Predictors of Professional Identity Development for Student Affairs Professionals

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This study examined whether professional involvement, supervision style, and mentoring predicted the professional identity of graduate students and new professionals in student affairs. Results of the study show that all three independent variables predicted the professional identity development of graduate students. Supervision style of a supervisor, but not mentoring or professional involvement, significantly predicted the professional identity development of new professionals. Implications and recommendations for future research and student affairs practice are provided.

During the 20th century, college student life evolved into much more than learning inside the classroom. The concepts of educating the whole student and connecting academics to extracurricular activities provide the basis for the student personnel movement. By the 1960s, college student personnel had become a professional field (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). Subsequent movements within the profession shifted emphasis from student conduct to learning and development. Given the recent historical emergence and shifting focus of the profession, student affairs professionals need to have a clear understanding of and a deep commitment to their professional work.

Research on professional identity development within higher education has mostly focused on theories, pedagogies, and learning strategies (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2011). A gap in the literature exists regarding the impact of education, workplace learning, and mentoring on professional identity (Trede et al., 2011). Studying the relationships among these processes is important to help professional associations best meet the needs of newer members (Crim, 2006), to address attrition from the profession (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006), and to help graduate programs meet their students’ needs (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). This study examines the degree to which having a graduate degree in student affairs or a related field, role of mentors, the level of professional involvement, and the supervision style of supervisors are related to the professional identity development of graduate students and new professionals in student affairs.
Congruence between an individual’s professional identity and chosen career is important for job satisfaction and effectiveness (Holland, 1985). A professional identity consists of the relatively stable and ingrained self-concept of beliefs, values, attributes, and experiences through which people define themselves in a professional role. Professional identity forms through experiences and meaningful feedback that allows people to develop insight about their core preferences and values (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). Socialization is the process of entering a profession and beginning the formation of a professional identity. Socialization processes can include academic training in graduate programs, guidance from mentors, on-the-job training from a supervisor, and membership in a professional association (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Clark, 2006; Arminio, 2011).

In the student affairs profession, graduate programs assist in developing students’ professional identity (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Having a mentor can help graduate students and new professionals grow personally and professionally (Cooper & Miller, 1998; Tull, 2009). Participating in synergistic supervision with a supervisor, a style of supervision focused on personal and professional growth with a holistic purpose, may help graduate assistants or new professionals gain information specific to a particular work setting (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003; Winston & Creamer, 1998). Involvement in professional associations also allows new student affairs professionals to enhance their skills, develop relationships, and grow professionally (Chernow, Cooper, & Winston, 2003; Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

Review of Literature

Having a professional identity requires being a member of an established profession. Arminio (2011) noted professions have a systematic theory and knowledge base. In student affairs, this knowledge base is student development theory, campus ecology, student population research, and professional socialization. Although some (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994) would argue student development theory is not a foundation but merely a passing movement within the profession, Reason and Broido argued that student development influences, “...what we do, and who we are as professionals” (2011, p. 91). A profession also contains work that is relevant to the values of society, such as valuing education and educating the whole person (Arminio, 2011). Professions require a significant amount of specialized training that involves manipulation of ideas and symbols. Standards for student affairs are written by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), while certain graduate programs should meet competencies outlined by key professional associations (ACPA & NASPA 2010; Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014). Professions offer community, common identity, common density, agreed-upon language, and a system of socialization (Arminio, 2011). While the student affairs profession may have some, if not all, of these qualities, Arminio (2011) suggested new professionals should develop professional identities during socialization processes and enact them in consistent ways.

