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Vocation, Belonging, Courage: Gender Equity in Narratives of Non-Exempt Women Administrative Assistants in Academic Units at the University of Dayton

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Vocation, Belonging, Courage: Gender Equity in Narratives of Non-Exempt, Women,
Administrative Assistants in Academic Units at the University of Dayton

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Gender Equity Research Fellowship

University of Dayton

2021

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Abstract

Gender roles normalize thinking patterns, behaviors, actions, and attitudes. The workplace is not immune to their influence. Gender roles make certain labor invisible, either because it does not typically fit with the expectations of a determined gender group, or because it is deemed normal and therefore expected. This report condenses the narratives of 11 women, non-exempt, administrative assistants at the University of Dayton in reference to how vocation, belonging, and courage are affected by gender. Based on the responses, the report proposes several approaches to equity, which is defined as the modifying of structures and practices that have intentionally or unintentionally advantaged or disadvantaged groups of people. This report proposes equity as a process that provides visibility, voice, support, advancement guidance, and the right tools and spaces for administrative assistants to interact as peers.

Introduction

The Gender Equity Research Fellowship is an initiative housed in the Women's Center of the University of Dayton, offered in collaboration with the Women's and Gender Studies Program and with the support of the Provost's Office. The Women's Center sponsors two Gender Equity Research Fellows every year. The gender and disciplinary background of the fellows is open and the goal of the initiative is to "advance gender equity and social justice through the conduct of high-quality research and the development of subsequent recommendations to share with the campus community" ("Gender Equity Research Fellowship"). As a research project that stems from the mission and purpose of this initiative, the main concern of these pages is to outline recommendations for the creation of a work environment that factors the gendered labor of administrative assistants in equitable ways. Instead of prescribing initiatives based on the opinions of the researchers, the goal of this project is to look for threads and isotopes that condense the voices of administrative assistants.

How Equity Relates to Vocation, Belonging and Courage

How do we define equity? In the realm of higher education, practitioners refer to equity as addressing at least three different areas. First, equity serves as a corrective lens for the educational and societal debts owed to underserved, underrepresented, and colonized populations who were excluded from advantages awarded to other groups. Second, equity refers to an organized and purposeful process or program designed to "confront overt and covert racism embedded in institutional structures, policies and practices" (Brown McNair, 21). Finally, equity motivates organizations to recognize the

extent to which maleness and whiteness operates as the *de facto* norm and forms the foundation of the playing field for structures, policies, traditions, cultures, and practices in our societies. While equality refers to a leveling of the playing field based on sameness (equal pay, access, or working hours), equity requires an assessment of needs, a process of bridging gaps, and offering targeted, structural measures and support.

If equity is a lens that allows institutions to understand how policies affect certain populations that differ from the white, male norm that has served as the basis for the creation of organizational structures, how can administrative assistants reveal their needs in relation to equity? We believe that narratives of vocation, belonging, and courage allow us to understand how they see themselves and the way they are represented within the structures, culture, traditions, and policies of the University.

Chapter one will focus on methods and procedures of the research, while chapter two will define key terms in relation to gender roles and gender equity. Chapter three will be devoted to narratives of vocation, which shed light on the educational and professional paths that led women to become administrative assistants at the University. These journeys are varied and are affected by many conditions related to access, opportunity, education, family relations, social class, parenting responsibilities, and of course, gender roles. As administrative assistants talk about their backgrounds, and the way they see themselves fitting into the mission of the University and their respective units, their perceptions and feelings become clearer. Narratives of vocation transform into perceptions of belonging.

Belonging (chapter 4) is a concept that relates to perceptions of self-fitting into a role and an organization. In that sense, belonging goes beyond the perception of a person feeling welcomed and respected within an organization, although it certainly presupposes those conditions as a minimum. Faith Nibbs defines belonging in close relation to identity. Identity “is taken to mean who a person is, or a self-representation of someone's interests, relationships, social activities, etcetera.” Administrative assistants have a perception of who they are based on their vocational paths and the different aspects that make their sense of self, for example, their skills, abilities, personalities, gender, sexual orientation, family roles, etc. Belonging is based on perceptions of one's own identity because it is “the state where that self-representation is perceived to fit. Sometimes one leads seamlessly to the other, but more often the two intersect in more disruptive ways; either aspects of one's self-representation are sacrificed in order to belong, or belonging is sacrificed in order to preserve aspects of self-representation” (Nibbs, 4).

Women realize that there are certain requirements that the University expects of them in their roles as administrative assistants. Some of those roles are gender-related, which explains why, in several instances, they define themselves as “mothers” or “big sisters” to students and other members of the unit. There are also stereotypes related to the role, and that, too, impacts their own representations. However, women are able to sacrifice certain expectations of belonging to preserve their own selves. We hear from administrative assistants who define themselves as problem solvers, managers, and advisors. In other words, we could affirm that women are aware of the requirements that organizations pose for them in order to belong, but they have the agency to negotiate

what parts of themselves they sacrifice or what membership requirements they reject or modify to maintain their sense of selves.

As administrative assistants confront those requirements, one witnesses courageous acts that they perform in their every day actions (chapter 5). Courage reveals the way administrative assistants affirm gender and other social roles and expectations, and at the same time how they are aware of the needs of their units and those who belong to them. Women administrative assistants take concrete actions to correct these needs, sometimes in ways that remain invisible and uncompensated. If we want to know what aspects of their work should be looked upon through an equity lens, courage is the right place.

Conditions and Representations of Staff in the American University

Listening to the narratives and stories of women in roles such as administrative assistants is key to understanding their needs and expectations in relation to equity. Usually, universities create spaces for faculty members, staff, and administrators to voice their opinions and concerns in public forums, such as the faculty senate, and through participation in committees. In general, these spaces do not exist for administrative assistants. The only place in which administrative assistants may bring attention to issues related to climate is in unit staff meetings. However, the manager or supervisor usually controls the agenda for the meeting, and discussions are, most of the time, confined to professional issues. The opinions or perceptions of these unit staff members regarding climate, or their own concerns and accomplishments, rarely form part of the exchanges taking place in such spaces. This reality requires the creation of a forum for the communication of concerns and opinions destined to reveal the

perceptions of administrative assistants' views and apprehensions, their perceptions of climate, as well as their stories of vocational path and agency.

The traditional structure of the American university complicates the way staff members, in general, see themselves fitting into roles. In the United States, universities have used a two-tier model composed of faculty and staff to structure a division of labor, responsibilities, and power. Since faculty members and their commitment to intellectual freedom, teaching, and original research are considered embodiments of the mission of the university, it is not surprising that research on issues of campus climate has usually veered toward the complexities that affect them, touching particularly on matters of gender, race, national origin, and tenure.

Staff members are divided in two different groups using a federally-mandated policy. The University of Dayton recognizes two types. The exempt category includes "salaried employees who are not subject to the provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act regarding hours of work and overtime" ("Handbooks"). This group is composed of high-level administrators; assistant, associate, and executive directors; and managerial positions within a department or unit. Regardless of the amount of time that exempt employees work during a pay period, the University is not required to compensate them for the hours they have worked outside their normal schedule. On the other hand, "non-exempt employees are hourly paid employees who are subject to the provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act regarding hours of work and overtime." If a non-exempt employee works outside their normal schedule, the University is obliged to compensate them ("Handbooks").

