some work and home offices had bookshelves in the background and others had paintings and family photos, with one displaying hobby-related items which prompted an engaging conversation between the two of us. The CAOs shared much

regarding energizing and challenging job duties and responsibilities, and positive and challenging work relationships with colleagues. The CAOs also shared their thoughts regarding future career plans, including whether they planned to stay in or leave their current position, and some of their reasons for staying or leaving. During our discussions, the CAOs seemed careful to separate their ongoing roles and work relationships from those more pandemic-driven. Like many higher education leadership positions, it seemed that an already challenging and stressful job was made even more challenging and stressful by COVID-19.

Transcript analysis from the 13 interviews revealed 11 strong themes. Three were related to challenging job duties and responsibilities, three to energizing and fulfilling job duties and responsibilities, and three were focused on work relationships. In addition, two themes emerged regarding reasons for potential or planned departures. Of note is the volume of comments shared by CAOs that were dedicated to each thematic area. Of the total 986 in vivo codes created using CAO interview comments, 270, or 27%, were focused on challenging duties and responsibilities. While the same number of themes emerged for energizing and fulfilling job duties and responsibilities, the number of in vivo codes was only 165, or 17%, of total related comments. Eighty-three, or 8%, of comments were focused on challenging work relationships with 125, or 13%, focused on positive work relationships. Fifteen percent, or 150 of the 986 coded comments, related to reasons for potential or planned departures. The coding system that was developed using a priori codes from theory and the research questions, and the in vivo codes from CAO comments is included in Appendix F. The coding system also notes the number of participants who commented regarding each of the themes. Also of note is that no thematic differences emerged by sex, race, or ethnicity.

Themes Related to Challenging Job Duties and Responsibilities

"It's really a beast of a role."

"If you fail, you don't just fail for yourself, you fail for many others, and you fail for your institution. So, you work hard, and then you try to get some sleep and do a good job the next day."

Toughest Job on Campus

Twelve of the 13 CAOs interviewed used the words "toughest job on campus," or similar to describe their roles. Other phrases used included "it is the hardest job on campus;" "the provost role is unrelenting;" "at times, it can be completely exhausting;" "it is a really hard job, and it is constant;" "it is just totally overwhelming in some ways;" and "it's so unrelenting that it is hard to unplug." Several CAOs also shared that COVID-19-related challenges have made an already tough job even more challenging. Specific COVID-19-related challenges will be noted in the applicable thematic areas. What makes the duties and responsibilities of these jobs so tough? Duties and responsibilities challenges fell largely into three themes:

- A large number of responsibilities including many direct reports and frequent difficult decisions;
- Back-to-back meetings, long days, and no time for planning; and
- People management and disciplinary challenges.

Large Number of Responsibilities, Direct Reports, and Frequent Difficult Decisions

"You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

Eleven of the 13 CAOs referenced challenges associated with the breadth of duties and responsibilities, including many direct reports and committees, the frequency of difficult decisions, and being dragged into the minutia.

Number of Direct Reports and Committees

"The combination of having the deans as direct reports and all of the issues associated with running the academic mission of the institution, plus all the things that have been added to provosts offices over time, make these positions very challenging."

All CAOs interviewed for this study described a large portfolio of duties and responsibilities including many direct reports, multiple committee leadership roles, and significant areas of management oversight. The number of direct reports varied, but all CAOs interviewed led large organizations with many direct reports: "I have probably around 34 or 35 direct reports;" "for a time, I had 22 direct reports;" "my extended cabinet includes 30 people;" "I have 19 deans, several associate provosts, and other direct reports;" and "it includes a number of operational offices in addition to the academic units." One CAO summarized the challenges associated with a large number of direct reports by sharing "the reporting structure violates all guidance about organizational hierarchy and span of control." Another shared that "this role is just too big for one person," with a third commenting "we have spans of control that are too large, too broad."

Adding to the challenges associated with large numbers of direct reports, several CAOs noted that turnover was also a challenge, including time needed to manage search processes and onboard new leaders with several sharing that they[1] were currently onboarding new deans and department heads in addition to ongoing duties and responsibilities. Beyond the responsibilities associated with direct reports, CAOs also referenced committee and task force leadership responsibilities with one sharing "I probably chair 20 different committees," and another noting

[1] According to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020), "they" is "inclusive of all people, helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender, and is part of APA Style" (p. 121). Pronouns used by CAOs during interviews have also been changed to "they."

"I chair all the reappointment, promotion, and tenure processes." Leading large organizations with many responsibilities and direct reports also means that CAOs must frequently make difficult decisions.

Difficult Decisions All the Time

"The problems you are trying to solve don't have easy or obvious solutions. If they did someone else would have already taken care of them."

Responses by a number of interviewees indicated that few decisions at higher education institutions are supported by the entire campus community. As one CAO put it, "it's really hard to satisfy everyone, so you often end up satisfying no one." Other CAOs echoed this sentiment: "sometimes people beat you up over a decision," "you have to make decisions that you know will upset some people," "there's little room for error," "you hope you get it right more often than you get it wrong," "the right thing to do is not always clear," and "I try to fix problems before they blow up." One CAO summarized their approach by sharing that CAOs must not get depressed regarding tough decisions and that it is important to "stay focused on the big picture, what you are trying to accomplish, and the good things of the day." CAOs also referenced the challenging decisions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and that this has made an already challenging job even more challenging. As one CAO summarized, "you are making decisions about how to do things based on what surrounds you now, knowing that it is changing from moment to moment."

Dragged into the Minutia

Details, details, details. One CAO commented that their predecessor was adept at the role because "they were able to focus on the minutia and be comfortable being very inwardly focused." Others described the role as frequently focused on "tactical perspectives" and "detailed

processes," with one commenting "your day fills up with things that are right in front of you that you have to do right now," and another sharing "there are a lot of little things which require your immediate attention on nearly a daily basis." Frustration with the minutia was also highlighted by one of the CAOs:

> I can do the details, but I think the university, for what they pay me, would be better served if I had more time to focus on strategy—what this university needs to do to keep us relevant, viable, and strong financially, instead of approving whether or not we hire this lecturer or that lecturer.

Back-to-Back Meetings, Long Days, and No Time for Planning

"The schedule is pretty grueling, and I think there are times that came at a cost to my personal life and my health."

Large numbers of direct reports and committees, multiple areas requiring management oversight, and frequent difficult decisions also mean that CAOs spend their days in back-to-back meetings with meeting preparation, responses to emails, and planning occurring early mornings, nights, and weekends. Eleven of the 13 CAOs interviewed noted the challenges created by their very busy meeting schedules.

Meetings All Day, Every Day

"Every day is a sequence of meetings, one after another, with hardly a break."

Most participants noted that they have a full-time person whose primary role is to manage their meeting calendar and described their schedules as "tough;" "grueling;" "crazy;" "it's meeting, after meeting, after meeting;" "every day is a sequence of meetings;" "wall-to-wall meetings;" and "meetings with just about every constituency you can think of." Meetings include one-on-one discussions with deans and other direct reports, groups of direct reports, committees,

task forces, faculty groups, individual faculty members, board of trustee members, outside groups, student groups, individual students, and others. Comments revealed that topics covered in the meetings also run the gamut including, but not limited to, academic-related issues, disciplinary challenges, strategic planning, enrollment management, and safety and health. Three CAOs emphasized the importance of the meetings to those meeting with the CAO: "people sometimes wait months to see you;" "for the person to whom you are talking, this could be the most important meeting of their day, or week;" and "you cannot let tiredness or distractions shine through." All CAOs noted that many meetings have been added to CAO schedules during the last year to address challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Long Days, Nights, and Work During the Weekends

"It would be easy to work all the time."

Workdays filled with back-to-back meetings mean that CAOs must dedicate early mornings, evenings, and weekends to prepare for meetings, respond to emails, and plan. Comments from CAOs regarding their extended work hours included "I don't even try to monitor email during the workday," "during evenings and weekends is when I am often playing catch up," "I do a gazillion emails and take work home on the weekends," and "there is not a whole lot of time for any such luxury as a balanced life." Back-to-back meetings also means that critical thinking and planning typically occur during early mornings, nights, and weekends. One CAO noted that evenings and weekends are the only time for thinking, writing, and analysis; and another shared that anything requiring critical thinking can only be done outside of normal working hours. Two participants also noted that it was challenging to maintain their research interests.

Several CAOs also cautioned that it is important for them and their CAO colleagues to try to set boundaries. One shared that they ensure that progress is being made on the most important priorities, another recommended "getting caught up" not be a goal for CAOs, and another commented that there is an enormous amount of work and that those looking for balance should not aspire to be in the role. One CAO summarized by saying "these jobs can consume every waking minute if you let them."

People Management and Disciplinary Challenges

"There's barely a day that goes by, and certainly not a week that goes by, that the words "You've got to be kidding me" don't come out of my mouth."

Leading large organizations with many responsibilities and direct reports also means that CAOs spend a lot of time managing people and disciplinary challenges. Twelve of 13 CAOs referenced people management challenges in their large, complex organizations, including the time needed to manage people and the disciplinary challenges created by unacceptable faculty and staff work performance and personal conduct.

Time Needed to Manage People

"I didn't realize how much time you have to spend managing people in order for the organization to run effectively."

A common comment from participants was that they did not realize going into the role how much time would be spent managing the day-to-day work of direct reports, including the time required to deal with turnover, to lead and coordinate searches, and onboard new deans and other direct reports. CAOs shared "supervising and managing people requires a lot of time;" "the major component is managing people, I didn't fully appreciate that before taking the role;" "you have to have so much patience for everybody," "there are a lot of personalities involved;" and "a

lot of your time is spent managing people and the dynamics and that can change every year." Regarding turnover and searches for replacements, CAOs noted the significant amount of time needed to find and onboard replacements with one noting, "at one point, I became the best customer of one of the search firms."

Beyond the day-to-day people management challenges, nine of 13 CAOs referenced challenges created by unacceptable job performance and personal conduct of faculty and staff.

Dealing with Unacceptable Job Performance and Personal Conduct Challenges

"Humans are humans. We're all fallible, and some people really know how to screw up."

The nine participants who referenced challenges associated with unacceptable job performance and personal conduct focused on the sheer volume, frequency, and complexity of disciplinary challenges, and the time required to course correct bad decisions of deans and other leaders. Regarding volume and frequency, CAO comments included "the volume was unexpected," "the most unexpected thing was the sheer volume of faculty disciplinary challenges," "the sheer volume of legal matters for not just faculty, but leadership," and "I had no idea how much I would need to interface with counsel." Complexity was also referenced by several CAOs. As one participant noted, "the events leading up to the transitions, the actual transitions, and the immediate aftermath, were all very challenging." CAOs also commented regarding the time and effort needed to course correct bad decisions including "people will tell you things that aren't true," "I hate cleaning up after people who don't play by the rules," "there are individuals who are just not making smart decisions," and "it is much easier to do it right the first time than to need to fix it."