New professionals comprise up to 20% of the entire student affairs workforce; further, it is estimated that within their first five years, 50–60% of these new professionals leave the field (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). One reason for such attrition is lack of job satisfaction (Tull, 2009). Approaches to retaining new student affairs professionals focus on exemplar graduate programs (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), mentor relationships (Cooper & Miller, 1998; Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009; Tull, 2009), effective supervision practices (Shupp & Arminio; 2012; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003; Tull, 2006), and involvement in professional associations (Chernow et al., 2003; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Janosik, 2009). All of these processes, considered elements of socialization, take place early in an individual’s career (Adams et al., 2006; Arminio, 2011).
Graduate Preparation Programs

Entering a graduate program can be seen as the beginning of professional identity development (Carpenter & Miller, 1981; Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2008). Professional socialization begins when a student enters a master’s level graduate program and begins to “learn the jargon, read the literature, internalize the values, and prepare to enter the job market” (Wood, Winston, & Polkoscnik, 1985, p. 532). Course teachings in graduate programs cover the profession’s philosophy, values, and norms via a community-based process that includes peer group collaborations, in-class discussions, and interaction with faculty members and advisors (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009).

Liddell and colleagues (2014) studied the effects of graduate programs on professional identity development. They studied the qualities of, standards incorporated in, and enrichment activities offered in student affairs and higher education (SA/HE) graduate programs and whether graduates from those programs differed in their professional identity from graduates of programs without those characteristics. Graduates from programs that included theory-based curricula and high expectations for ethical behavior, encouraged a collaborative peer culture, met professional standards (i.e., CAS Standards and ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies), and offered academic enrichment activities held values that were more congruent with the field’s and were able to cultivate a personal commitment to their work (Liddell et al., 2014).

Role of Mentors

Mentoring includes support, challenge, knowledge and skill development, career development, advising, role modeling, and leadership (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009; Tull, 2009). Professional identity development is dependent upon the existence of mentors to help new professionals establish their appropriate identity (Adams et al., 2006). Mentors may exert influence on the cognitive and behavioral stages of professional socialization, allowing for the development of professional identity. While mentor relationships can form haphazardly or intentionally, the relationships must be authentic and goal oriented, while maintaining a personal and professional balance (Tull, 2009).

Mentors can provide a social support system to those experiencing role conflicts to help prevent attrition from the profession (Tull, 2009). In student affairs, mentors often influence an individual to become involved in a professional association, which could provide another means of social support and influence graduate students’ professional development (Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

Involvement in Professional Associations

Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement is useful for explaining involvement in a behavioral manner. Astin defines involvement as the investment of physical and psychological energy in an object (1984). Involvement is important when discussing professional associations because a distinction is drawn between being a member of an association and being actively involved. A highly involved member may attend educational workshops/sessions, serve on committees, present material at conferences, and vote in elections.

Graduate students in Carpenter and Miller’s (1981) formative stage of professional development tend to join associations to network with other professionals and obtain entry-level positions (Chernow et al., 2003). Graduate students benefit from staying in touch with classmates from their respective universities, creating a peer-network of students at different institutions, and meeting seasoned professionals (Janosik, 2009). Graduate student involvement in professional associations can be seen on a continuum of observing through attendance and then increased participation once
their understanding of the association norms increases. As higher involvement occurs, graduate students find their professional homes, seek out cultures that reflect their own values, gain connections, and understand career expectations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

**Supervision Style**

The most common reasons new professionals leave the field, according theoretical and empirical evidence from Tull (2006), are role ambiguity, role conflict, stress, and burnout. Supervision that effectively socializes the new professional to the complex roles played in the profession can support new professionals in overcoming these challenges (Tull, 2006, 2009). A particularly effective style for those who work with new professionals is synergistic supervision, which focuses on personal and professional growth (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003), holistic performance, long-term goals, and appraisals (Tull, 2006; Winston & Creamer, 1998). Synergistic supervision is necessary to help new professionals adapt to a new culture and learn the profession of student affairs (Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Participating in synergistic supervision positively correlates with increased job satisfaction and decrease attrition from the profession (Tull, 2006).

In order for synergy to occur, supervisors should establish a supportive environment characterized by giving positive feedback, highlighting early successes, and modeling effective supervision behavior. Working in a collaborative environment that facilitates learning and teaching can lead to self-awareness, assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and increased motivation (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). Through participation in synergistic supervision with their supervisor, graduate assistants or new professionals gain important information about the institution, roles, expectations, norms, and culture, with hopes of lowering ambiguity, stress, and intent to turnover. The more an individual identifies with their professional culture and roles, the more likely they are to have a well-defined professional identity (Adams et al., 2006).