Non-exempt is a broad category that comprises cafeteria, ground and maintenance workers; clerical staff in offices and departments; counselors; some technicians and accountants; advisors; custodians; receptionists; and administrative assistants. In academic departments and administrative units, non-exempt administrative assistants are usually women. The hierarchical nature of the university, along with a tradition of representations, images, and stereotypes, has generated preconceptions about the level of education, agency, voice, and responsibility attached to them. Hourly-paid employees are usually imagined as a group of individuals whose purview is limited to the immediateness of their job and with levels of education that contrast the advanced degrees of faculty members. Seen as resources to the wellbeing and success of faculty and exempt-staff in an academic department or unit, non-exempt staff members may be perceived as aides, or as lacking the theoretical knowledge of exempt employees, administrators, and faculty members, and without direct contact with students. As one of the administrative assistants noted in reference to these views, her role “is just something you end up doing. It's just a support job. I don't think it's, you know, there's no glamour. It's certainly not the highest paying job. But it's actually really interesting” (AA5, 1-2).

We noted a pessimistic tone on some occasions. For example, a woman values the fact that a supervisor asks her questions and tells her that she is not *just* an administrative assistant, which in reality should be something to stress, given the centrality of their roles. “[My supervisor] will ask me questions in front of the team members and want my opinion, and she has often said, ‘well, you know you're not just an administrative assistant, you are part of the team,’ and that says a lot without saying

much” (AA8, 7). Cultural representations carry significant weight. Equity requires a serious implementation to correct the effects of invisibility.

The importance of clerical staff and administrative assistants in a department, division, or unit is central to the life and sustaining of a university. The job of non-exempt employees affects all parts of life in a university, not only in reference to the academic or administrative sides, but also in efforts tied to student and employee recruitment and retention, technology, finances, grounds and facilities, and donations and advancement. However, the intersections of gender roles, the cultural imagination, labor policy, institutional priorities, and hierarchy, affect the way non-exempt staff members see themselves. These intersections also affect the perceptions other university employees have toward the nature of their presence, labor, and efforts, which often extend beyond the normal work schedule, but remain unrecognized and/or sometimes unpaid.

The nature of the job market and appointments in the American university further complicate this picture. Faculty members leave institutions for a variety of reasons; administrators and exempt employees move to different units and divisions depending on institutional needs and priorities; many undergraduate and graduate students also serve as employees or interns; and department chairs have limited appointments. Clerical workers and administrative assistants become the keepers of institutional memory. They also track procedures and key persons and offices that secure the normal functioning of their units. (It is worth mentioning that clerical workers and administrative assistants also move to other units and take new responsibilities as they navigate education and opportunity in the University.) In a department, the administrative assistant often takes on the role of informal advisor to undergraduate and

graduate students, and becomes a key player in the enactment of a warm climate for employees and student assistants, particularly for those struggling to adapt to a new environment or learning the ropes of university functions and politics.

Equity as Mission Imperative at the University of Dayton

Theme four of the *Common Themes in the Mission and Identity of the University of Dayton* highlights the role of “meaningful relationships between our students, faculty and staff.” In order to create those meaningful relationships and foster a spirit of community, this document mentions the need to realize “our shared sense of purpose.” The duties and schedules of non-exempt female staff complicate access to spaces where they can share their views, experiences, and the way they contribute to the mission of the University. This, along with the preconceptions of their role and work, may become impediments for the creation of a community that “listens and appreciates others” and “creatively merges and expands ideas into solutions for the good of everyone.” This project presents an opportunity to bring attention to the realities of female staff employees, set the initial steps for a conversation among University stakeholders about the importance of what they do and the specific contributions they render to the University, and include their perspectives as we look for initiatives tied to the common good.

The document *Aim4Community Excellence Executive Summary* reveals important information regarding overall climate for female staff in the University. They “reported less overall job satisfaction than male respondents” (8-9). Creating a space where female staff members can talk about their experiences, voice their concerns, and

volunteer their hopes is an opportunity to examine their feelings of belonging in our institution and devise concrete actions for the betterment of their conditions.

The “11-Step Anti-Racism Action Plan: Current Status and Plans” recognizes the need to make marginalized histories more visible (step 9) and highlights the role that each member of the University plays in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (step 1). Knowing more about the stories and experiences of administrative assistants and how they see themselves fitting into the University is an important step toward making their presence more visible and will serve as concrete examples of how to create and instill equity.

Recent publications have shed light on issues pertaining to support staff in higher education. A couple of examples include Adrianna Kezar et al. and their book *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University*, and Peter Mark Magolda’s *The Lives of Campus Custodians: Insights into Corporatization and Civic Disengagement in the Academy*. Kezar and her colleagues inquired about the transformation of universities after the 2008 economic crisis and the challenges that lower enrollment prospects posed for institutions. In her research, Kezar references the changes and impacts of current policy on the everyday lives, roles, and futures of staff members. In Magolda’s case, he pays close attention to personal stories and narratives of campus custodians. Kezar’s portrayals provide a wider context to the lives, motivations, and complicated decisions of these individuals. The focus of this project is similar to Kezar’s, since one of its main goals is to collect personal narratives and find commonalities and differences that complicate perceived notions about hourly-paid female staff members, by providing a more nuanced image of the realities that they face. The fact that the fate,

stories, views, and concerns of support staff across different levels is receiving increased attention is promising in terms of scholarly connections for the future.

1. Methods and Procedures

Initial meetings with members of the Women's Center and the Women's and Gender Studies Program revealed that the feelings, opinions, and voices of administrative assistants at the University are often invisibilized from research projects for reasons already outlined in the introduction. The co-researchers of this project shared common experiences about being positively impacted by the actions of administrative assistants as motivating factors for this work.

The primary researcher emigrated to the United States in the early 2000s to complete graduate studies. The administrative assistant of his department introduced him to American culture and helped him and others in similar circumstances brainstorm solutions to the everyday complexities of life in a new country (and benefited from the same type of advice on a number of other occasions in his professional life). The primary researcher's mother, who took part in the great migration of rural individuals to the cities in the 1960s in Latin America, found her first job as an administrative assistant. The professional and development opportunities tied to this role allowed her to quickly ascend and build her career.

As an undergraduate student, the co-researcher was also able to ask questions to administrative assistants. These were questions that she would not typically share with faculty members or other staff. She reported feeling that the experience of sharing with administrative assistants was enriching and contributed to a strong sense of belonging to the University. Beyond theoretical and institutional motivations for change, the human and personal connections that researchers developed with administrative assistants are a crucial reason for the realization of this project.

The first question that we addressed as a team of investigators was the criteria for deciding who the population of this project would be. The Office of Human Resources at the University provided a report of all administrative assistants at the University, revealing that more than 700 individuals worked in positions with titles that fit the phrase “administrative assistant” (Valentin). From those 700+ individuals, only a portion are employed in academic units and in positions that interface directly with students. Given that the Provost’s Office was the supporter of this fellowship, and considering that conducting research with 700 individuals by a group of two researchers is a task that surpasses the limits of this project, in consultation with the Women’s Center we decided to limit the scope of the project to administrative assistants who work in academic departments, not in administrative offices. Moreover, one of the goals of the research was to investigate their interactions with students. Based on the report provided by Human Resources and after looking at the websites of each department, we were able to bring the number of the research population close to 68 women.