Of note is that budget management did not emerge as a theme regarding the most challenging job duties and responsibilities. Nine of the 13 interviewees did specifically mention

budget challenges, but the other four did not do so. One of those mentioning budget management commented that "budget challenges are a given," which could possibly have been the assumption of many or all the CAOs. In contrast to the challenging duties and responsibilities of their roles, CAOs also shared information about their most rewarding duties and responsibilities.

Themes Related to Most Rewarding Job Duties and Responsibilities

"That's a rewarding part—just getting to see the breadth of things that we do here on campus and developing a greater appreciation for that."

In addition to commenting on some of the challenges, all 13 CAOs shared details regarding their most rewarding duties and responsibilities. These fell largely into three themes:

- Leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students;
- Developing strategy; and
- Building and supporting people.

Leading and Contributing to the Success of the Institution and Students

"As I tell the faculty, you're really the dream makers. The more you can find ways to help first generation students succeed, the more you are dream makers for those students and their families."

All 13 CAOs commented that leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students were rewarding parts of their roles. Most institutional success contribution comments were focused on the opportunity to lead change on a large scale, make an impact, and really make a difference for the institution and students. CAO comments included "the most rewarding part for me is the visibility and appreciation that I have for the entire campus," "I can have a greater impact on the things that matter," "I've had the opportunity to lead a whole bunch of different initiatives," and "I realized that I could make real tangible contributions." One CAO

summarized their comments by saying, “successful societies invest in their only renewable resources, and that’s its people and the society that does that better is the one that will flourish and succeed.”

All but a few of the CAOs also specifically referenced their roles in driving student success, including access and success for first generation and low income students and their families. Comments emphasizing the importance of this to CAOs included: “you see their dream come true, and you realize the importance of your work;” “we hold the hopes of parents and the dreams of children in our hands, and that is a sacred responsibility;” and “you see the gleam in the eyes of the kids who for the first time realize that the dream of going to college could be real.”

Developing Strategy

“I’m a builder, I’m a strategist.”

In addition to the gratification from leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students, 10 of 13 CAOs specifically referenced developing and implementing strategy as an energizing part of the role. Comments included “the most satisfying thing has been to help the university lay out strategic priorities,” “getting to shape the vision is very rewarding,” “I enjoy building a strategy,” “I’ve always been fascinated with organizational efficiencies and trying to get things to work and seem as frictionless as possible,” and “I enjoy helping drive improvement because you get to make things happen.” As one participant summarized:

> I always know the strategies that we’re developing have an outcome that we’re trying to work towards. When we reach it, it makes it all worth it.

Leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students and involvement in development and implementation of strategy were clearly rewarding parts of the CAO role, but another clear theme emerged related to building and supporting people.

Building and Supporting People

"These jobs are all about figuring out how to empower people, and let the drivers be the drivers, and once you got it working, get out of the way."

Twelve of 13 CAOs shared the gratification they receive from building and supporting people across the organization, including supporting deans and creating opportunities to build bridges and bring people together. One CAO shared that "the best part of the job is working with smart people who care a lot." Another shared that they were "excited to help more and more people be successful," with another commenting that "the rewards gained from enabling and empowering people help balance the challenging people-related issues." "It's wonderfully rewarding when you make progress, and help people deal with their challenges;" and "my job is to bring ideas together with people's dreams" were also sentiments shared by participants.

Themes Related to Work Relationships

"I try to break it down to people and jokingly say my job is simple. I just have to keep the president happy and the faculty happy."

Participant comments revealed the perception that when one works in the "toughest job on campus," there are going to be many important work relationships connected to the job duties and responsibilities of the position. Some of these work relationships are negative and make the jobs of CAOs more challenging, while others are positive and make the jobs more engaging and rewarding. Three themes emerged regarding work relationships. One was more negative and reflected many of the challenges CAO encounter as part of their work relationships. The other

two themes were positive and reflected the importance of strong, collaborative work relationships. These themes were:

- Walking the tightrope;
- Positive relationships with president and vice presidents; and
- Positive relationships with CAO office staff.

Walking the Tightrope

"It's a balancing act, which I can do fairly well, but it's exhausting year after year."

Twelve of the 13 CAOs interviewed referenced work relationship challenges, with 11 of them specifically referencing challenges of walking the tightrope created by institutional bureaucracy and faculty governance, and politics and boards.

Institutional Bureaucracy and Faculty Governance

"Part of the difficulty is managing the relationship between the president and the faculty. Over time, it is exhausting."

Participant CAOs noted challenges related to risk aversion by other executives and faculty, faculty governance, and the difficulty of being caught in the middle between the president and the faculty. Some of the comments regarding faculty governance challenges included "many faculty were not thrilled with this direction, but I felt like it was a moral imperative for us to at least try to take a step;" "there is a really complex relationship between faculty and the administration;" "faculty sometimes are the toughest ones to work with because there are so many of them and the spectrum of their needs is very wide;" and "the thing you do that is exactly what one person needs is the exact opposite of what someone else needs." Regarding relationships with faculty, one summarized their challenges by commenting "sometimes it's difficult to bite your tongue, but it's an essential part of the job."

Some of the comments regarding bureaucracy included “I was really shocked at the bureaucracy,” “there’s a time value of money or a personal or personnel cost of waiting,” “as a faculty member I would not have understood that so much of what a provost actually does is determined by the president,” “people don’t respond to logic as much as they do to emotion,” and “you have to navigate and manage those things.” In addition to challenges created by overall institutional bureaucracy and faculty governance, CAOs shared challenges of navigating politics, boards, and the media.

Politics, Boards, and the Media

“It’s the sordid underbelly of this role. One of the things that burns people out is that a lot of what we do, we can’t talk to anyone about.”

Like many leadership positions, CAOs do not get to share their personal political views. As one CAO put it, “you have to be careful and remember that irrespective of where you fall on the political spectrum, half of your stakeholders are probably going to have a different view.” Another shared

> Even though it’s not supposed to be a political position, it is, just like the president. And if you’re not aware of that, you can get blindsided.

Others echoed these sentiments: “I hadn’t fully appreciated the politicization of higher education and policy,” “we have political issues,” “there are always political dimensions to everything we do,” and “there are politics that come into play.”

Other comments focused on state legislatures and boards of trustees. One commented “some of the governing entities seem almost anti-education, anti-intellectual;” with another sharing; “most (legislatures) have a perception, especially for research universities, that we’re a

bunch of eggheads who are more left-leaning and really don't get it." This CAO also commented:

> Boards are mostly business people who have a certain view of things. We have to figure out how to share information with them.

Participants also commented regarding the challenges created by not being able to share the full story with the politicians, the media, and others due to legal or other confidentiality issues. One CAO expressed this sentiment:

> In personnel matters because of confidentiality, sometimes people beat you up over a decision, and you think if you knew what I knew you'd understand it was a lot more complex than the one side of the story you're hearing, but I, of course, can't tell you everything.

As a way of managing work relationships with boards, politicians, and faculty, one CAO noted that one of the things they have learned to do is "work the room."

Challenges Related to COVID-19

CAOs referenced duties and responsibilities challenges created by COVID-19, but the majority of COVID-19-related comments reflected challenging conversations and communications with faculty and staff, particularly faculty. As one CAO noted, "throughout this crisis, to try and make unprecedented decisions quickly that we've never had to face before, and try to do that through shared governance, someone is extremely upset on a daily basis." Another shared, "the temperaments, and the issues of dealing with faculty in particular, that during any given year are difficult anyway—you take an environment of complete uncertainty and fear, and those things just multiply and grow exponentially. They get magnified and the voices get louder."

Twelve of the 13 CAOs interviewed referenced work relationship challenges, but participants also referenced positive work relationships. In fact, all 13 shared that they enjoyed working with individual colleagues and groups of colleagues. CAOs mentioned positive work relationships with deans, faculty, and students, but the two groups that emerged as positive work relationship themes were presidents and vice presidents, and provost office staff.

Positive Relationships with President and Vice Presidents

"I've got a great president, and I have a great relationship with them. To me that's been an important part of why I've been in the job so long."

Eleven of 13 CAOs commented on positive work relationships with presidents, vice presidents, and others in executive leadership positions. Nine of the 13 specifically mentioned positive, engaging relationships with their president. Comments included: "I enjoy working with our president;" "the president is always very helpful;" "If I didn't have my president as a mentor, I would have to find another mentor;" "we just hit it off, we work well together, we've got very complimentary skills;" "I have a fantastic president;" and "I like working with the president."

In addition to overall positive comments regarding relationships with president, all CAOs commented on their positive work relationships with at least one other vice president, with the vice president for finance, vice president for student affairs, and general counsel mentioned most frequently as strong cabinet-level collaborators. Some of these collaborative relationships were described as follows: "I like working with my fellow VPs and others on the cabinet," "these are all extraordinary collegial people who work well as a team," and "the most engaging and rewarding parts of the job are the close collaborations between all the vice presidents."

More than half of the CAOs also commented about overall positive relationships with the campus community including "there are really marvelous people here," "it's got really wonderful

people," "a lot of it is about the relationships," "it is a pleasure to work with leaders across campus," "I find most academics are good-willed, altruistic, hardworking people, and that makes it fun to come to work;" "I'm working with smart, motivated, good-willed people all the time;" and "they're all good people, they just have different ways of going about things."

Strong Work Relationships and COVID-19

Several participants referenced the COVID-19 challenges of the last year and the ways that a strong collaborative leadership team has helped support the work of the institution and each other. As one summarized it, "it would have been really hard to get through this past year if I didn't already have those relationships well established."

Positive Relationships with CAO Office Staff

"Within the provost office staff, I have a really, really strong team."

Ten of 13 CAOs mentioned strong collaborative relationships with the CAO office staff with some mentioning specific individuals and positions and others commenting about the collective strength of the provost office team. Participants shared some of their thoughts regarding these collaborative relationships: "my chief of staff is truly a partner with me in everything we do;" "I have a member of my staff who never hesitates to tell me when something's a bad idea, I cherish these moments;" "I have a really great team around me of very experienced leaders who I feel very comfortable delegating to, so I spend a lot of time working with them."

Themes Related to Community Connections

"I've had many hobbies over the years that have had to go because there's just not enough time in the day."

Engaging and challenging job duties and responsibilities, and rewarding and challenging work relationships can impact decisions to stay in or leave a CAO position, but Mitchell et al. (2001) also posit that embeddedness in the community can also impact decisions to stay or leave. All 13 CAOs shared information regarding the things they enjoy doing outside of work, but there were no themes that emerged that highlighted strong connections between the CAOs and their communities. Only three mentioned family connections in the area as part of their motivation for staying, with more than half referencing hobbies including biking, running, hiking, playing golf, mowing the grass, and going to community theater productions that were not necessarily connected to their particular communities. This lack of specific connectivity to the community was highlighted as CAOs shared the reasons for staying in or leaving their positions.

Themes Related to Staying In or Leaving the Position

"Looking forward, you hope you make wise and interesting career choices."