**The Present Study**

Few studies have examined the professional identity of student affairs professionals (Crim, 2006; Cutler, 2003), particularly regarding how various factors predict professional identity. A number of variables have been shown to influence professional identity on a singular level, but past studies only focused on one construct in relation to professional identity (Crim, 2006; Cutler, 2003; Liddell et al., 2014). Professionals who enter student affairs having earned a master’s degree in SA/HE tend to have a stronger sense of professional identity than those who enter via less typical paths. They also have a better sense of what their role will be in a professional position, largely as a result of the training received during graduate school, and typically acquire a mentor earlier in their career (Crim, 2006).

Past research (Crim, 2006; Cutler, 2003; Liddell et al., 2014) highlights the important aspects of the socialization process (i.e., graduate preparation, mentor relationships, supervision style, and professional involvement) in forming a professional identity. The degree to which each of these constructs contributes to professional identity in a combined fashion is unknown. The purpose of this study is to examine each of these factors and their relationship to the professional identity of student affairs professionals to determine whether there is overlap in the predictive effects of these constructs or whether they contribute unique elements to the formation of professional identity. We examined three research questions in this study:

1. Do certain factors (i.e., role of mentors, supervision style received, and professional involvement) influence the professional identity development of student affairs professionals?
2. To what extent do certain factors influence the professional identity development of student affairs professionals?

3. Do certain factors of professional identity development differ between graduate students and new professionals?

**Methodology**

**Design**

This study identified the degree to which several variables predicted the professional identity development of student affairs professionals using a standard multiple linear regression model. Because three predictor variables (i.e., role of mentors, supervision style, and professional involvement) were investigated in this study, a multivariate statistical procedure was used to determine how much of the variance found in the dependent variable could be attributed to each of the three predictor variables (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). A multiple regression was used to answer Research Questions 1 and 2. Two separate regressions, one for graduate students and one for new professionals, were used to answer Research Question 3.

**Participants**

An email was distributed to the CSP-TALK listserv of faculty who teach in student affairs graduate programs, asking that they forward an electronic link for the survey to their graduate students and alumni. This procedure yielded a large number of visitors to the website containing the survey ($N=897$). Participants were given a statement of informed consent; those who agreed to participate were directed to the question statements of the survey. Respondents were allowed an unlimited amount of time to complete the survey. Of the 897 who clicked on the link to open the survey, 557 (62%) provided responses to the questions; feedback from many who failed to respond indicated that they did not meet survey criteria.

Of the 557 surveys completed, 15 were excluded because the respondents failed to answer enough questions in order to run the regression analysis. Of the 542 participants who completed usable surveys, 81% identified as Caucasian, 8% as African American/Black, 4% as Hispanic/Latino, 4% as Asian Pacific Islander, 2% did not provide their race, and 1% identified as Native American or Alaskan Native. Seventy-five percent of participants identified as female, 25% as male, and less than 1% identified transgender. The sample was characteristic of entry-level professionals (Liddell et al., 2014).

**Materials**

The online survey consisted of five questionnaires. The first construct measured was the dependent variable, professional identity. Following the dependent variable, questionnaires measuring demographic information, role of mentors, supervision style received, and professional involvement were presented. Information regarding the questionnaires are outlined below.

**Professional Identity Scale.** The professional identity scale, created by Brown, Condor, Matthews, Wade, and Williams (1986), and adapted by Adams and colleagues (2006), was selected to measure the dependent variable, professional identity. Adams and colleagues conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the pool of items to assess whether they formed a unidimensional scale. A nine-item, single factor solution was produced with an internal reliability of 0.70 (Chronbach’s alpha). The alpha in the present study produced a reliability of 0.867 with an overall $M = 38.39$ and a $SD = 5.039$. 
Demographic Questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire was included asking participants to identify their gender identity, race, whether they had attended a graduate program in SA/HE, and their professional/functional area of employment.