Once we reached an agreement on the target population, the next step was to define the research questions. The main points outlined in the introduction revealed that the representation of the American university usually focuses on the experience of faculty members, not of staff members, and particularly not of those in positions that are typically seen as extraneous to the classroom. We decided to research three variables. The first one had to do with vocation. What motivated women to become administrative assistants? The second one had to do with belonging. Gender, racial, ethnic, and other social variables condition how certain members should act in order to belong, and in that sense, members have agency to accept, modify or reject conditions of belonging.

As members see themselves fitting in a particular role, they discover that there are certain hurdles that they need to overcome in order to belong. Courage becomes a way for subjects to bridge whatever gaps they see. Some of the ways administrative assistants see themselves as courageous follow certain gender roles commonly expected of women, while others not. The questions that we included are available as appendix 1. We included 13 questions about vocational journey, structures of belonging, feelings of inclusion and being excluded, professional development, spaces to meet as equals, and courage.

During the month of October 2020, we submitted the draft email invitations, procedures, and questions to the University of Dayton's IRB for approval and soon after received the green light to begin with the project. Since at the time COVID-19 protocols were in place, we decided to conduct all interviews via Zoom (all recordings were deleted from the server after the interviews were saved offline). To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the women who participated in the study, we created a protocol in which we explained how to assign themselves an alias and turn their cameras off. Once this was accomplished, we proceeded to record the interview. Since Zoom provided a transcript of the meeting, there was no need to purchase any particular software for this purpose. We created a key with the names of each one of the participants and the aliases of their choice, and stored this information, along with the transcripts and recordings, in an offline device. Using the aliases, we created a new key that assigned identifiers (AA for administrative assistant) in an alphabetical order.

We sent email invitations to 58 administrative assistants and 13 accepted. We also posted an invitation on the University's intranet (Porches). As researchers, we were

expecting to have a higher response rate. Therefore, we sent subsequent invitation emails. This happened after COVID financial mitigation strategies had been lifted at the University and we assumed that finding 45 minutes for an interview could be challenging for many women. Of those who responded, we were able to interview 11. We sent interview questions to individuals in advance, to give them time to prepare. Interviews took place between the end of October and mid-December. Once we were able to analyze the data and debrief, we decided to create a new survey and send it to the administrative assistants to see what their opinions were about some of our findings. The survey's questions are included as appendix 2. We received close to 20 responses.

We were also able to interview three other women who previously held roles as administrative assistants (PAA). One of them works in one of the colleges at the University, while two others now have different roles in other areas of the campus. Once we drafted initial recommendations, the authors met with two representatives of the Office of the Human Resources at the University of Dayton to discuss issues relative to performance reviews, professional development, and training. Their input was crucial for the final draft of this project.

2. Gender Roles and Gender Equity

When making recommendations for the University to implement equity in relation to administrative assistants, it is integral to examine the role that gender plays in their work environments and how it affects equity. Gender refers to the intersections between perceptions of biological sex and the particular values, assumptions, and beliefs that have been ascribed to them by individuals, groups, and societies. As individuals interact within their environments, they receive cues about the behaviors that are adequate for the biological sex they are believed to have. That negotiation results in an identification of gender. In that respect, gender refers to the meanings and practices that stem from the decisions that an individual makes in relation to their perception of biological sex (Blackstone, 335-7). As an immediate factor of self-identification and how others perceive one's identity, gender becomes a lens through which everyone sees the world. A woman administrative assistant who coaches a student before an important exam retells this experience as if she was acting as a *mother* to the student. The woman interprets that facet of her job as an integral one to her own being, and that is partly why she does it. Since this type of responsibility might not be listed on her job description, she is not directly compensated for the coaching she provides. If the student passes the exam, thanks in part to the intervention made by the administrative assistant, she might not be praised by her team members or superiors. Gender equity in reference to the study population of this research refers to the influence that gender roles play in the understanding of what an individual's job is and the need to account for that labor in a manner that awards visibility and resources, and designs ways for fair compensation.

Beginning with the report's title, we intend to draw a clear specificity of the population we interviewed. We spoke with *women* rather than *female administrative assistants* because of the clear differences between sex and gender, as well as the importance of those distinctions when attempting to foster inclusion. While the authors may not have known the sexes of the women with whom we spoke, we do know that all of them identified as women. Therefore, the term *woman* is the most appropriate with regard to the expectations into which women administrative assistants see themselves fitting socially. Further, this report focuses on women staff members at the University of Dayton, and in order to truly analyze the narratives of these women, one must consider the roles that gender, not necessarily sex, plays within their stories.

The power of gender roles are a common topic of debate since the first wave of feminist writings, even as early as Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex*. In her book, Beauvoir maps out the social and institutional genesis of the differences in the ways men and women are treated, and how individuals – based on those treatments – tend to accept certain jobs and responsibilities. Individuals develop patterns of behaving and acting that they deem *natural* or *normal*, even if, in reality, they are codified and arbitrary. A famous quote by Beauvoir says that women are not born, but rather created. This means that society expects certain behaviors according to one's gender and that individuals learn what their *appropriate* or *normal* role is depending on their gender identity. Beauvoir, and the theory on gender roles that unfolded after her, explains that women are required to be nurturing, motherly, and supportive, and that the training to perform those roles begins from the first stages of socialization.

These expectations do not disappear in the workplace. Researchers have further analyzed how gender expectations manifest in the case of administrative assistants. For example, Kennelly argues that

The job of secretary is not a prestigious, men-affiliated occupation like a politician or physician. It is also not an occupation that requires a college degree in most situations. It does, however, allow many of its occupants the opportunity to engage in public service, even though this aspect of the job is not commonly recognized, appreciated, or compensated. (Kennelly 175)

What Kennelly's research shows, in this passage, is that the position of administrative assistant is one that requires women to work for the common good by serving others. But this work usually remains invisible and is not equally compensated as would be the case, for example, for men. A faculty member or a staff person who deals professionally with students has a degree commensurate with the expectations of their roles; receives compensation that matches their responsibilities; participates in University governance; and receives training to perform their job with students in a more efficient way. The administrative assistant that coaches a student before an important exam sees herself and is seen by others as *just* doing her job, when in reality she is performing an action that is not part of her job description. She could receive formal training on how to perform that job in a more effective way, and that would ultimately benefit students. The labor remains invisible, but is treated by superiors and team members as part of her job because she is a woman. Gender equity means that institutions need to close the gap between recognition, compensation, and training, and the actual roles and actions that women perform in their jobs.

One of the ways in which we have consciously made choices in order to equitably uplift their voices is by truthfully sharing the language that the interviewees

use. They sometimes use gendered language to interpret where and who they are. “I feel like I’m a catalyst to our small family, or big family” (AA7, 7). For this woman, she feels that she belongs to her unit as one would to a *family*. Her narrative demonstrates a theme of belonging among administrative assistants that occurs when they are able to help students, faculty, and other staff in crisis. In many instances, the kinds of situations where administrative assistants feel empowered or demonstrate courage are those framed in familial language. In the example we mentioned above, this woman is speaking of an instance when she felt valued in her department for bringing her team together despite their differences in opinion regarding religion, politics, race, and ethnicity (AA7, 5-7). In this example, this woman acknowledges that she is networking with others and therefore securing her status as an important member in her department, even if she only highlights her role as a nurturer that brings the department together as a mother would do. She frames her actions within a familial role, even if that work requires management of relationships, organization of events, execution of procedures, deciphering personalities, observing behaviors, detecting needs and meeting them, etc.