No themes emerged regarding reasons CAOs planned to stay in their current roles. Three participants mentioned that they did not aspire to move to a presidency, with one noting that they were happy in their current role, and another noting that they felt rewarded by what they were doing in the CAO position. However, 10 of the 13 CAOs interviewed commented on plans to pursue another opportunity, specifically a presidency. CAO responses regarding reasons for leaving and future career plans were categorized using guidance from Lee and Mitchell's Unfolding Theory (1994) and supplemental work by Griffeth et al. (2008) which posits that employee departures are due to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, another opportunity, or other reasons not captured by existing theory and literature. The two themes that emerged regarding reasons for potential departures were:

- Another Opportunity—Seeking a Presidency

- Tough Job Duties and Stress of the Position

Another Opportunity--Seeking a Presidency

"I'm currently a finalist in more than one search."

As noted, there were no themes that emerged regarding reasons that CAOs planned to stay in their roles. It is also important to note that no participant mentioned moving to another CAO role was a possible career path. Six of 13 CAOs referenced the possibility of multiple career paths, with one sharing, "once you get to the provost role, it is either up or down," and another commenting, "whatever I do, I will be happy with what I've done with my career." Three mentioned the possibility of transitioning back to the faculty and four mentioned the possibility of moving out of higher education for their next position.

A clear theme that emerged was the probable move to a presidency with 10 of 13 CAOs sharing that this was likely the next career opportunity for them. "I just accepted a presidency at another institution;" "I am a finalist in a search right now;" "I'm currently a finalist in more than one search," "I'm seeking a presidency right now;" "I think I can be great president, but it's got to be the right fit;" "the position would need to require some work on strategy, someone who is forward thinking, not somebody who's just going to try to maintain;" "I have thought seriously about being a university president;" and "pursing a presidency is the natural next step." One CAO summarized by commenting:

> The reality is you've got a whole generation of leaders that is retiring and there need to be replacements. The natural place to look is provosts. So, I think that's part of the reality as well as it's an opportunity.

Interestingly, in addition to sharing plans to move to a presidency, five participants specifically referenced that many CAOs are currently in the position because they aspire to be a

president and believe that experience as a CAO is essential: “a lot of people look at this job as a stepping stone job to a presidency,” “they see this as a short-term stepping stone,” “I don’t want to give you the bs that I’ll be in this job for the next 20 years,” and “ the only thing that appealed to me was that if I ever wanted to be a president somewhere that having checked the provost box would be beneficial.”

The only other theme that emerged regarding reasons for potential or planned departures related to the tough job duties and stress of the position.

Tough Job Duties and Stress of the Position

“I think the stress is the uncertain factor. Even just talking to some of my colleagues, it is something that we all deal with and try to spend time managing.”

According to Lee and Mitchell (1994), some incumbents leave jobs for other opportunities, like moving to a presidency. As noted in the previous section, the opportunity to move to a presidency will likely lead to the departure of at least 10 of the 13 CAOs interviewed, a clear theme from this study. Lee and Mitchell also identified missed rewards, opportunity lost, conflict, work-related mistrust, and personal reasons for potential departures. A few CAOs referenced conflict and mistrust, but the second theme that emerged regarding potential reasons for departures combined elements of missed rewards, opportunity lost, and personal reasons into one theme, tough job duties and stress of the position.

Eleven of the 13 CAOs shared that the overall difficulty and stress of the role would likely contribute to, or prompt, their departure. In other words, responses focused on their initial interview comments emphasizing that, in their opinion, the CAO job is the toughest and most stressful on campus. CAOs also expressed their desire to distance themselves from the job duties and the stress of the position. More than half of CAOs used the words “toughest job on campus”

or “hardest job at the university” as reasons for potential planned departures, echoing the sentiments they shared when discussing job duties and responsibilities. One CAO summarized as follows: “I think the major factor contributing to whether provosts stay or leave the role is stress. This is a highly stressful job.” Another shared: “I’ve been in other administrative roles, and they don’t come close to this. In some ways, I think this job is more stressful than president’s job.” These sentiments were echoed by others: “When people come into this job, there’s a pretty quick divide between people who absolutely hate it and people who find it rewarding and are interested in continuing;” “there is a pretty significant percentage of people who start in the role of provost and discover that it is not for them;” “it is so intense all the time;” “I don’t want to do this anymore;” “I have had enough because this job has been a lot;” and “it’s the most stressful job I’ve ever had.” One summarized their sentiments as “you’re kind of caught in this purgatory between being the president and being the dean, and so it’s hard to find your voice in that space.” A CAO’s spouse also acknowledged the challenges of the role: “my spouse tells me that whatever job I go to, if I become a president or move to another role, it’s going to be easier than what I am doing now.”

CAOs also reflected on the length of time spent in the role with two commenting “there’s a window of effectiveness and an expiration data for every provost given the constraints in the role,” and “I don’t think you can do this job well forever, it’s just too much.” One longer-term CAO summarized as follows: “actually, that’s the thing that weighs on my mind the most—knowing that after this length of time in the role that I’m kind of past my life expectancy—the freshness date on the label.”

Additional Challenges and Stress Brought on by COVID-19

All 13 CAOs also shared that COVID-19 has created additional challenges and stress. The sentiments of the group were summarized by one of the CAOs:

> I think COVID-19 has had an impact. I think that is why there is so much turnover right now among provosts. The COVID challenges have been absolutely unrelenting. Layer on top of that the challenges caused by the George Floyd murder and other issues like that which created a lot of turbulence on campus and trying to deal with all of those at the same time. These have made what was already a stressful job more stressful and challenging.

Results Summary

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 chief academic officers at doctoral universities in the U.S. to more fully understand the reasons that chief academic officers stay in or leave their positions and whether departures were related to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, another opportunity, or other reasons not captured by existing theory and literature. I also explored whether these decisions were more job-related or community-related. Responses varied, but the strong themes emerged regarding positive and negative job duties, and challenging and rewarding work relationships. Strong themes also emerged regarding reasons for potential or planned departures.

Themes that emerged related to challenging job duties and responsibilities were:

- large number of responsibilities, direct reports, and frequent difficult decisions;
- back-to-back meetings, long days, and no time for planning; and
- people management and disciplinary challenges.

Themes that emerged related to energizing and fulfilling job duties and responsibilities were:

- leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students;
- developing strategy; and
- building and supporting people.

Themes that emerged related to work relationships were:

- walking the tightrope;
- positive relationships with president and vice presidents; and
- positive relationships with CAO office staff.

Themes that emerged related to potential or planned departures were:

- another opportunity--seeking a presidency; and
- tough job duties and stress of the position.

In the next chapter, the themes that emerged will be used to answer the research questions of this study. The themes will also be reviewed in the context of the Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Theory of Turnover and the Job Embeddedness Theory of Mitchell et al. (2001). This review will be followed by a summary of implications for policy and practice.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Pritchard et al. (2020), 47% of higher education chief academic officers have been in their positions for three years or less, but there has been no systematic review and exploration into why this level of turnover has occurred. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers to more fully understand the reasons chief academic officers choose to leave or stay in their positions. In addition, this study explored whether particular job duties, work relationships, or connections to the community beyond the campus affect the likelihood that incumbents will stay in or leave their positions. Outcomes from this study could help higher education presidents, CAOs, and other campus leaders evaluate and more clearly define the duties and responsibilities of the CAO position. Outcomes could also help CAO search committees assess candidate skills and abilities needed to be successful in the role at their institution. In addition, if outcomes from this study are incorporated into position descriptions, this could potentially help candidates determine how well their skills and experiences align with those needed for the CAO role.

The overarching question guiding this study asked: Why do doctoral university Chief Academic Officers choose to voluntarily stay in or leave their position? This question was supported by the following questions that were guided by the theoretical framework used for this research study:

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe interpersonal relationships with work colleagues as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe community connections beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?
- For Chief Academic Officers referencing potential or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

The study was guided by Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model of Employee Turnover which posits that there are "shocks," or events, that cause chief academic officers to *think* about quitting, and the work of Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski and Erez (2001) that focuses on the elements of job embeddedness, those connections to the organization and community which increase or decrease the likelihood that chief academic officers will stay or leave the organization.

Summary of Findings

Overall findings from semi-structured interviews via Zoom with 13 Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) indicated that they perceive their job to be the toughest on campus, with significant challenges related to their duties and responsibilities including large numbers of direct reports, frequent difficult decisions, grueling meeting schedules, no time for planning, and people management challenges. Participants also identified challenges with interpersonal work relationships and described how they spent much of their time walking the tightrope between the president and faculty, and with individuals or campus group members who created challenging

circumstances for the CAO. In contrast, participant CAOs also shared that the most energizing and fulfilling elements of their roles included leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students; developing strategy; building and supporting people; and having positive relationships with the president, vice presidents, and the CAO office staff. As noted in Chapter Four, the amount of time participants spent describing challenges *significantly* exceeded the amount of time spent describing the energizing and fulfilling parts of their roles. The majority of these CAOs also shared that they were already seeking, or will be seeking, a presidency in the next few years and that the challenges and stress of the position strongly contribute to their planned or potential departures.

Through the lens of the guiding theories, potential or planned departures of CAOs most closely aligned with Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding path three, which acknowledges that there are multiple career opportunities for incumbents and that CAOs are often highly recruited for other positions. Information shared during participant interviews revealed little evidence of job embeddedness to tie the incumbents to their positions or the community, which increases the likelihood that CAOs will leave their positions (Mitchell et al., 2001).

In this final chapter, I will summarize study findings for the five research questions and the implications that emanate from the findings including implications for theory, as well as recommendations for practice and future research.

Responding to the Research Questions

Research Question One

How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?

Eleven of 13 chief academic officers interviewed for this study commented that the challenges and stress associated with the job duties and responsibilities of their positions had or would likely contribute to, or prompt, their departure. This was supported by the number of comments regarding these challenges which significantly exceeded comments for every other area of focus for the study including the most rewarding duties and responsibilities, challenging or rewarding work relationships, or community connections beyond the campus (see Appendix F for a detailed list from the coding analysis).

Challenging Job Duties and Responsibilities

Chief academic officers described their jobs as the toughest on campus with some characterizing it as "unrelenting," "exhausting," and "overwhelming." They shared that the most challenging duties and responsibilities of the toughest job on campus include having a large number of responsibilities including many direct reports and frequent difficult decisions; needing to spend their days in back-to-back meetings with little time for planning; and being required to manage people and disciplinary challenges.

Large Number of Responsibilities, Direct Reports, and Frequent Difficult Decisions

All participants described significant areas of management oversight with large numbers of direct reports including deans, vice presidents, associate provosts, administrative department heads, and provost office staff. They also noted that turnover of position incumbents was a challenge, including the time needed to manage search processes and onboard new employees. In addition to a large number of direct reports, participants shared that they also chair multiple committees, adding to their responsibilities and areas of oversight. CAOs also noted that leading large organizations means that they must frequently make difficult decisions while understanding that some people will disagree with the decisions and that there is often little room for error.

They also expressed frustration that they are too often dragged into details of managing the day-to-day operations of the institution. Several participants also commented that the COVID-19 pandemic has added to an already-stressful job by necessitating that they make decisions knowing that circumstances could quickly change requiring a course correction or a totally different decision.