Mentor Role Instrument (MRI). The Mentor Role Instrument (MRI) was developed by Ragins and McFarlin (1990) in order to measure mentor roles of career and psychological development functions. The original 33-item instrument was developed via confirmatory factor analysis to independently measure 11 different mentor roles. The coefficient alphas for the 11 mentor roles ranged from 0.63 to 0.91 (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The alpha for the MRI in the present study returned an internal reliability of 0.960, with an overall \( M = 170.66 \) and \( SD = 34.19 \).

Synergistic Supervision Scale (SSS). The Synergistic Supervision Scale (SSS) is a 22-item scale, developed by Saunders, Cooper, Winston, and Chernow (2000). For this scale, participants rated the frequency of described behaviors based on perceptions of their supervisory relationship (Tull, 2006). The authors reported a Chronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.94, and a range of correlations from 0.44 to 0.75 was found for the item totals (Tull, 2006). To test the validity of the SSS, scores were correlated to scores on the Index of Organizational Reaction (IOR) and the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ, Tull, 2006). The correlation between the IOR and SSS was 0.91; the OCQ and SSS correlated at 0.64. The alpha for the SSS in the present study returned an internal reliability of 0.94, with an overall \( M = 82.88 \) and a \( SD = 16.07 \).

Professional Involvement Questionnaire. The level of involvement in professional associations was measured with a self-reported questionnaire adapted from Chernow et al. (2003). Participants were asked to list up to five names of the national, regional, or state professional associations in which they were members. No participant listed five organizations, and only two participants listed four. Participants were then asked to select the programs, services, or benefits they took part in for each association in the past year and the three prior years. The Chronbach’s alpha for this measure returned an internal reliability of 0.860, with an overall \( M = 44.57 \) and a \( SD = 22.73 \).

Limitations
This study has many limitations that should be taken into consideration. The reliance on self-reporting of data in an uncontrolled environment is an important facet to consider. Because surveys were distributed online, there was no way for participants to complete the questionnaires in a controlled environment, which could have allowed for environmental influences to occur during data collection or resulted in misleading or false information. When studying identity development, however, self-reported data is crucial in order to learn the participants’ experiences, while conducting the research in an ethical manner.

Another limitation pertains to the number of six questionnaires within the survey. Many participants \(( n = 346/897)\) chose not to complete the survey resulting in a higher mortality rate than was expected. We believe that much of this was due to individuals accessing the survey and then finding out that they did not meet the study criteria, although participants also could have opted out due to the survey’s overall length. Many participants chose to omit certain questionnaires or individual questions. For example, 135 participants chose not to complete the MRI (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). This may have been due to participants not being able to clarify choices or identify with questions that were asked. If information from one variable (e.g., MRI) was insufficient, that data was not used in the final analysis because we wanted to understand the relationship between all predictor variables and professional identity. Despite participant mortality, sufficient responses were collected to show the statistical power to detect differences between the populations being studied.
The final limitation of this study lies within the effect sizes from the multiple regressions. Effects sizes were calculated to quantify the size of the difference between the two groups being studied. Cohen (1988) outlined parameters for what consists of a small, medium, and large effect size. A medium effect size was calculated from the entire population, noting that there were some statistically and practically significant results regarding the professional identity development of student affairs professionals. In the new professional population, however, the small effect size indicates a fairly minor relationship between the variables, leaving room for other potential variables that relate to professional identity. While a small effect size shows us that a relationship exists, a medium effect size would indicate the relationship is worth serious consideration.

**Results**

Of the total participants, 38.4% \( (n = 211) \) indicated that they had earned a master’s degree in SA/HE, while 61.6% \( (n = 339) \) had not and were current graduate students. Graduate students were defined as those who were currently enrolled in a SA/HE graduate program. If participants were enrolled in or had graduated from a master’s program other than SA/HE, their data was not used in the analysis.