While some administrative assistants frame gendered work as a way to develop professionally in their office, this is not the case for all of them. There is a tremendous amount of emotional labor that goes into gendered work in an office. When prompted to ask about a time when she displayed courage, one administrative assistant spoke of her experience negotiating family relationships for her supervisor.

Often I dealt with [my supervisor’s] son on the phone and using discretion, of course, and giving him motherly advice because [my supervisor] didn’t want to talk to him at work after a while. So I had to take it on myself to be like a mother, even though he had a mother. I didn’t want to overstep my

bounds. But since my boss asked me to go ahead and answer the phone and take care of the issue, I did [...] I didn't want to tell him different than what his parents would have told him, so I was walking a thin line, I felt. But it was okay. It worked out. (AA6)

AA6's narrative reveals the ways that gender expectations are not always an easy task to carry out. While on some occasions this emotional labor can be highly rewarding for them, it also can be taxing and very inequitable, considering the lack of guidance and support. Serving as a coach to her supervisor's son was not part of AA6's job description. She felt that her proximity to her boss made her *feel like family*. This, of course, contributed to her sense of belonging in the workplace, but simultaneously made her feel obligated to perform a difficult task that made her uneasy. She expressed that "so I *had to* take it on myself to be like a mother." The use of "so" here implies that she identified a need and then made a conscious decision to meet it. She interpreted this action almost as an obligation ("I had to"). This shows the feelings of confusion that she had about navigating a familial situation in substitution for her supervisor. While this example is incredibly courageous, it also demonstrates the gendered issues that administrative assistants need to face every day, as well as the lack of support or guidance they endure when performing some gendered labor.

If stakeholders view administrative assistants as mothers, nurturers, sisters, and caretakers, then one risks only celebrating them for that work. But we know that they practice copious amounts of professionalism, and often this professionalism emerges from situations where administrative assistants act within a gender role. This is not to say that the nurturing nature of administrative assistants should not be celebrated, especially if it is an element that makes them feel as if they belong. Being a mother is difficult work. However, equity is lost when organizations do not broaden the scope to

celebrate more than just the nurturing work that women do. One administrative assistant remarked about her job that “the best part, I think, is knowing that you're helping people and trying to keep things running smoothly in the department as much as possible with as few interruptions and disruptions as possible” (AA3). In order to be true to their stories, we cannot ignore how gender has shaped their environments and how we have perceived the information they have shared. Gender plays a complex role in the workplace, and the goal of this report is to point out equity strategies in the way we interpret their labor. The skills of administrative assistants span far beyond gender aspects.

3. Vocation: “I like where I’ve landed”

The women who took part in the interviews have served the University of Dayton for different periods of time. Two had been at the University for more than 25 years, while two others had worked at the institution for more than ten. Two had served for more than five and the rest for two years or less. This distribution means that the range of experiences reveal different stages of the life of the institution. The survey conducted after the interviews revealed similar results about the variety of experiences that women bring. Over 40% of the respondents had worked at the University of Dayton for more than 16 years. Sixteen percent of them had been at the University between 11 and 15 years, while only 5% had served between 6 and 10 years. In contrast to the women who participated in the interviews, 33% had been at UD for less than five years (Quintero, 43).

The survey revealed important data about the administrative assistants' characteristics. For example, a significant number of administrative assistants have had some college education, and at least three of them have a master's degree or are pursuing one. Only one of the administrative assistants had no education beyond high school. All of them identified as women and all but one as heterosexual. In terms of race, only two of the respondents identified as people of color, while the rest of the respondents located their ethnicities and races as white or European. Since the number of respondents of color is so low, disaggregating data in this respect is problematic, because it can reveal the identities of those who took part in the study (Quintero, 39-43).

Their Vocational Journeys

For some women, the path to become an administrative assistant began very early, even as they were children and accompanied family members to shadow a role that they later found attractive. One of them remembers the experience of visiting an insurance company in her home city where her sister worked and “falling in love that day with being in an office.” This narrative corresponds to the idea of vocation as a strong call.

So one Saturday, she took me to the office with her [...] and she let me play with the typewriters, and the adding machines. And I wasn't breaking anything at all, or doing damage, but it was really cool for the adding machines to have a very long piece of paper. I just punched in a bunch of numbers. [...] I don't know what specifically about it grabbed me but I just thought it would be a really neat place to work. (AA3, 2-3)

In terms of pursuing being an administrative assistant as a career, some of them decided to dedicate themselves to the profession since they were in high school.

My journey began, I will say, in high school. I went to a high school that was a Career Technical Center. And my goal was to pursue an administrative assistant position in order to work at a local university to pursue higher education, so it was just a stepping stone. I have worked in higher education for many years. (AA10, 1)

For women in administrative assistant roles at the University, working in higher education is one of the most attractive features of the job. Professional development and the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of working in an institution of learning is a strong motivation for them to become administrative assistants, as we will develop later in this chapter. In that respect, some women pursue the field because it connects with their intellectual interests. To the question about why she began working in her current role, one woman referred immediately about her intellectual interests. “The subject matter. The field of study is the thing that's the most important to me” (AA2, 4). The fact

that she could work in an academic unit that hosts faculty members devoted to the area of expertise she pursued during her master's degree, was a strong motivator for her to look for an opportunity at the University of Dayton.

Vocational calls are not the only reason that lead women to become administrative assistants, even if 66% of the respondents agreed with the statement "being in my professional position is a result of a personal search and/or vocational path" (Quintero, 1). Family responsibilities often result in women looking for opportunities in the field. "My husband lost his job and our financial situation was changing, so I needed to look at college in a different way. So if I became an employee, that would mean tuition, if that's what my kids wanted to do" (AA7, 3). In this case, the possibility of sending her children to college was an opportunity that she felt might be in jeopardy after her husband lost his job. Because of the tuition remission benefit, the fact that this woman could join the University of Dayton implied that there was a clear path for her children to receive a quality education, and in addition, there was the stability of the job and the opportunity to apply her skills.

The chance to interact with students seems to be one of the main factors that motivate administrative assistants to continue in the role. As an example, this woman mentions the opportunity to meet international students and others from other diverse backgrounds.

I enjoy the overall picture of working in a university setting. I love to be around young people. I do love to hear their stories, especially working in a university, where you have students from all nationalities. You hear their background, their family life, their hopes, their dreams, their goals. I think young students just bring life into an environment. (AA10, 2)

These narratives contrast with others in which women mention that being an administrative assistant is a profession that does not entirely depend on a conscious vocational life call or choice, but is due to navigating opportunity in complicated circumstances and the ups and downs of the labor market. This woman explains her journey to the University as she began working in a temp agency. More than a vocational call, she reports the fact that in her case, she “just sort of ended up doing it.”

You just sort of end up doing it, I think. I worked at a temp service before this and I worked at the library. But [being an administrative assistant] was just a role I fit into at the time. And I've grown, as I've been here throughout all those years. Nobody wakes up and says, I want to be an administrative assistant. It's just something you end up doing. It's just a support job. There's no glamour. It's certainly not the highest paying job. But it's actually really interesting. (AA5, 1-2)

However, as we will see, she complicates this narrative in very interesting ways.

Equity as Visibility

The prior description mentioned some of the apprehensions that women have about the role of being an administrative assistant, due to media representations and the realities of compensation in the professional world. However, despite the less-positive connotations that this passage intimates, highlighting the next section of her comments is key for understanding how equity can be implemented. This woman complements her description of the way she became an administrative assistant by saying, “I'm not sure people realize that every office is very different. I've been in four different offices at UD, and they are all very different and it just continues to change. So anyway, I enjoy it” (AA5, 1-2).