Back-to-Back Meetings, Long Days, and No Time for Planning

Significant areas of management oversight, large numbers of direct reports and committees, and frequent difficult decisions require interview participants to spend their days in back-to-back meetings with meeting preparation, responses to emails, and needed planning occurring early mornings, nights, and weekends. Interviewees described their meeting schedules as "grueling," "tough," and "crazy," and several commented that they often need to make sure their assistants schedule short lunch and bathroom breaks. Participants also emphasized that their meetings could be with virtually anyone connected to the institution including deans and other direct reports, groups of direct reports, committees, task forces, faculty groups, individual faculty members, board of trustees members, community groups, student groups, individual students, and others. Interviewees also shared that CAOs need to be prepared to address a myriad of topics brought by these individuals and groups and understand that many of these discussions will be challenging.

Back-to-back meetings require interviewed CAOs to dedicate time during early mornings, evenings, and weekends to respond to emails, plan for upcoming meetings, and do any needed planning, thinking, writing, and analysis. Two also noted the challenge of finding time to maintain their research interests, with several noting that they have had to give up all, or the

majority, of their research. Several commented that it is important for CAOs to set boundaries because the jobs can "consume every waking minute if you let them."

People Management and Disciplinary Challenges

Managing and leading large organizations with many responsibilities and direct reports means that a lot of time must be spent managing people. Participants commented that they did not realize going into the role how much time would need to be spent managing the work of direct reports, dealing with turnover, coordinating searches, and onboarding new direct reports. They also shared challenges associated with unacceptable job performance and personal conduct of faculty and staff, including the sheer volume, frequency, and complexity of the disciplinary challenges. CAOs also noted that they had to spend considerable time course correcting bad decisions of deans and other leaders.

As noted in Chapter Four, budget management did not emerge as a theme regarding the most challenging job duties and responsibilities. One of the study participants who mentioning budget management commented that "budget challenges are a given," which could have possibly been the assumption of many or all the CAOs. This could be an area of additional exploration in a follow-up study.

Rewarding Duties and Responsibilities

All 13 CAOs shared information regarding the parts of their roles that were the most rewarding, and 10 of 13 commented about the personal and professional gratification they receive from their most rewarding job duties and responsibilities, but only two referenced these as reasons for staying in the role. In addition, the number of comments regarding challenging duties and responsibilities significantly exceeded those related to rewarding duties and responsibilities (see Appendix F). Even though the number of comments was significantly less,

CAOs clearly identified their most rewarding duties and responsibilities: leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students; developing strategy; and building and supporting people.

Leading and Contributing to the Success of the Institution and Students

Interviewed CAOs said they enjoy leading change on a large scale, making an impact, and making a difference for their institutions and students. Regarding impact and institutional success, they noted that the role provides opportunities to lead initiatives, make tangible contributions, and more fully appreciate the work of the entire campus community. Participants also commented about the personal fulfillment and reward they receive through their contributions to student success and that these serve as reminders regarding the importance of their work. As one CAO shared, "you see their dream come true, and you realize the importance of your work."

Developing Strategy

Participants view developing strategy as one of the most important, energizing, and rewarding parts of their roles. Working with the campus community to build, shape, and implement a direction, including goals and metrics for success, were characterized as satisfying. They described strategic planning processes they have led or been a part of and commented about the sense of accomplishment they feel when they see progress toward, and achievement of, goals. They also commented that part of the reward received from developing strategy is that they are a part of making things happen and driving improvement.

Building and Supporting People

CAOs enjoy building and supporting people, including the opportunities to build bridges to connect different parts of the organization and, as noted by one interviewee, bring together

"smart people who care a lot." They also noted that they enjoy helping people be successful, including enabling and empowering them to learn and grow as leaders and individuals, and then getting out of the way to let them lead and flourish. Participants also commented about the rewards they receive when helping others work through their challenges and bring ideas together.

Research Question Two

How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe interpersonal relationships with work colleagues as motivation for staying or leaving?

Only two CAOs indicated work-related interpersonal relationships as reasons for potential departures and only two referenced these as reasons to stay. All CAOs shared examples of challenging and rewarding work relationships with three areas of greatest importance emerging. Interpersonal work relationships described as the most challenging related to walking the tightrope created by institutional bureaucracy and faculty governance and politics and boards. Work relationships characterized as the most positive and rewarding were those with presidents and vice presidents and CAO office staff.

Walking the Tightrope

Twelve of the 13 CAOs interviewed commented on their work relationship challenges, with 11 specifically referencing the challenges of walking the tightrope created by institutional bureaucracy and faculty governance as well as politics and boards. CAOs noted that they often find themselves caught between the president and the faculty as the president works to meet the goals set by the board of directors and state legislatures and faculty having different definitions of success for the institution. They also shared that these different definitions of success sometimes occur due to lack of communication from the president and sometimes due to lack of faculty willingness to accept that change is needed or essential. CAOs also noted the frequent

challenges of meeting the needs of the faculty because the needs are so varied and diverse. One CAO shared that the needs of some faculty can be in contrast to, and sometimes direct conflict with, the needs of other faculty.

Every CAO must learn to "work the room" was a comment offered by one participant. Managing internal and external politics, boards of directors, and the media frequently require CAOs to walk the tightrope. These challenges include understanding that the CAO role is a political role; managing internal politics with faculty and other campus groups; working with legislatures that seem "almost anti-education, anti-intellectual;" and communicating with trustees who have political agendas. CAOs also shared that they must often walk the tightrope with the media, being careful regarding what they can and cannot share, particularly for inquiries during employee or student disciplinary investigations.

Further, CAO job duties and responsibilities have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the majority of COVID-19-related comments focused on challenging interactions with faculty and staff, particularly faculty members. CAOs noted that the need to quickly make unprecedented decisions through a shared governance structure often resulted in someone being "extremely upset on a daily basis." CAOs also noted that the uncertainty and fear created by COVID-19 made already challenging relationships with faculty even more challenging.

Positive Relationships with the President and Vice Presidents

Relationships with the president and vice presidents were acknowledged as positive and rewarding for 11 of the 13 CAOs with nine specifically mentioning positive, engaging relationships with their president. CAOs used words including "mentor" and "helpful" to describe their presidents and shared that they enjoyed working with them. One shared the

sentiments of others by commenting, “we work well together, we’ve got very complementary skills.”

All participant CAOs described positive work relationships with at least one other vice president, with the vice president for finance, vice president for student affairs, and general counsel mentioned as their most frequent cabinet-level collaborators. Several CAOs also noted positive work relationships between the entire leadership team, describing the group as “extraordinary collegial people,” and sharing that the close collaborative relationships of the team were among the most rewarding parts of the role. In addition, CAOs noted that the strong, collaborative leadership team has been important as they worked to address COVID-19 challenges. One summarized by commenting, “it would have been really hard to get through this past year if I didn’t already have those relationships well established.”

Positive Relationships with CAO Office Staff

Strong, collaborative relationships with CAO office staff were referenced by 10 of the 13 CAOs interviewed. Some shared comments regarding particular individuals and roles and others focused on the collective strength of the office team. Several referenced their chief of staff (or similar role) as an extension of their role with some incumbents in this role able to easily serve as proxy for the CAO with campus groups and committees. One noted that their chief of staff has similar research interests and helps the CAO stay connected to research that would otherwise have to go by the wayside.

The other office staff member most often referenced was the person who manages the CAO’s schedule. Participants expressed their appreciation for those serving in these positions and noted that it was important for the individuals in these roles to be able to help vet who gets on the calendar, what meetings require a sense of urgency, and what meetings might be delayed

or rescheduled. One participant also referenced a particular staff member who is not afraid to challenge and question decisions and offer alternative ideas and that it is important to have this person (and this kind of voice) as part of the office leadership team.

Research Question Three

How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe community connections beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving?

In the Job Embeddedness Theory, Mitchell et al. (2001) posit that on-the-job and community-related factors impact employee desire to stay in or leave the organization. Mitchell and his colleagues identified three dimensions of job embeddedness including: formal and informal connections to other people or activities; the employee's fit to the job and the campus and broader community; and how easy it is to break, or give up, one or more of these links by leaving the position.

All 13 CAOs shared information regarding what they enjoy doing outside of work, but there were few strong connections between the CAOs and their communities that were characterized as possible reasons to stay in their current position or at their current institution. Only three mentioned family connections in the area as part of their possible motivation for staying, and none referenced other community engagement that might motivate them to stay. Participants did reference connections to community organizations and activities, but these were not characterized as reasons to stay in their communities or positions.

Research Question Four

How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?

Participants did not identify strong reasons to *stay* in their positions related to job duties and responsibilities, work relationships, community connections, or other reasons not already noted in the responses to questions one, two, and three. As highlighted in the response to research question one, 11 of 13 chief academic officers shared that the challenges and stress associated with the job duties and responsibilities of their positions would likely contribute to, or prompt, their departure. The other primary reason for planned or potential departures that was not captured in the responses to questions one, two, or three will be to pursue a presidency, with 10 of 13 sharing that this was the likely next career opportunity for them. In fact, one of the interviewees had just accepted a presidency, one commented that they were currently a finalist, and another shared that they were a finalist for more than one search. Several commented that a move to a presidency was the "natural next step," with five specifically referencing that they were in the CAO role as a "stepping stone" to the presidency. In addition, two referred to the need to "check the provost box" to be viewed as a serious candidate for president positions. More information regarding potential or planned departures is included as part of the response to research question five.

Research Question Five

For Chief Academic Officers referencing potential or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

As noted in the responses to questions one and four, comments revealed that CAO potential or planned departures will occur to move to a presidency or escape the challenging and stressful job duties and responsibilities of the position. Guided by Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Theory of Turnover, Griffeth et al. (2008) identified that voluntary employee

departures occur due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity. Pursuit of a presidency clearly fits into the "another opportunity" category, but the challenging and stressful job duties and responsibilities referenced by CAOs do not fit into one of these categories and combine elements of missed rewards, opportunity lost, and personal reasons.

"Missed rewards" and "opportunity lost" for CAOs are created by workload of the position, including a large number of responsibilities, back-to-back meetings, being dragged into the minutia, and lack of time to focus on the most energizing and engaging parts of the role including leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students, developing strategy, and building and supporting people. The missed rewards and opportunity lost created by these challenges also creates stress, which Lee and Mitchell (1994) and Griffeth et al. (2008) would categorize as "personal reasons" for planned or potential departures. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to choose just one of these categories as the reason for a CAO departure, so the departure categorizations used by Griffeth et al. (2008) should be augmented to emphasize that an accumulation of challenging duties and responsibilities and the stress created from these challenges can combine to prompt a CAO to leave the position.

In my interviews, no other strong reasons for potential or planned departures emerged. Six participants referenced conflict as a reason for potential departures, but of note is that the majority of these comments focused on *the potential* of future conflict leading to involuntary turnover, or involuntary turnover characterized as voluntary turnover, instead of current interpersonal relationships that might cause the CAOs to consider departure. As one CAO noted regarding conflict, "there are 40-60,000 people walking around any given day who could end your career."