Respondents who reported graduating from a SA/HE graduate program and had worked no more than five years were defined as new professionals (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Of the new professionals, 68.1% \( (n = 98) \) earned their master’s degrees in student affairs and 31.9% \( (n = 46) \) earned their master’s degrees in higher education. Not including graduate assistantships, 37.5% \( (n = 54) \) had worked one year or less, 28.5% \( (n = 41) \) worked two years, 10.4% \( (n = 15) \) worked three years, 14.6% \( (n = 21) \) worked four years, and 9.0% \( (n = 13) \) had worked five years in a full-time position. Professionals who had worked more than five years in the field were omitted.

**Primary Analyses of Research Questions 1 and 2**

To answer Research Questions 1 and 2, a regression was computed using professional identity development of student affairs professionals as the dependent variable. In regression equations, there is a possibility that variables could be intercorrelated (George & Mallery, 2006); therefore, the three-predictor variables were evaluated for collinearity using the full instruments from the questionnaire. Role of mentors and supervision style were correlated to a slight degree \( (r = 0.230, p < 0.01) \). George and Mallery (2006) suggested correlations greater than \( r = 0.5 \) would indicate excessive dependency. Each independent variable separately influenced professional identity in this study (George & Mallery, 2006). The result of correlational analyses also revealed that the role of mentors \( (r = 0.290) \), supervision style received \( (r = 0.297) \), and professional involvement within the past year \( (r = 0.189) \) all showed a significant positive correlation with the professional identity of student affairs professionals \( (n = 382, p < 0.01) \). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s \( f^2 = 0.216 \) showing there was a medium effect of these predictors (Cohen, 1988). Using data from both graduate students and new professionals, all three independent variables emerged as significant predictors of professional identity development in a regression equation, \( F(3, 381) = 27.352, p < 0.01 \) (Table 1). The three predictor variables together significantly predicted the professional identity of all participants with an \( R^2 = 0.17, F(3, 381) = 27.352, p < 0.01 \). Partial correlations revealed that professional involvement \( (sr = 0.196) \) showed the lowest predictive power. Role of mentors \( (sr = 0.213) \) followed by supervision style received \( (sr = 0.253) \) showed the highest predictive power on professional identity.
Primary Analysis of Research Question 3

Two separate regressions, one predicting the professional identity of graduate students and one predicting the professional identity of new professionals, revealed that supervision style received, role of mentors, and professional involvement over the past year significantly predicted the development of a professional identity as a student affairs professional.

In order to answer Research Question 3, the regression for the graduate student sample is examined first. The total number of graduate students in this sample was $N = 248$. The three predictor variables together significantly predicted the professional identity of graduate students with an $R^2 = 0.21$, $F(3, 247) = 21.570$, $p < 0.01$. Effect sizes were calculated using a Cohen’s $f^2 = 0.266$ showing a medium effect (Cohen, 1988). Table 2 summarizes the regression analysis for variables predicting professional identity of graduate students. Partial correlations reveal that professional involvement ($r = 0.212$) showed the lowest predictive power. Role of...
mentors (sr = 0.227) followed by supervision style received (sr = 0.281) showed the highest predictor power on professional identity of graduate students.

New professionals were defined as having earned a master’s degree in SA/HE and having less than five years of full time experience. The total number of new student affairs professionals was N = 92. Again, the three predictor variables (role of mentors, supervision style received, and professional involvement) together significantly predicted the professional identity of new student affairs professionals with an $R^2 = 0.13$, $F(3, 91) = 4.668$, $p < 0.01$. Effect sizes were calculated using a Cohen’s $f^2 = 0.159$ showing a small effect (Cohen, 1988). Although these results are statistically significant, other variables likely affect the prediction of professional identity for new student affairs professionals. Partial correlations reveal the role of mentors (sr = 0.048) and professional involvement (sr = 0.095) were not statistically significant. Supervision style (sr = 0.288) showed the highest, and only, statistically significant predictive power on professional identity of new professionals (Table 3). The major difference between graduate students and new professionals lies in the predictive power of mentoring and professional involvement. For graduate students, all three independent variables were significant predictors. For new professionals, only synergistic supervision significantly predicted professional identity.