One of the main narratives of women is that being an administrative assistant requires excelling at particular skills, and sometimes team members don't see or appreciate that.

The reason I became [an administrative assistant] is probably because I'm good at it. I'm a very organized person, detail oriented, which is obviously a big part of being an admin. As far as my journey, I actually was in banking probably 20 years prior. And then I took a job at [name of institution], which was obviously a non-profit and my role wasn't necessarily titled administrative assistant, but that's a lot of the type of work I did. A lot of organizing and grant responses and things like that. (AA11, 1-2)

Administrative assistants find the university setting attractive because of what it offers them in terms of education, professional development, stability, and tuition benefits, among other areas. They enjoyed the varied nature of the job responsibilities, the constant interaction with stakeholders – particularly students – and the opportunity to apply their skills, which many identified as problem solving, supervision, management, and organization. A prevalent narrative across their interviews is that of “growing into the role” and, as the title of this chapter reflects, feeling proud and satisfied with the place where “they landed.” The fact that they grow into the role suggests that for some of them being an administrative assistant is a vocation that they elected as they were growing up, while others discovered it.

Instilling equity requires recognizing that women administrative assistants usually have long careers before joining the University. Their educational backgrounds are rich and varied as well. Becoming an administrative assistant is something that requires a high sense of organization and management skills, and team members might not see that as a primary characteristic. They have constant interactions with students, serving sometimes as coaches, as we will see in a later chapter. As this woman explains, she

feels “lucky” that her unit recognizes the extent of her responsibilities, particularly with students, to whom she needs to give “pep talks” before exams. “I think there are some people in the University that really get that. And there are other people that I don't think have a clue. But luckily for me, my people get that. I'm very lucky in that aspect [...] I'm valuable. Yes. I think we are very valuable. And I think sometimes as admins we are definitely overlooked at what we truly bring to the table” (AA4, 10).

Administrative assistants refer to visibility of their actual responsibilities and roles using the expression “they get it.” Those department members who “get it” are those who see the real influence and scope of administrative assistants in the life of the unit. “[Administrative Assistants] make it possible that classes happen, that research happens. So when you say [team members] get it, they see the many functions that you play in the department” (AA4, 11).

Equity means that the actual background and work that administrative assistants do should be recognized monetarily and symbolically as what it is: qualifications, experience, skills, and hard labor. Invisibility is the first and most pervasive form of inequality, because it condemns subjects to inaccurate representations, while their real and actual work is underappreciated.

4. Belonging: “I work with them, not for them”

Our interviews with administrative assistants revealed that the supervisor is perhaps the most important factor for them to feel included as valuable members of their units. If a first step to instill equity relates to providing visibility of backgrounds and job functions, a second one refers to empowerment on the part of the supervisor and other team members to provide targeted support during difficult situations and allow them to access professional development opportunities.

As defined in the introduction, belonging presupposes a connection between representations of identity and how the individual perceives that they fit a particular role or organization. The subject has the option to define which areas of their personality need to be sacrificed in order to belong, or which conditions of belonging need to be rejected in order to keep the personality intact. The supervisor, as the leader of the unit, functions as a mediator who defines which parts of certain identities are welcomed within an organization and which are not. In that respect, the supervisor vouches or sanctions certain identity traits. Hence, their importance in a work environment.

The power differences in university settings between faculty and staff, tenure and non-tenured faculty lines, exempt and non-exempt staff, and full- versus part-time employees, complicate the ways women administrative assistants interact with other members of the team. Due to the power of cultural representations and the hierarchical structure of our society, visibility in terms of their real jobs and responsibilities is a struggle. This makes it incumbent upon supervisors to step up and show how necessary the presence and labor of administrative assistants is for the functioning of the units. One woman, when she was asked about what makes her feel included within her unit,

responded that “I have often said that I work for such and such. And I always get corrected. They tell me I work with them, not for them. And I like that they feel that way about me” (AA1, 3). The American university is embedded with hierarchies that signal the worth of someone based on the perceived position of the person within the hierarchy. Anything that can be done to dissolve those barriers by making the role, background, and real responsibilities of team members more visible would amount to members feeling that their identities are a valuable part of an organization.

Meetings are one of the key structures of an institution. As an organized, recurrent space for team members to interact, meetings serve as instances where power relations are stressed and members have an opportunity to voice their opinions. Air time, willingness to listen to concerns, ability to talk without being interrupted, and the prerogative to interrupt others are all common occurrences that happen during a meeting. Each one of them signals a place in a real or imagined hierarchy. One administrative assistant reported the feeling of inclusion and belonging that comes from the way a supervisor interacts with her during meetings, and from knowing what the priorities of her unit are.

My current boss is excellent at including me and everything we do as a department. I go to most of the meetings that everyone else does. That helps me do a better job just to have a better understanding of what the issues are and the different things they're trying to accomplish. Even if I'm not like a main person I can still offer support in some way, if I have a clue what's going on. (AA6, 4)

Through these words, it becomes clear the issues of self-representation that this woman intimates when she speaks about herself as not being a “main person,” even though the unit would not be able to function without her labor. This suggests the need for a more intentional approach to make sure that administrative assistants feel recognized and

empowered in what they do. Communication is key. To be successful, she needs to know what is happening in her unit at the macro level.

In that respect, asking administrative assistants about their opinion in matters that pertain to their purview is another strategy to foster belonging. The previous description continues in that direction. “It just seemed that I could fit right into the job and help a lot of people, students, parents, as well as my boss and the people that worked for him. They often came to me asking for my help and I just felt a big part of that department” (AA6, 4). Another woman stresses a similar idea that highlights the values and skills she brings to the position.

With both of my supervisors, when there is a task at hand or a project, they bring me into the planning process and we discuss and brainstorm and find some of the best practices for that given project. As an assistant, that is an environment where somebody recognizes the skills and the ability that an individual has and they're asking them. (AA10, 7)

“Because You Are the Linchpin for the Entire Department”

Administrative assistants play a central role in making the University function. While it seems like a simple statement, in reality their roles are complex. Departments in the University cannot serve the institution without the labor of administrative assistants because of the planning, managing, and organizing they perform in their departments. Administrative assistants schedule meetings, support students, make everyone who visits their offices feel welcome, manage budgets, agendas and course schedules, and plan events, among a wide range of responsibilities that keep their departments functional to serve the University. As one administrative assistant describes, “you are the linchpin for the entire department” (AA9, 12-3). A linchpin is defined as “one that serves to hold together parts or elements that exist or function as a unit”. This means

that this woman sees herself as an indispensable individual connecting an entire department together through her work.

Administrative assistants are very aware of the importance of their role and responsibilities on campus. For this reason, they often seek to better themselves in any way available to them, particularly through professional development. However, some of them expressed that finding opportunities for professional development was challenging precisely because of the central function they perform in their departments. When the linchpin is removed, team members might feel anxious because of them feeling not supported. As a result, one administrative assistant reported that in certain instances “[administrative assistants] feel tied to a desk” (AA10, 15). Forty percent of administrative assistants agreed to feeling this way as well in the survey. The fact that they feel such an intricate part of their units is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their labor is necessary and they feel as if they play a crucial role in their job environments, which to a certain extent increases their sense of belonging. On the other hand, that same factor makes it difficult for them to participate in professional development opportunities.