Implications for Theory, Implications and Recommendations for Practice, and Recommendations for Future Research

Higher education professional associations like the American Council on Education (ACE) regularly dedicate resources to collect and report on the tenure and challenges of college presidents (e.g., Gagliardi et al., 2017), but there has not been a systematic review of CAO turnover and the reasons this turnover has occurred. The outcomes from this study provide implications for theory, implications and recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Implications for Theories Guiding This Study

The two theories guiding this study were Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model of Turnover and the Job Embeddedness Theory introduced by Mitchell et al. in 2001. Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model of Turnover references that employees choose whether or not to stay in their positions based on multiple factors related to personal values, personal career goals, or strategies to reach personal goals and that a "shock" leads employees to consider one of four "decision paths," to determine whether or not to leave their positions. The primary reasons for planned or potential departures of study participants included their plans to pursue a presidency or to leave the position to escape the challenging and stressful duties and responsibilities. These reasons most closely align with Lee and Mitchell's Decision Path Three (see Figure 4 in Chapter Two). This path is used by incumbents who are focused on evaluating alternatives and leaving the position. For CAOs who choose to pursue a presidency, there can be one shock, such as a call from a recruiter, that can cause them to begin evaluating alternatives and planning to leave the organization, or a series of shocks, including calls from multiple recruiters, to prompt the evaluation.

Unfolding Path Three also acknowledges that some decisions to leave the organization are not prompted by a single shock, but an accumulation of shocks, and that the decision to begin evaluating alternatives and leave the position can be slower and more deliberate. Participant CAOs described the accumulation of challenges and stress, or shocks, created by large number of duties and responsibilities, back-to-back meetings, being pulled into the minutia, and lack of time to focus on the most energizing and engaging parts of the role as motivation to leave. Based on findings in this study, Figure 5 adapts Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Theory of Turnover Path Three to represent the two *most likely* paths for CAOs: pursue a presidency or determine an alternate path to leave the position due to the challenging and stressful duties and responsibilities. This model only represents these two *most likely* paths based on findings from this study and does not incorporate all possible alternatives.

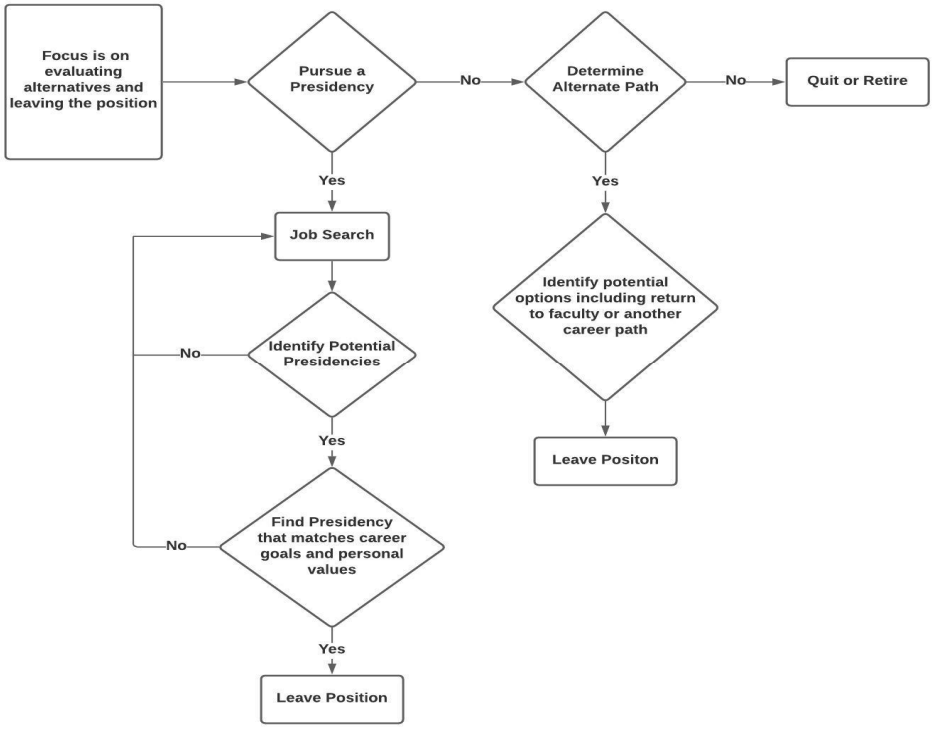

Figure 5. Chief academic officer most likely turnover path. Adapted from "An Alternative Approach: The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover," by T.W. Lee and T.R. Mitchell, 1994, *Academy of Management, (19)*(1), p. 63.

The other theory guiding this study was Mitchell et al.'s (2001) Job Embeddedness Theory that posits that on-the-job and community-related factors impact employee desire to leave the organization. Mitchell and his colleagues identified three dimensions of job embeddedness including formal and informal connections to other people or activities; the employee's fit to the job and community; and how easy it is to break, or give up, one or more of these links by leaving the position. CAOs who participated in this study said they will leave their positions to move to a presidency or to escape the challenging and stressful position duties and responsibilities, which may highlight that they are not embedded enough in the organization or community to stay in the position. It is possible that some CAOs who pursue a presidency might move to that position at their current institution or to the presidency at another institution in their community, but the reasons for these moves would not be driven by the desire to stay in the community, they would be more driven by the opportunity to transition to a president role. It is also possible that CAOs who leave the position could choose a path that enables them to remain in the community, but staying connected to the community or the institution were not shared as motivators by the majority of study participants. This lack of on-the-job and community-related embeddedness supports the work of Mitchell et al. (2001) that this increases the likelihood of turnover for these CAOs.

As referenced in the literature review for this study, much of the application of Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model of Turnover has been applied to hourly-paid, non-exempt positions (Andrus et al., 2019). However, this study builds on the work of Andrus et al. (2019) to apply the model to executive roles and provide new information regarding the shocks that influence voluntary turnover for incumbents in these positions. Also, as noted in the literature review, more study of non-profit executive turnover and a more consistent model of turnover

theory building for non-profit executive is needed (Stewart, 2016). This study contributes to the study of turnover for these types of positions. Because this study exclusively examined the perceptions of CAOs at doctoral universities, it is possible that reasons for departure or leaving may differ. However, median CAO tenure is similar across all institution types (Pritchard et al., 2020), and all CAOs have multiple direct reports and significant duties and responsibilities, so it is likely that the turnover paths outlined in Figure 5 would be the same or similar.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic with CAO interviews during February and March of 2021. As noted by CAOs interviewed for this study, the pandemic made their already-challenging and stressful jobs more challenging and stressful, including difficult decision making during times of significant uncertainty. Similarly, they also noted that the challenges created by the pandemic made already-challenging work relationships even more difficult. As higher education transitions beyond the pandemic, CAOs, presidents, and other campus leaders must grapple with challenges that existed before, or were exacerbated or created by, the pandemic, including the approaching enrollment cliff, race relations, equity for women and people of color, student and employee mental health and well-being, and long-term financial viability (Grawe, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021).

Martin and Samels (2015) noted that challenges impacting the work of chief academic officers include pressures to raise institutional rankings; unprecedented student loan default; growing dependence on technological resources; greater needs for academic accountability in athletics; higher levels of plagiarism among students and faculty; and the impact of social media on academic life. Martin and Samels (2015) also noted that environmental changes such as student consumer decision making, less faculty engagement, challenging budgets, and frequently

conflicting academic leadership expectations also impact the work of chief academic officers. In addition, a report from CUPA-HR (Pritchard et al., 2019) also highlighted the challenges of an aging higher education workforce, and a January 2021 *Inside Higher Ed* article emphasized that burnout was causing high turnover of higher education employees before the pandemic and that this trend is likely to continue (Fried, 2021).

It is also important to note that the pandemic forced higher education to adopt new ways of teaching, completing administrative work, and engaging with students and employees. According to a 2021 PricewaterhouseCoopers report (2021), only 22% of employees want to return to the office full time, and 74% want to work remotely 2+ days per week. The same report also noted a disconnect between executives and employees regarding productivity with 65% of executives believing that productivity is tied to being in an office and employees disagreeing with this perspective. Faculty and staff are expecting that presidents, CAOs, and other campus leaders will continue some degree of flexibility moving forward while also acknowledging that the core mission of most institutions is centered around the campus experience for students, faculty, and staff. Choosing to ignore or minimize these challenges, and the context they create, as we use the outcomes and recommendations from this study to review and adjust the duties and responsibilities of CAOs could lead to more challenges recruiting and retaining talented employees, including CAOs.

CAOs who participated in this study expressed frustration that they are frequently bogged down in the day-to-day operations, and commented that the large number of responsibilities and direct reports requires that they spend their time in back-to-back meetings, creating long days with nights, evenings, and weekends needed for planning and meeting preparation. As noted by study participants, the large number of direct reports increases the likelihood that CAOs will

need to be involved in people management and disciplinary challenges of the individuals in those positions and employees in the organizations of those direct reports. Participants also noted that the large number of direct reports means that CAOs must find time to deal with turnover, organize and manage searches, and dedicate time to onboard new incumbents.

Interviewed CAOs said they would prefer to have more time to spend on their energizing and fulfilling job duties and responsibilities including leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students, developing strategy, and building and supporting people. As presidents and CAOs review the duties and responsibilities of positions, they should determine how potential changes can create more time for CAOs to focus on these more energizing parts of the role. These changes could potentially lengthen the time that CAOs stay in the position and cause fewer CAOs to consider the position as a stepping stone to the presidency and more of a longer-term career opportunity. Based on the outcomes from this study, presidents and CAOs at doctoral institutions could also review the duties and responsibilities of the CAO position to ensure greater clarity of responsibilities and adjust the organization structure to lessen the number of direct reports to the position. Recommendations for practice are organized into two sections: CAO titles and position descriptions, and CAO organization structure.

CAO Titles and Position Descriptions

The majority of CAOs in this study commented that they did not fully understand all the duties and responsibilities and potential challenges of the position when they agreed to move into the role. Indeed, for all study participants, their responsibilities extended beyond management and oversight of the academic mission of the institution and included responsibility for the work of other vice presidents including research, diversity and inclusion, student affairs, and others. Titles of 10 of the 13 interviewed included the word “Provost,” with some also incorporating

Vice President, Senior Vice President, or similar as part of the title. Before addressing the structuring and wording of the position descriptions for CAO positions, it could be beneficial for campus leaders to incorporate guidance from Atnip (2009), Martin and Samels (2015), and Buller (2015) to develop a more standard approach to the use of the word "provost" in position titles to provide internal and external clarity regarding the role of the position. As noted by Atnip (2009), duties of the CAO can differ based on many factors including size and type of institution, leadership style of the president, external challenges that require focus of the president, and institution culture. Martin and Samels (2015) also noted that at many institutions, the chief academic officer is the second-most senior position managing the day-to-day operations and making decisions on behalf of the president, and Buller (2015) noted that institutions incorrectly use the terms provost and vice president for academic affairs interchangeably. Buller (2015) defined the role of vice president of academic affairs as inward looking and focused on academic programs, faculty, and students and noted that the title provost should be used to emphasize that the position has responsibility for overall internal institution operations *and* oversight of the work of other vice presidents.