### Discussion

Of the three independent variables examined in this study, supervision style was the most influential variable predicting professional identity. This is most likely due to the frequency of contact that graduate students and new professionals have with their supervisors. Most graduate students and new professionals probably interact with their supervisors on a regular, if not daily, basis. Another reason supervision ranked first could be how synergistic supervision is embraced in student affairs. Student affairs professionals value a developmental approach to working with students. For many, including supervisors, this can extend to staff members. Part of this approach with new professionals includes a concern for developing staff members into competent professionals with a strong professional identity (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003).

Mentoring was the second strongest predictor in this study and scored as the middle variable for all three regressions. We anticipated that mentor relationships would have a stronger influence

### Table 3

**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Professional Identity of New Student Affairs Professionals (N = 92)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role of Mentors</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.483</td>
<td>0.630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision Style Received</td>
<td>0.091**</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.329</td>
<td>2.913</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Involvement***</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td>0.340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R$</td>
<td>0.371*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.137</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>4.668**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Predictors: Professional Involvement over three years, Supervision Style, and Role of Mentors

**p < 0.01

***Professional Involvement was measured over three years
than the results indicated. It is important to note that not every participant answered the MRI distributed as part of the survey (n = 135). Some noted they skipped the scale because they could not identify a mentor, among other possible reasons. The majority of the participants in this study were graduate students (n = 248) and most SA/HE graduate programs last two years. If the participants were in their first year of graduate school, they may not have had an opportunity to establish a relationship with a mentor. Many graduate students who did have a mentor in the field may have established that relationship through a formal process, which may produce less effective relationships than those that develop organically (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Professional involvement was the lowest predictor variable for the participants in this study. The professional involvement questionnaire (Chernow et al., 2003) consisted of a list of predefined activities and participants were asked to record how many times they did a certain activity. The majority of participants were only involved in one or two professional organizations, and much of that involvement was limited to paying dues, receiving emails, and reading the association’s journal.

With regards to Research Questions 1 and 2, the results of this study add to the current understanding of professional identity in several ways. This is the first empirical study to bring together the three identified predictors that have been shown to independently influence professional identity development. Knowing that synergistic supervision is most influential in developing professional identity can help practitioners target such efforts. Doing so can help supervisees to develop a strong professional identity, adapt to new cultures, and increase motivation (Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003).

Research Question 3 was posed to determine if differences exist between what predicts the formation of professional identity in graduate students and new student affairs professionals. The three predictor variables (role of mentors, supervision style received, and professional involvement) together significantly predicted the professional identity of graduate students. Examination of partial correlations revealed that the analysis for graduate students was the same as for the total sample, with supervision, mentoring, and professional involvement having strength of prediction, in that order.

While ranked lowest of all three predictor variables, it is important to remember professional involvement was a significant predictor in the overall model and the graduate student model, demonstrating unique influence on professional identity development. Graduate students benefit from professional involvement by gaining leadership skills, job satisfaction, and knowledge (Janosik, 2009; Tull, 2006). Graduate students often find their professional homes at conferences by seeking out cultures that reflect their own values, gaining connections, and understanding career expectations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). As graduate students are forming their professional identities, professional involvement allows for increased networking and establishing relationships with like-minded people (Chernow et al., 2003). Professional involvement allows individuals to identify with members, make strong connections, and share characteristics with other members, all of which are aspects of having a strong professional identity (Adams et al., 2006).

Unlike the total and graduate student sample, professional involvement for new student affairs professionals was not a significant predictor of professional identity. Though professional involvement has numerous benefits for new professionals, developing a deeper professional identity is not one of them, at least in the aggregate. It could be that new professionals, particularly those who have graduated from SA/HE graduate programs, already have a sufficient professional identity in student affairs.

Mentoring relationships emerged second in the regression. Mentoring was found to predict the professional identity development of graduate students but not new professionals. Research has
shown that individuals have often created relationships with mentors before they enter the field of student affairs (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Many graduate students who enter the field have been influenced prior to their entry. This influence attests to the special role of mentors during the graduate school process, particularly as it relates to developing professional identity.