Equity as Providing Voice and Support

Equity manifests as providing the means for women to leave their desks and attend professional development events. Allowing administrative assistants to take time off for personal issues and professional opportunities increases equity. One woman sums her experience in a few words: “The manifestation of how they have made me a valuable member is when I get a request to do something or to be provided something that I did not even ask for” (AA8,17). The fact that their positions are non-exempt and

paid hourly, as well as the perception that their presence is necessary for the unit to function implies that they feel that they have to constantly be in their offices. A woman shared the impact of counting on a supportive supervisor, who encourages her to seek professional development opportunities happening at the University.

I feel that I'm very fortunate because my direct supervisor is extremely supportive [...] She is constantly encouraging me to do what I need to develop myself personally and professionally. She offers me every opportunity to take professional development courses. If there is something that I have an interest in and it is not being offered, she asks that I research it and try to find someone that can offer it to the folks where I work. (AA1, 4)

Women administrative assistants mention that one of the perks of working at a University has to do with the opportunity to access educational and training opportunities. They report interest and motivation to take the different courses offered by Human Resources and the Center for Leadership, and to pursue a college education, provided that they receive clearance from their supervisors.

I've taken about 40 some hours towards an accounting degree. I probably won't go any further with that. But that was a nice opportunity that I didn't have when I was younger. I know HR offers a lot of courses on management and communication with your student workers. Those sorts of things that apply really well to my job. I know they have some other leadership ones, too. So even just the classes they offer on our retirement benefits or financial things, those are a really nice perk to working at UD" (AA5, 13-14).

Professional opportunities are a way to increase belonging. "Anytime that there's in-person training I never turn it down. I take advantage of it, even if it's something I don't think I'm necessarily going to use very often. I try to at least expose myself to it" (AA3, 11).

The need for professional development and other forms of professional or educational support is something that women referred to often during the interviews. On the couple of occasions when they said they had experienced some form of exclusion,

they were all related to professional development or other forms of accessing educational opportunities, which attest at how important they see these issues in their professional and personal lives.

The people that I worked with in the admin level and the administrative level, there was no support. There was very little encouragement. There was a lot of negativity. When it came time for me to take a class that was required for me to graduate and I had to leave before my prescribed end of the day, even though it was 10 minutes before that, [a team member] who I did not report to became upset when I had left, and I was told about it by another co worker. My supervisor had approved for me to take the class and approved for me to leave. And I was coming in in the morning to the job about 8am, my start time was 830, so I did not feel like I was cheating UD out of any time. (AA9, 4-5)

The support can take many forms, even simply encouragement and showing interest in what administrative assistants are doing for further education. The University is currently exploring options for flexible work hours and environments. The narrative below stresses the fact that equity manifests as a willingness to accommodate schedules and circumstances. As the chapter on vocation revealed, many different factors brought women to join the University as administrative assistants. As a result, on some occasions they expect reasonable accommodations and flexibility to be able to balance their backgrounds together with their desire to take advantage of the educational and professional opportunities that different offices at the University offer.

When an employee is trying to work full time, go to school, balance a family, keep up on their job, do homework, it would be nice to have support with that even if you can't do anything. Officially, you could say, 'hey, how's your class going? How far are you along in your degree? How many more classes do you have to take?' Just basic support and the understanding that there could be a time you may have to do some flex hours to meet the goal at an educational institution. I found it appalling that even though it is offered as a huge benefit here to get a degree, whether it is a masters or undergrad or doctorate, people were not being supportive of that pursuit. (AA9, 6-7)

A woman also noted the importance of making the perspectives of administrative assistants heard in University committees. Since they are the ones working in the field, they have an understanding of how things can be done from their own perspective. This woman points out that her view of new implementations can in some instances save money and resources.

When we started into the budget situation and they put together a team, they said this team represents everyone on campus. There were no administrative positions [...] I mean administrative assistant level positions on any of those committees, not one who actually did the day to day duties and running an office. [...] Many times there are students on the committees, which is great. [...] They should be. But there should also be someone from the Hay class on these committees, because without that voice people are making decisions in a relative vacuum, because the person who has the actual hands on experience of putting it into the computer or looking it up or getting the football strings they are not included in that situation. So when a decision comes down [...] this way, the administrative professionals are like, 'why are we doing it this way? It makes more sense to do it another way and it can save money'. There's just no voice there for the administrative level. (AA9, 15).

The purpose of this narrative is to point out how administrative assistants feel that their voices and roles are important for the overall success of the University and how necessary it is to count on them to create an inclusive environment for everyone.

Equity can also be implemented as targeted support. A woman provides a very practical description. The furloughs that took place to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 during the summer of 2020 meant that some employees had to leave their work temporarily. Upon their return in the fall, some of them reported feeling demoralized. The supervisor quickly stepped in to provide relief for the members of their team, particularly the administrative assistants.

We've talked a lot about the depression or the sense of loss that a lot of us felt when we were furloughed and what a shock that was to the system. And coming back to work was great and fantastic and I was thrilled to be back along with everyone else that was back, but I still had that sense of depression [...]. And we

have had some listening sessions with professionals from the University where we just got together in small groups in a Zoom meeting and were able to talk about what we were feeling and [...] be supportive of each other. And I just think for a supervisor to really care that deeply about not only me because I'm our direct report but, as well as other folks in the [unit], I think that that's really great (AA1, 5-6).

This narrative highlights equity as an effort that requires an attitude prone to listening to the concerns of team members and mobilizing resources to provide support during difficult circumstances. This approach can extend to other aspects of the work of administrative assistants and other employees.

Equity as Providing Advancement Guidance

As mentioned in this section, the supervisor has a significant role in the process of building belonging among employees. One of the ways a supervisor can recognize the expertise, efforts, experience and accomplishments of administrative assistants is by helping them navigate the unit's pathways for advancement. At the University of Dayton, the Office of Human Resources sets a general framework of competencies and goals that are required from individuals to advance professionally within the organization and stores the appropriate forms for individuals and supervisors to initiate this process (Washington; see "Human Resources Policies"). However, each unit stipulates how the individual process takes place.

Since this course of action is initiated at the unit level, one administrative assistant highlighted the importance of the supervisor as the person who can provide clarity and support. She suggested that "a prescribed path for an admin to get a promotion" would be a great structural change for them to advance. "Your individual supervisor can do small things to support you" (AA9, 12-3), she also said, underlying

the equity measures that supervisors can take to help administrative assistants advance, which is congruent with equity measures offered as targeted support. The survey revealed that administrative assistants would like to advance professionally and that in some instances they are not aware of the details this process entails. Fifty-five percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement "I feel content in my position because it is fixed and there are not many pathways for advancement," while 72% of them disagreed with the statement that "there are opportunities for me to advance in my position" (Quintero, 10-12).

One of the women who previously held the position of administrative assistant mentioned that she coaches other women who are interested in advancing in their positions. Even if there is not a professional review process set in place for administrative assistants within their units, she mentioned that they should document everything they do. She suggests that administrative assistants should make an effort to make their actual roles and responsibilities visible, and the best way is to keep track of them (PAA2).

Equity requires deliberate and concrete actions for supervisors to make sure that all employees are aware of the procedures that can lead them to develop themselves personally and professionally.

5. Courage: "That's When I Wear my Mom Hat"

The dictionary defines courage as “the quality of mind that enables a person to face difficulty or danger without fear.” Through this research, we discovered that the acts of courage women administrative assistants have displayed are often an action above and beyond what is expected of them.