Using this guidance leads to two questions to help determine the title of the position. The first question—does the position have duties and responsibilities beyond academic affairs, including the oversight of the work of other vice presidents? If so, the word "provost" should be incorporated into the title. If responsibilities are primarily focused on academic affairs, it would provide greater clarity for CAOs, other campus leaders, and potential CAO candidates to not include the word "provost," and instead use "Vice President" or similar. The second question relates to the incumbent's position in the organization. Regardless of the delegated responsibilities, does the incumbent function as the second-in-charge for the institution, serving

as proxy for the president, or serving as the institution's chief operating officer? If so, it would provide greater clarity for CAOs, other campus leaders, and potential CAO candidates to use a title such as "Senior Vice President and Provost" or "Executive Vice President and Provost" to identify the role to external and internal constituents. It might also be helpful for presidents to consider whether or not other positions reporting directly to the president like the chief business officer, the chief external affairs officer, or the chief human resources officer have a similar "Senior Vice President" or "Executive Vice President" title. If there is no clear second-in-charge, titles for vice presidents reporting to the president should be consistent. If the provost is the clear second-in-charge with the title including "Senior Vice President," other direct reports to the president should not also have this title, instead being acknowledged with the title "Vice President."

As follow-up to this study, it might also be helpful for position titles within the Senior Vice President and Provost organization to be consistent. Using Buller's (2015) guidance, the word "provost" should only be in the title if the position has broad oversight for other vice presidents and areas beyond academic affairs. This also means that there would be more organizational clarity if academic affairs-focused positions did not include the word "provost" in the title. These positions could instead be referred to as "Vice Presidents" or "Associate Vice Presidents" unless there are significant duties and responsibilities that extend beyond academic affairs. This overall approach to position titles for the CAO position and positions within the CAO organization would provide greater clarity for institution leaders, search committees, and candidates for CAO positions.

Clarity Regarding Position Challenges, Duties, and Responsibilities

Greater clarity regarding the titling of the CAO position could be coupled with greater clarity regarding the actual duties and responsibilities of the position. The duties and responsibilities of provosts are frequently poorly defined and often not focused on the work that is most impactful and important (Bugeja, 2018). This was supported by the comments CAOs shared as part of this study. Mech (1997) also noted that the qualifications, skills, and abilities that search committees *think* are required for successful chief academic officer candidates often do not match those included in advertisements for vacant chief academic officer positions. Position descriptions and advertisements should be carefully developed to clearly outline the duties and responsibilities of the position, essential credentials, and important leadership characteristics. If the position is the second-most-senior role, this should be clearly stated. Position descriptions and advertisements should also clearly convey unique elements of the institution's mission, values, and challenges, and the desired candidate characteristics should match those needed to be successful in the role. Misleading or unclear descriptions or advertisements can create a mismatch between needed credentials and experiences and those of the candidates who apply for the position.

Lack of clarity regarding unique elements of mission and values, like a strong connection to a particular religious denomination, can lead to wasted time during the search process and potential conflict if the mission and values are not clear when the CAO is hired. In addition, if position descriptions and advertisements include descriptors typically included in CAO advertisements like "innovator," "change agent," "forward-thinking," and "transformational leader" to describe ideal CAO candidates, these must be supported by the actual expectations of the president and the faculty. The president and members of the search committee should also be

able to clearly articulate to candidates how these descriptors relate to the needed work of the position and the institution, and the support they will receive to help them be successful. Search firms often include these descriptors even though they do not reflect the culture of the institution, creating immediate frustration and potentially quick departure of the candidate chosen for the CAO role. Choosing not to clearly define duties and responsibilities, connect these to the highest priorities and greatest challenges for the institution, and ensure that search committees are evaluating candidates based on these could lead to more frequent turnover and even greater CAO frustration regarding what is expected of them in the position. In addition, the description should link to an organization structure or similar documents so that candidates can more clearly understand the areas of responsibility and the number of direct reports. A review and clearer definition of duties and responsibilities should be supported by a review of the organization structure, including the number of direct reports to the position.

CAO Organization Structure

Few organizations create a structure that requires one of the key strategic leaders of the organization to *directly* supervise the work of 20+ positions, but this is what has been created for the CAOs who participated in this study and many doctoral institution CAOs across the U.S. Organization structures for the CAOs included in this study had slight differences in titles of positions reporting to the CAO to reflect the different cultures and operations of the institutions, but there was overall very little variance with all deans and a mixture of vice provosts, associate provosts, vice presidents, associate vice presidents, and office support staff reporting directly to the CAO positions. An example of a hypothetical typical doctoral institution CAO organization structure that incorporates elements from several institutions is included in Figure 6. The Senior Vice President and Provost in this hypothetical example has 28 direct reports, including 15

deans, a chief of staff, seven vice provosts, three associate provosts, and two associate vice presidents. One structure could never fully capture the reporting relationships for every organization across the country, but this example is included to illustrate the number and types of positions that currently report to many CAOs.

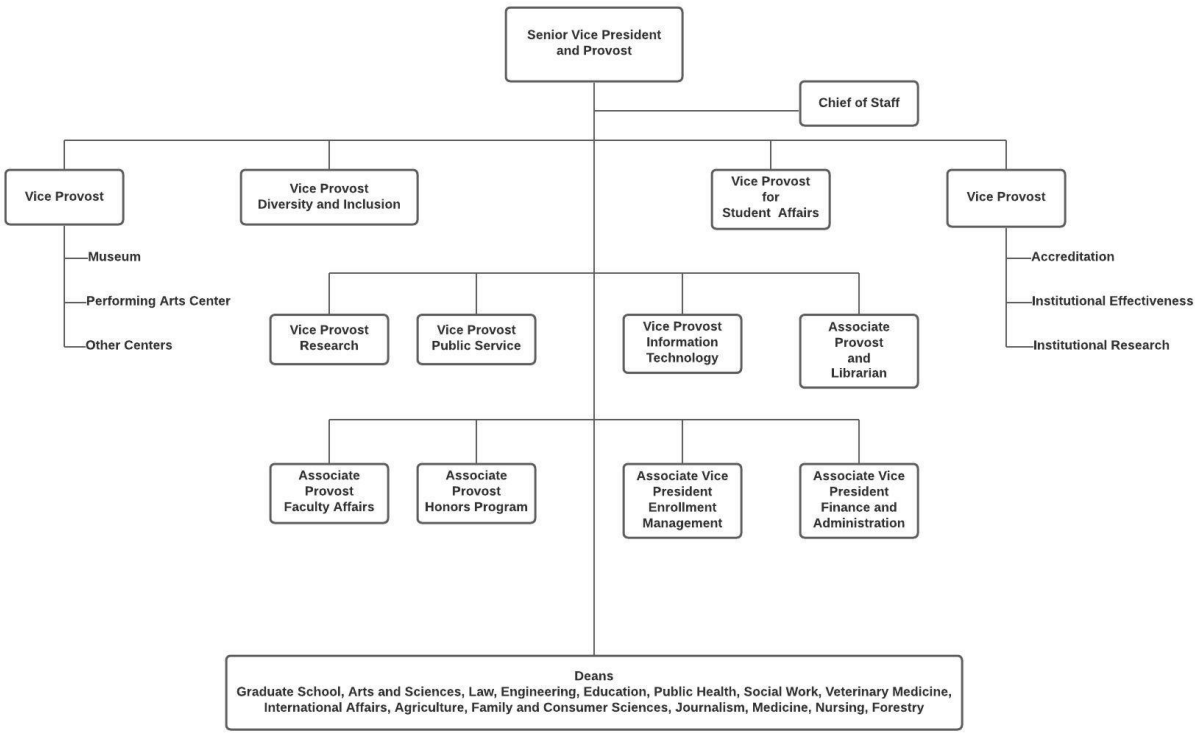

Figure 6. Current typical CAO organization structure. It is important to note that one example organization structure could never fully capture the structure needed to support the operations of every institution.

One option for presidents and CAOs to consider would be restructuring the reporting relationship of deans. A *current position* that reports to the CAO could be *converted* to a Vice President for Academic Affairs (or similar) with deans reporting to that position instead of the Senior Vice President and Provost as referenced in Figure 6. Some deans might perceive it to be more prestigious to report directly to the Senior Vice President and Provost, but is this necessary to support the academic mission and provide the guidance needed to manage their organizations?

One potential revised structure is reflected in Figure 7. Note that this structure also adopts a clearer method of titling positions reporting to the provost as outlined earlier in CAO Titling section of this chapter. The only position reporting to the Senior Vice President and Provost with the word "provost" in the title for this revised structure has responsibilities that stretch across all areas of the provost organization and are not limited to just one area (e.g., academic affairs). All other positions have vice president or associate vice president titles to indicate that their primary responsibilities are focused in one area of the organization.

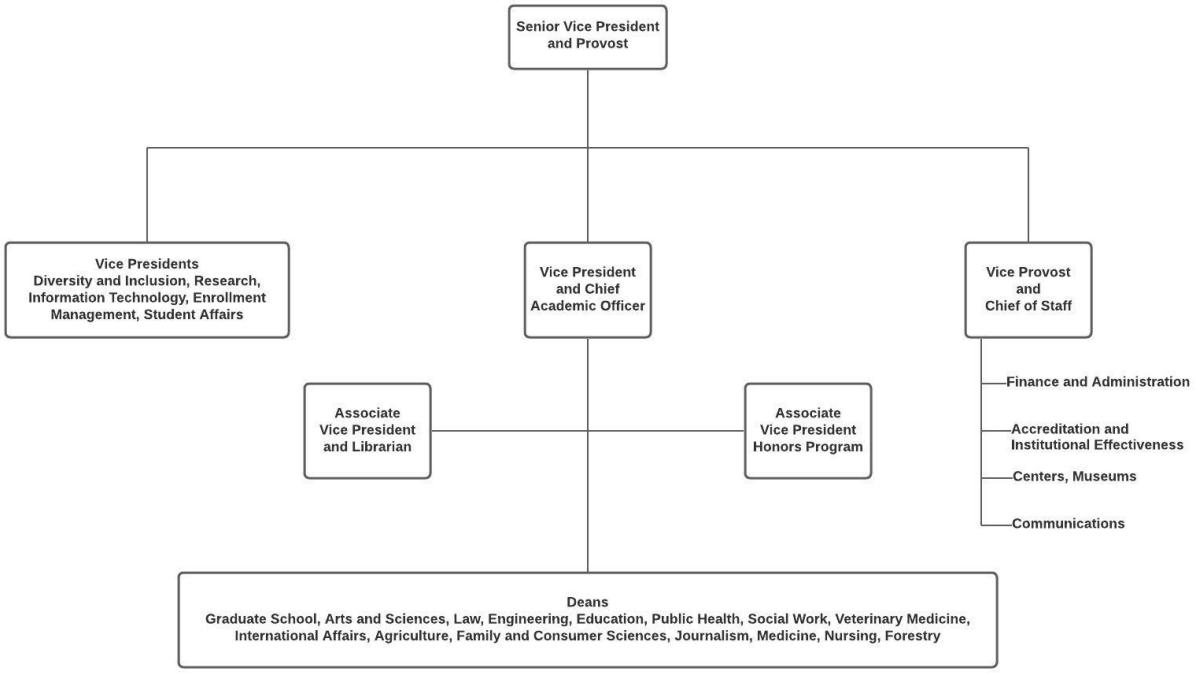

Figure 7. Revised CAO organization structure—create VP for academic affairs position. It is important to note that one proposed organization structure could never fully capture the needed structure to support the operations of every institution.