Supervision style was the only significant predictor of professional identity development for new professionals. This might be because new professionals rely heavily upon their supervisor when they first enter the field. Research asserts supervisory relationships hold great potential to influence positive self-image, orient new professionals, and increase role awareness (Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Tull, 2006, 2009).

With the exception of one study (Liddell et al., 2014), previous studies on professional identity in student affairs have been qualitative (Crim, 2006; Cutler, 2003). The present study took the themes identified by past researchers, combined them, and examined them through a quantitative lens. The present study extends prior research by showing the collective effect of the three variables measured as they relate to professional identity.

By combining the results of the current study with Crim (2006) and Cutler’s (2003) research, we see that people who work in student affairs, particularly graduate students, seek out mentors in the field, become involved in professional associations, and receive positive supervision in order to form a professional identity. These studies support the theory that congruence between an individual’s professional identity and chosen career is important for job satisfaction and effectiveness (Holland, 1985).

**Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research in this area would benefit from a study with an experimental design. Though it may be difficult to randomly assign participants to a supervisor who uses synergistic supervision, it would be possible to take a pool of participants who do not currently have a mentor, assign half to a mentor and have the other half be a control group to clarify the role of mentoring in professional identity.

Another area for potential research includes examining how people of differing racial, gender, and other social identities form professional identity. Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) have set the foundation for research regarding Black male professional identity development. Future research could also study the professional identity development of student affairs professionals who are more experienced (e.g., doctoral students). Unique to the current study, the participants who identified themselves as new student affairs professionals all received a graduate degree in SA/HE. Their predictors of professional identity development could be different from new professionals who did not attend a professional preparation program in student affairs or higher education. Future studies could examine the professional identity development predictors of professionals who do not have a “traditional” SA/HE background to determine the effect of graduate education on professional identity development.

**Implications and Recommendations for Student Affairs Practice**

There are several implications and recommendations for student affairs practice and professional identity development. First, because student affairs professionals begin forming their professional identity in graduate school, professional preparation programs should include curriculum regarding professional identity formation and values associated with the profession. Graduate preparation
programs should encourage seeking out mentors and becoming involved in professional associations. Faculty in graduate programs should seek to develop strategies that would increase the likelihood of forming mentoring relationships. Aside from formal means, faculty should encourage graduate students to seek out mentors who can provide a positive influence.

Supervisors can apply the results of this study by encouraging their supervisees to both seek out mentors and become involved in professional associations. Practicing synergistic supervision should not be the only means of professional socialization for new professionals. If supervisors are concerned about developing their new professionals into satisfied student affairs professionals, they should encourage their staff to seek out mentors and become professionally involved. Supervisors of graduate students in an assistantship role should also be cognizant of graduate students’ dual roles. Graduate students’ primary goal is completing their education in order to learn the profession’s values and what it means to be a professional. Supervisors should allow for ways in which graduate students can develop as professionals and integrate their course teachings into their positions.

Faculty members and senior student affairs officers should have intentional conversations with graduate students and new professionals about career goals, aspirations, and experiences. Opportunities for graduate students and new professionals to interact in an informal atmosphere may provide a way to break down access barriers and feelings of intimidation. Both parties should formally recognize the mentor relationship and hold discussions about expectations and potential benefits.

While Liddell and colleagues (2014) found that graduate students can be influenced by in-class and out-of-class experiences to join professional associations, student affairs professionals should still be intentional about becoming involved on their own. Graduate students should join at least one professional association related to the field of student affairs or the functional area in which they work. Conference attendance should increase participants’ peer networks and opportunities to engage with other like-minded professionals. New student affairs professionals should attend conferences for the purpose of staying up-to-date on current research and trends to enhance their practice and skills.

**Conclusion**

Results of this study indicate that mentor relationships, professional involvement, and supervision style significantly predict the professional identity development of graduate students. Supervision style was found to significantly predict professional identity development of new student affairs professionals. While limited, the results of this study provide important answers for how these factors work together to predict the professional identity development of graduate students and new professionals in student affairs.

**References**