Courage as Student Support

Administrative assistants provide multifaceted support in the departments they serve. One administrative assistant recognized that, while they are not officially asked to advise students, she shared with them perspectives relative to course selection, job readiness, career goals, and advice about navigating life circumstances. Many offices in the University of Dayton employ students as workers in ways that serve the departments with clerical services and special projects for the benefit of the whole unit. One of the most common ways administrative assistants interact with students is as supervisors. “I supervise between 10 and 15 student workers and I really enjoyed that aspect. I always tell them that they might hate me by the end of their employment here because I can tend to be another mother for them” (AA1, 3). It seems that, at least in this instance, the administrative assistant is the one who conducts interviews, allots work hours, supervises, and evaluates student workers. Administrative assistants take on the role of mentor, even when it is not required of them. This extra responsibility requires a great level of courage and emotional labor, and as this narrative highlights, is usually framed in familial language or gender role terms (“another mother”).

Moreover, by taking on these roles and interacting with students several days a week for hours at a time, they develop trusting relationships beyond mentoring. For example, one administrative assistant reveals that, “I’ll assist when someone, a student, might need a ride to a doctor appointment. It’s just because I can tune in and I know their needs. And I can help. They are not in my duties that are assigned at all, but things I enjoy doing” (AA3, 26-27). Administrative assistants assume these additional responsibilities not because they are required to, but because it is their way of serving their community by building relationships with students.

Because of these extra responsibilities, administrative assistants might act in certain instances as first responders to students’ needs or concerns, often detecting early signs in the way a student is behaving. An administrative assistant – who is also a cancer survivor – shared during an interview that “I’ve had the kid at my desk, who’s like, ‘my mom’s sick’. Well, what’s wrong with your mom? It turned out his mom had breast cancer. I’m like, ‘dude, I can help you out with that one’” (AA4, 9). In this situation, AA4 volunteered her own experience, making herself vulnerable by sharing confidential matters about her own medical history to help a student process emotions and find the strength to overcome a difficult situation. AA4 continued to generalize her experience by saying that

I think besides the fact that we’re answering phones, doing emails, trying to schedule classes, trying to put orders into Runway and trying to keep research people happy [...], when the students were coming into the office, we’re trying to keep these kids like, you know, ‘I just trashed this test’ or or ‘I’m so nervous about this test,’ and you’re trying to give them the last minute pep talk. (AA4, 10)

On some occasions, she realizes when a student is not feeling well. Students might not know the right procedure to present these concerns to faculty members. In

this case, this woman is referring to an international student. Because of her experience dealing with similar situations, she was able to provide the right advice. The labor of this administrative assistant becomes an equity measure in its own way, as she closes the gap that exists in the knowledge certain students have to navigate successfully their college experience. In this instance, she is introducing herself as a buffer for the student to feel supported and resourced as they overcome the situation.

[An international student] comes in and he looks like he's pale. I'm like, 'honey, what are you doing here? You look like you need to go home' and he's like 'oh, but I got a class' [...] and I'm like, 'Dude, are you okay?' He's like, 'Well, I had to go to the hospital.' And I am like 'okay, so if you had to go to the hospital. Why are you here? If you're sick, you need to go home.' So after about 15 minutes I [told him to] just give me the note from the hospital. 'I will contact the instructor, I will take the heat if you get in trouble because of this.' And of course the instructor, I knew he would not have a problem with it because he's wonderful" (AA4, 31-32).

Because of the role they play in academic offices, administrative assistants often provide students with informal guidance about classes or accommodations that departments can offer in special circumstances. In this example, a student approaches an administrative assistant telling her "Hey, I'm trying to get in this class. How can you help me get into this class?' I'm like, 'Well, if it's our class I can help you get in it. If not, try this [...]. It's funny, I ran into him. He's actually teaching now over at [name of university]" (AA4, 32).

Informally, administrative assistants refer to this part of their jobs as serving as a *mother* for the students who are in the University, coaching them in different kinds of situations. "So that's where I put my mom hat. Oh, I always say, 'Okay, I'm putting on my mom hat now and if you are my kid, this is what I would tell you to do'" (AA4, 11). Similar language is employed by others as well in reference to gender roles, usually as

caretakers or “big sisters” that advocate for those who are in precarious positions or difficult circumstances. To that effect, when the researchers asked about something courageous, one of the administrative assistants said that “I think it's really being an advocate for people. Being that sort of big sister” (AA8, 18).

Courage as Support of Faculty and Staff

Being supportive of faculty and staff above and beyond their responsibilities is something that administrative assistants often do, even for their supervisors. One of them revealed the case of a senior administrator who came from an area of the United States where it does not snow. The senior administrator thought that snow on the roads meant that he did not need to come to work. The administrative assistant became an intercultural mediator that allowed this person to adjust successfully to the new environment. “He was just amazed [at the snow]. But he didn't think he had to come to work. So one of my first challenges was to tell him he had to come in [...] So I told him it was safe to drive to work once the snow had been cleared off the roads. And then he learned to drive in the snow” (AA6, 16-17).

Another administrative assistant shared in an interview another instance of courageous support that she gave to a supervisor who was grieving the loss of her spouse. In this situation, she recognizes that she is new in her department and becoming acquainted with the different personalities of team members. She quickly identified a need in relation to her boss, given that team members seemed to act with relative indifference. The administrative assistant made a decision to supply the need by planning, organizing and remedying the situation.

I was still actually a temporary employee. My supervisor's [spouse] at [unit name] passed away suddenly. [...] I was in a job that I did not know, in a situation that I did not know and suddenly my supervisor was not there. [My supervisor] was unable to give support and guidance and I had to muddle my way through figuring out what I needed to do, and at the same time, I had to make sure she was supported emotionally while she was in the workplace. Many people were supportive of her, but I also saw people who were just like, 'Okay, yeah. Well, you had your five days of mourning, so you should be fine now.' They didn't understand the depth of the emotion [...] And I remember that my office was down the hall and there would be a time [when] I could actually hear her start to cry. And I would just shut my door and go down to her office and we would just sit there. And I gave her tissues. She just needed emotional support more than what she was getting. (AA9, 16-17)

The situation got even more dramatic, as the administrative assistant's supervisor needed to go to the doctor, but did not have anyone who could do that for her. "There was a time [when] she got sick. I took her to the doctor because she didn't have anyone that could actually take her to the doctor. That was way above and beyond. But I didn't mind because I cared about her" (AA9, 17).

Destabilizing Gender Roles

Through their courageous acts and every day action, administrative assistants have the opportunity to destabilize gender roles by highlighting their work as planners, organizers and managers. One of them shared that "the best part is knowing that you're helping people and and trying to keep things running smoothly and the department as much as possible with as few interruptions and disruptions as possible" (AA3). Support, which is often associated with caretaker roles, is inherent to their position on campus. Organization and leadership, which draw away from the gendered expectations placed upon them, are also key functions in their roles.

Even if administrative assistants are not often expected or imagined to be leaders, through their work and narratives they show that their positions require professional skills that are ascribed to leaders. Administrative assistants see their roles as organizers, planners, creators, managers, and problem solvers. "I'm a problem solver. And I like to be a part and have a goal. And working toward it. I think I have good leadership skills, but I never want to be in charge" (AA7, 1). Another woman underlines how motivating she finds the managerial skills she needs to employ in her work and how important it is for her to keep the department running smoothly.