If the Senior Vice President and Provost prefers to stay more closely connected to the academic affairs responsibilities and retain the direct reporting relationship with deans, another

option to consider would be *converting a current position* to a Vice Provost with all other vice presidents reporting directly to that position (see Figure 8). Not only does this organization structure change create a more manageable organization for the Senior Vice President and Provost, but it also creates a career path for future provosts by providing the opportunity for deans and other academic leaders to be promoted into the role and lead other areas of the organization including research, student affairs, and enrollment management.

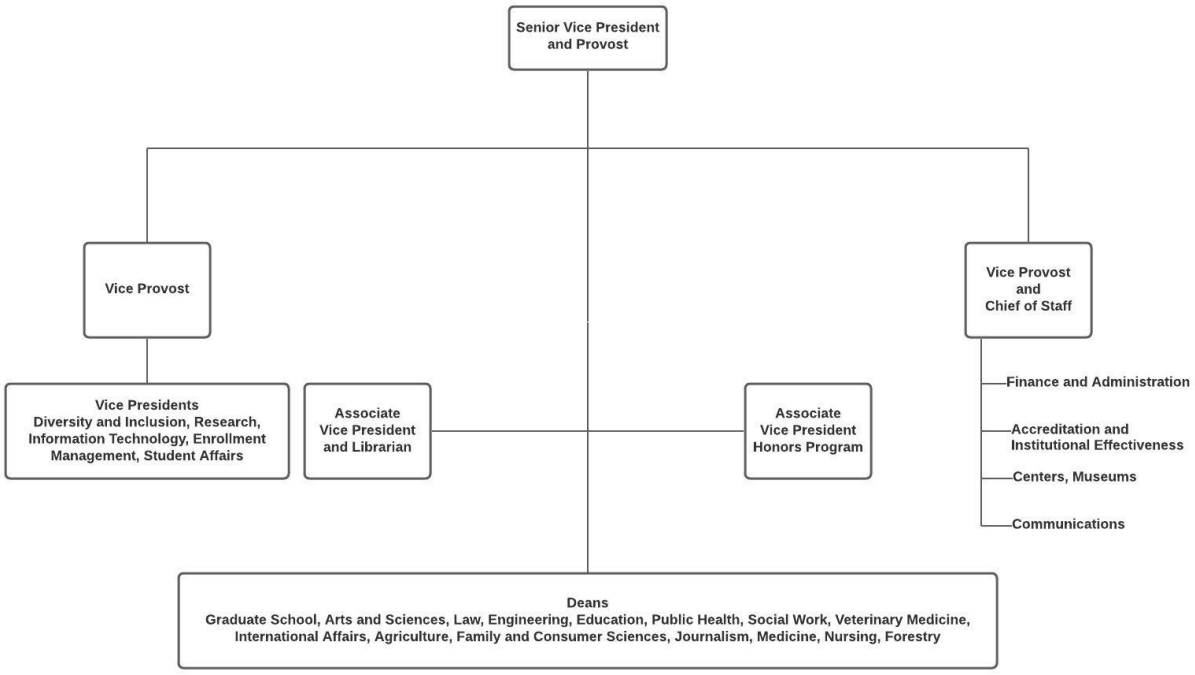

Figure 8. Revised CAO organization structure—create vice provost position. It is important to note that one proposed organization structure could never fully capture the needed structure to support the operations of every institution.

Converting a current position to Vice President for Academic Affairs or Vice Provost in these examples create a more efficient structure for the Senior Vice President and Provost, but this still leaves a challenging role for the position with management responsibility for the deans

with (in this hypothetical example) 15 deans as direct reports (see Figures 7 and 8). It might also be beneficial to review the structure of dean positions. The dean of arts and sciences role organizes many different academic disciplines under one dean. Organizing some other academic disciplines under one dean might increase collaboration across disciplines and lessen the number of deans reporting to the Vice President for Academic Affairs in Figure 7 and the Senior Vice President and Provost in Figure 8. While this change could be fraught with implementation challenges, including internal politics, it could be an important strategy to pursue to create a better-functioning, more efficient, organization structure. In May of 2021, the University of West Virginia (WVU) announced plans to merge two colleges as part of the University's academic transformation efforts (Kaull, 2021). The work of leaders at WVU could serve as one potential model for consideration. For institution leaders who believe that frequent turnover of the CAO position is inevitable, incorporating some of these changes to the duties and responsibilities and the organization structure could create fewer challenges and ensure greater continuity of organization functions when turnover occurs.

In addition to considering changes to duties and responsibilities and organization structure, there are other ways to provide guidance and support to CAOs. One study participant noted the importance and value of an external coach who has provided support since their appointment to the role. Other participants noted the importance of mentors from within and outside of their institutions who have served as resources and sounding boards. Another option for institution leaders to consider is an assessment or similar for the CAO after one year in the role. Many forms of assessment, including 360-degree review, could be used to help guide and support the development and progress of the CAO. If assessment is used, it should be clear that

the purpose is to help the CAO continue to learn and grow and that is not used to judge or evaluate performance.

There is no single strategy that will work for all institutions across the country, but incorporating some of these recommendations might help address some of the challenges outlined by CAOs who participated this study, potentially lengthening the amount of time that CAOs spend in the position and causing more current and future CAOs to aspire to serve in the role instead of viewing it as a stepping stone to the presidency. CAOs and the entire campus community have been through a lot during the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating some of these recommendations could be an important way for higher education institution leaders to acknowledge the great contributions of our CAOs and the importance we place on them as individuals who are balancing extraordinary workloads while attempting to continue their research and find time to dedicate to life, family, and interests beyond the CAO role.

Recommendations for Future Research

CAOs in this study referenced that the pandemic has made their already-challenging duties and responsibilities and work relationships even more challenging. It might be helpful to conduct this study again following the pandemic to see if study participants focus less on the challenges of the position responsibilities and more on the positive and rewarding parts of the role. No themes emerged regarding reasons that CAOs planned to stay in their positions, or strong community connections that might increase the likelihood of staying in their positions. It would also be interesting to see if themes emerge regarding reasons that CAOs choose to stay in their roles in a post-pandemic study.

Study participants were CAOs at doctoral institutions. Similar studies could be conducted with CAOs at different types of institutions (e.g., community colleges, private baccalaureate institutions) to determine if they share similar challenging and rewarding duties and responsibilities and work relationships. It would also be useful to know if CAOs at different types of institutions tend to be more embedded in the institution and community decreasing the likelihood of turnover. In addition, no differences were found by sex, race, or ethnicity in this study. I believe that I created a compelling study design and that I was able to quickly and easily establish rapport with participants, but would different themes emerge if only female CAOs were included in the study and the investigator was also female? Would different themes emerge if only CAOs of color were interviewed by an investigator of color? I acknowledge that I have served in an administrative leadership role for my entire career. Would different themes emerge if CAOs were interviewed by a member of the faculty or someone with a faculty background? Would new themes emerge if the same participants were interviewed again a year from now? The methods used for this study could be incorporated into any of these studies.

This study was guided by theories focused on turnover, but the duties and responsibilities and work relationships of chief academic officers could also be viewed through lenses guided by higher education management or leadership theory (e.g., Hearn, 1996; Toma, 2010). It could also be informative to view the work of CAOs through the lens of external stakeholders to compare and contrast their perceptions to those of CAOs.

Conclusion

"It's really a beast of a role."

"The schedule is pretty grueling, and I think there are times that came at a cost to my personal life and my health."

"I'm currently a finalist in more than one search."

These quotes underscore the key findings of this study. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers at doctoral institutions to more fully understand the reasons chief academic officers choose to leave or stay in their positions. In addition, this study explored whether particular job duties and responsibilities, work relationships, or connections to the community beyond the campus affect the likelihood that incumbents will stay in or leave their positions. Prior to this study, we knew that nationally, 47% of chief academic officers had been in their positions three years or less (Pritchard et al., 2020), but we did not know why this turnover occurred. There was also limited data regarding what job duties, work relationships, or connections to the community increased the likelihood that chief academic officers consider leaving or staying in their positions.

The 13 doctoral institution CAOs who were interviewed for this study shared information regarding energizing and rewarding job duties and work relationships, but these were not noted as reasons they planned to stay in the roles. A few study participants referenced community connections as possible reasons to stay in the position, but 10 study participants did not do so. Instead, CAOs said that the challenging duties and responsibilities and the overall stress these create will likely lead to their departure from the position. They noted that these challenges were caused by a large number of responsibilities and direct reports; back-to-back meetings, long days, and no time for planning; and people management and disciplinary challenges.

The other reason for planned or potential departures will be to move to a presidency. All but a few of the study participants said that they are currently pursing, or will likely pursue, a presidency and leave their position. In fact, one interviewee had just accepted a presidency, and two others were finalists in one or more searches. Several CAOs noted that the position was a

"stepping stone" with two noting that they needed to "check the provost box" to be viewed as a serious candidate for a president positions.

Presidents and CAOs could use the findings and recommendations for practice from this study as they work to address the causes of the most challenging and stressful CAO duties and responsibilities and review organization structures to see if there are ways to lessen the number of CAO direct reports to enable them to spend more time on their more energizing and rewarding duties and responsibilities. Adjustments to duties and responsibilities could also create more time for CAOs to build work and community relationships that benefit the institution, create a stronger connection between the CAO and the community, and increase the likelihood that these connections will entice the CAO to stay in the role longer. Presidents, search committees, and search firms could also use the outcomes of this study to help more clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the CAO position to lessen confusion and provide greater clarity for search committees and candidates regarding the most important duties and responsibilities of the position.

Chief academic officers who participated in this study described their jobs as the "toughest job on campus." I hope this study will be a guide to help campus leaders evaluate and make needed changes to clarify CAO duties and responsibilities and create more time for them to focus on the more energizing and rewarding parts of the role. I also hope that the outcomes from this study can help better prepare organizations for chief academic officer transitions to ensure that the transitions create opportunities…instead of chaos, or something in between.

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Appendix A

OUTREACH TO CUPA-HR LEADERS

(Sent via email) Good morning (or afternoon) (insert CUPA-HR leader name). I hope all is well. I am sending a note to request your help in connecting with your provost.

According to our CUPA-HR 2020 *Administrators in Higher Education Survey report,* 47% of U.S. higher education chief academic officers (CAOs) have been in their current roles for three years or less, but we do not know the causes of these transitions or the likelihood that this trend will continue. **To augment CUPA-HR's research work, I will be meeting one-on-one for one hour with 12-15 provosts from doctoral institutions during the next 3-4 weeks to try to more fully understand the reasons that CAOs choose to leave or stay in their positions. My hope that your provost will confidentially agree to be part of this small group.**

We plan to share the summary outcomes with HR leaders, presidents, and provosts to help them work more diligently to address the frustrations that could lead CAOs to leave their positions. The outcomes could also help us understand what increases the likelihood that a CAO will remain in the role for a longer period of time. I think you are aware that I am working on my doctorate from the Institute of Higher Education at University of Georgia. I will also be incorporating this study into my dissertation.

Provost is undoubtedly one of the most difficult and challenging roles on campus, but the majority of recent higher education executive research has been focused on our presidents. This work will provide much-needed information, and hopefully calls to action for our higher education community.

Would you be willing to reach out to (insert provost name here) to see if they would be willing to spend an hour with me via Zoom? I will then follow-up with them or their assistant via email to share the recruitment and consent letters and schedule a date and time for the Zoom meeting.

Thanks so much for your help and support. I really appreciate it. I am pleased that we can do this work to support our provosts across the country.

Andy Brantley

President and CEO, CUPA-HR

Appendix B

OUTREACH TO CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS

(Sent via email) Dear _____:

I really appreciate that (insert name of CUPA-HR national or regional board member) reached out to you regarding this study and that you are potentially interested in helping me. According to CUPA-HR's 2020 *Administrators in Higher Education Survey report,* forty-seven percent of U.S. higher education chief academic officers (CAOs) have been in their current roles for three years or less, but we do not know the causes of these transitions or the likelihood that this trend will continue. To augment CUPA-HR's survey work, I am exploring the reasons that CAOs choose to leave or stay in their positions as part of my dissertation as a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Karen Webber, Professor in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers at Doctoral Universities to more fully understand the reasons chief academic officers choose to leave or stay in their positions. My hope is that you will be willing to spend an hour with me via Zoom during the next several weeks to confidentially share your perspectives. Following the discussion, I will send you the transcript to give you the opportunity to incorporate any edits. I will also send you my initial findings so you will be able to provide additional feedback if you would like to do so.

You will be asked to share your personal opinions, and you will not be asked to respond on behalf of your institution or any other organization, so there are no foreseeable risks to participation. The findings from this study could help campus leaders restructure CAO responsibilities and priorities and work more diligently to address the frustrations that could lead CAOs to leave their positions. The findings could also help leaders more fully understand the connections to the organization and community that increase the likelihood that a CAO will remain in the role for a longer period of time.

Your work is shaping our world during these very challenging times. Thanks so much for all you do every single day. If you would like additional information about this study, please feel free to call me at (865) 567-7673 or abrantley@cupahr.org. You can also contact Dr. Webber at (706) 542-6831 or kwebber@uga.edu.

To proceed, I would like to schedule a date and time for our one-hour conversation via Zoom. Can you please reply to this email to let me know who I should work with to find a date and time that works for your calendar during the next few weeks? Thanks again for your help and support.

Sincerely,
Andy Brantley
President and CEO, CUPA-HR

Appendix C

CONSENT LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT LETTER

(sent as attachment to CAO Outreach Email in Appendix B)

Chief Academic Officer Transition: Opportunity, Chaos, or Something In Between?

Dear Participant,

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study that explores the reasons that chief academic officers choose to leave or stay in their positions. I am conducting this research as a student in the Executive Doctorate of Higher Education Management program in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Dr. Karen Webber is my major professor, and she will be supervising my work. The information in this letter will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. During the interview, you may also skip questions you do not wish to answer. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Karen Webber
Institute of Higher Education
(706)542-6831, kwebber@uga.edu

Co-Principal Investigator: Andy Brantley
Institute of Higher Education
(865) 567-7673, abrantley@cupahr.org

The purpose of this research study is to gather data from a select group of chief academic officers to more fully understand the reasons chief academic officers choose to leave or stay in their positions. The overarching question guiding this study asks: Why do postsecondary chief academic officers choose to stay in or leave their positions? Specific research questions are:

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe interpersonal relationships with work colleagues as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe community connections beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving?

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?
- For Chief Academic Officers referencing past or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

Study Procedures and Time Commitment

We are seeking your consent to participate in one 60-minute, audio-recorded one-on-one interview via Zoom. The interview will be scheduled at your preferred time and day.

Risks

Risks of participation are minimal. Because this research will involve the transmission of data over the Internet, every reasonable effort will be taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Benefits

Although direct benefits resulting from your participation are unlikely, your participation will help us to advise campus leaders regarding the reasons that chief academic officers leave or stay in their positions. Findings from this study can help campus leaders restructure CAO responsibilities and priorities and work more diligently to address the frustrations that could lead to turnover. The findings could also help leaders more fully understand the connections to the organization and community that increase the likelihood that a CAO will remain in the role for a longer period of time.

Confidentiality of records

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will not use your real name but will assign you and the institution at which you work pseudonyms at the point of transcription of the interview. The original digital audio recording of the interview will be deleted upon transcription of the interview. Information from this research will be used for purposes of this research only and will not be used in future studies or shared with other researchers outside of this specific project. The researchers will send you a summary of the interview for member checking of factual consistency via email. The research records connecting your name and institution to the pseudonyms will be destroyed within one month of the completion of the dissertation study.

Departments at the University of Georgia are responsible for regulatory and research oversight and may access the records. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Participant rights

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Agreement to participate

If you agree to participate in this research study, please reply to this email to let us know that you have read the consent letter and are willing to proceed.

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Andy Brantley

Appendix D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Chief Academic Officer Interview Protocol

Research Questions

The overarching question guiding this study asked: Why do Chief Academic Officers choose to voluntarily stay in or leave their positions? Specific research questions are:

- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe the duties and responsibilities of the position as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe work relationships as motivation for staying or leaving?
- How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers describe connections or engagement in the community beyond the campus as motivation for staying or leaving? How and to what extent do Chief Academic Officers identify other reasons not listed above as motivation for staying or leaving?
- For Chief Academic Officers referencing past or planned departures, to what extent are these due to personal reasons, work-related mistrust, conflict, opportunity lost, missing rewards, or another opportunity?

Information about the interview

Before the Start of the Interview

- Note the Interview Date and Time:
- List the Name, Title, Institution of Interviewee:
- If the interviewees has not already returned the informed consent form, send a follow-up email prior to the start of the interview to ask that this be signed and returned today.

Introduction

Introduce Myself and Thank Participants

Share Format for the Discussion and Confirm Participant Understanding

Background

Can you tell me a little bit about your career path and how you came to be in the role of CAO at this particular institution?

How long have you been at this particular institution?
Where were you prior to this institution?
How long have you been in your current position?
Which position did you hold prior to this?

Experiences in Role of CAO

Let's start by talking about why you chose to serve as a chief academic officer. Can you talk to me about why you chose to become a CAO?

What was it about the position that appealed most to you?
Was there anything that did not appeal?

Can you describe your role as CAO?

What does this role entail?
What does a "typical" workday look like for you?
Tell me about the people with whom you spend the most time.

Can you talk to me about what your experiences have been like thus far in the role of CAO?

Is the job what you expected?
Has it changed at all over time?

What would you say are the most engaging and rewarding parts of the position?

In contrast, what are the most challenging or frustrating parts of the role?

Tell me about the community. What are some of the things you enjoy doing outside of work?

Aspirations/Career Goals

What are your career aspirations moving forward?

[If interviewees mention that they are planning to leave, follow-up with these questions.]
What won't you miss? What things will you miss the most? Was there a specific event contributed to your decision?
[If interviewees mention that they are planning to stay, follow-up with these questions.]
What things do you most look forward to? What things to you least look forward to?

Closing

Is there anything else you would like to discuss relative to your experiences in this position?

Thanks so much for helping me with this study! Your work is critically important to the life and success of higher education and the students we serve. The information you provided will be very helpful as I explore and highlight the reasons chief academic officers stay in or leave their positions. If I have specific questions regarding your responses, I hope you will be willing to correspond via email or plan a very quick follow-up call. I am in the initial data collection process, but I will share the transcript of our discussion with you so that you have the opportunity to correct or edit anything you shared. I will also share my initial findings with you

before the end of June and hope you will be willing to provide feedback to me if I have misstated or overlooked anything. If you would like to receive a copy of the final dissertation, please let me know. I will defend it this fall and will be able to share the final version of it with you during early spring 2022.

Appendix E

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Chief Academic Officer Observation Protocol for Interviews

Information about the interview

- Note the Interview Date and Time:
- List the Names, Titles, Institutions of Interviewees:
- If there are interviewees who have not already returned the informed consent form, please send a follow-up email prior to the start of the interview to ask that this be signed and returned today.

Descriptive Notes

I will use this space to take notes during the dialog. Even though I am recording the interviews, this will help me capture the comments and provide a backup if I have challenges with the recording.

Reflexive Notes

In this space, I will note any personal thoughts or impressions to help heighten my awareness of my biases and note anything beyond what is actually stated by the interview participants.

Appendix F

TRANSCRIPT CODING SYSTEM

Category	Number of Codes	Number of Participants
Total	986	13
Job Duties—Negative	270	13
Toughest job on campus	**50**	**12**
Things missed from dean and faculty roles	18	8
Budget challenges	23	9
People management and disciplinary challenges	**57**	**12**
Large number of responsibilities, direct reports, and frequent difficult decisions	**63**	**11**
Back-to-back meetings, long days, and no time for planning	**59**	**11**
Job Duties—Positive	165	13
Personal gratification (I am good at this)	25	10
Leading and contributing to the success of the institution and students	**48**	**13**
Developing strategy	**49**	**10**
Building and supporting people	**43**	**12**
Work Relationships—Negative	83	12
Provost office staff	2	1
Mistrust of coworkers	7	4
Communications challenges	8	3
Walking the tightrope	**59**	**10**
President	7	3
Work Relationships—Neutral	52	11
Students	1	1
Provost office staff	13	9
Board of Trustees	4	3
Deans	9	7
Faculty	2	1
President and vice presidents	23	8
Work Relationships—Positive	125	13
Mentors	5	3
Deans	5	4
Board of Trustees	2	2
Students	1	1
Faculty	18	7
Provost office staff	**23**	**10**
Overall positive campus relationships	27	8
President and vice presidents	**44**	**11**
Community Connections—Negative	1	1
Community Connections—Positive	64	12
Affinity for institution/area/community	31	7
Outdoors/recreation	17	8
Hobbies	8	5
Family	8	3

Category	Number of Codes	Number of Participants
Reasons for potential or planned departures	150	13
Another opportunity	**57**	**13**
Multiple paths	11	6
Back to faculty	6	4
Job outside of higher education	5	4
Presidency	**35**	**10**
Missed rewards	0	0
Opportunity lost	9	5
Conflict	10	6
Work-related mistrust	9	3
Personal reasons	22	8
Job duties/stress of position	**43**	**11**
Reasons for staying	16	8

Note. Maximum number of participant CAOs=13. Bolded codes represent themes that emerged.