I like doing the math to figure it out and make sure that it's correct. And I like meeting the deadlines to make sure that it's in on time, that kind of thing. I like knowing that I'm helping people. Generally speaking, that's the best part, I think, is knowing that you're helping people and trying to keep things running smoothly and the department as much as possible with as few interruptions in disruptions as possible. (AA3, 5)

As chapter three discusses, it is valuable to recognize the gendered language in their narratives, but it is equally important to show the ways that they push the limits of gender expectations by way of their professionalism. Their roles inherently require them to work around the constraints of office life, while maintaining relationships. The complexities can be overwhelming at times, and they report the need to have the right tools to be able to react in a timely manner to changes.

Sometimes, whenever, they introduce new things that we have to learn at the office. [We] felt extremely overwhelmed with all the new stuff that was being introduced. And we felt pressured to get up to speed and learn things as fast as possible [...] It just seemed like they expected us to learn all this stuff and be good at it pretty fast and right out of the gate and that just doesn't sit right with me. You know what I mean, it just feels like their expectations were really high [...] It seemed like we were being piled on like too much was coming at us at the same time. (AA3, 9-10)

The actions of administrative assistants demonstrate that they reject in some instances the requirements of gendered work by highlighting the experience, skills, and attitudes they bring to their positions, which in many instances require leadership. Organizations could also collaborate in the attempt to curb the impact of gender roles by seeing professional development opportunities with an equity lens and providing spaces for administrative assistants to meet as peers periodically and receive targeted training. Equity requires support and development in relation to their actual roles.

Equity as Providing the Right Tools and Spaces to Interact as Peers

One of the administrative assistants expressed the effect of professional development in a way that accounts for belonging in the organization and feeling supported.

Anytime that you can leave your normal job duties and go for a half-day or full day of training where you're away from your environment, where you're with different people learning a new management skill, a time management skill, a people skill, is far more valuable and makes a greater impact on how you perform your duties and how you interact with people because you don't have to worry about your phone ringing or rushing off to the next meeting [...] It's the getting away in the isolation that helps it become more ingrained in what you do every day and can become a deeper part of who you are. (AA9, 8)

Creating training initiatives for administrative assistants to receive information about advising resources and contact information for those who deal directly with students in crisis would be a way for them to perform their roles in a more informed way. This would also allow them to elevate the need for help when the circumstances require it for faculty, staff and students.

Given the varied nature of their positions, allowing administrative assistants to meet together to interact as peers would be a step in the direction of equity. Faculty,

administrators, and staff usually have similar spaces to share concerns and important announcements and communications, brainstorm solutions to difficult issues, solve problems, and find a sense of belonging that extends across units, departments, and divisions. A couple of colleges in the University have implemented spaces for administrative assistants to navigate the complexities of the multifaceted nature of their jobs. In the experience of this woman, the most important factor of the time they have together is the opportunity to network, which she sees as the space to know who is the right person to contact in case she encounters a difficulty.

We do have monthly admin meetings [...] It's kind of for those who've been here a while. It may be a refresher on how to do something or for those of us that are new it's a PowerPoint presentation [...] But in any meeting that we have for the admins, as a whole, there's always a contact [...] Here are your contact people. So that's kind of nice because I feel that helps you reach out to the right person, you learn your networking, you learn who and what department does what. I'd say that's right now where the most growth is happening. (AA11, 8-9)

Another woman reinforces this idea and elaborates on the informal nature of some of these meetings, which seem to be designed for them to troubleshoot any issues that they find to be more challenging. This does not discount the fact that on certain occasions key presenters and University stakeholders can be at their meetings and give them the extra tools that would make their jobs easier and more effective. As we saw in a previous chapter, targeted support is a necessary ingredient of any initiative that tries to instill equity in the structures of an organization.

[The meeting for administrative assistants] is not anything formal, it's just get together and talk and see how things are going. And if we can do anything to help with some jobs like Runway, our purchasing system. Some people were having issues with that. So we had a training earlier this week on that. And that became nice and that was something that was discussed in our admins group. You know, things like that, where we talk about needs or issues that someone is having and we are able to get together. So we're kind of all on the same page and are better able to assist each other out. (AA1, 16-17)

A meeting of peers would not only benefit them in terms of resources and support, but also in terms of visibility. An administrative assistant poses an interesting parallel with faculty.

Faculty go to more meetings than they probably ever care, whereas we don't go to those kinds of meetings. And I think, why isn't our input, even if it's just with each other, why isn't that valued? We should be able to be given that time to have conversations like that. And I think it just would make everybody feel a lot more inclusive. We'd be less invisible that way. (AA3, 15).

Conclusions

The main objective of this research is to propose best practices to uphold and support women, non-exempt, administrative assistants at the University of Dayton. Their narratives point to the positive elements they see happening in their positions. They also make transparent potential improvements that can be implemented to achieve equity in their roles, particularly in relation to gender. As a summary of the report, we offer the following statements as conclusions:

- Gender lives within the intersections of: an individual's perception of their biological sex; the expectations and norms related to sexual identity by society, groups and individuals; and the way each person understands and confronts their own gender identity.
- Gender roles become a reference for individuals to define what their expected behavior is. These are also visible in the workplace.
- Because of gender roles, certain labor is considered *natural* or *typical* of a particular gender identity. This, in turn, means such labor might become unrecognized and therefore uncompensated, and in some circumstances, even expected. This is true for women, especially when they act as mothers, sisters, nurturers, and first responders.
- The first step to create gender equity requires making the actual roles and responsibilities of administrative assistants visible. This entails recognizing their rich backgrounds and the work they do with students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders in the University.

- Equity as visibility requires involving administrative assistants in areas where they are competent.
- Equity requires the actual labor women administrative assistants perform be recognized fairly, along with providing access to adequate resources for them to conduct the labor successfully.
- Supervisors are a key factor for administrative assistants to feel valued. Besides recognizing their actual roles, equity requires providing targeted support and reasonable accommodations for professional development and other personal needs. The Office of Human Resources at the University already offers clear guidelines with respect to these types of situations.
- Since advancement procedures are set at the unit level, equity requires supervisors to provide clear pathways for advancement and to coach women in the process. Guidelines and forms are available at “Human Resources Policies.”
- Administrative assistants can take an active role by documenting the particular aspects and tasks of their actual roles.
- When administrative assistants are pursuing educational opportunities, acknowledging this fact and supporting women in their efforts leads to feelings of belonging.
- The functions of administrative assistants are multifaceted, and require problem solving and a varied range of management skills. Spaces for them to meet as peers is a good strategy to close gaps and empower them in what they do.
- Targeted support in these meeting spaces would allow administrative assistants to feel empowered in what they do and allow them to elevate the need for

assistance when circumstances warrant. This would also allow the administrative assistants to connect students and other employees with offices on campus that deal directly with issues they might be facing.

- Because of the significant percentage of employees at the University who are administrative assistants or hold similar roles, and due to the vital functions they perform in their units, including them on University committees as active members would be a step toward equity in terms of visibility and voice. This might be already happening in the University, but some women express that they don't know if that is the case.

Administrative assistants see their voices, actions, and lenses as key for stakeholders to know what is happening in an organization. "I kind of often refer to, if you really want to know how something's run or how something works, you go to the person that's in the trenches. They're the ones that are digging. There are the ones that they see everything that goes on" (AA5, 16). Administrative assistants aspire to be heard for the solutions to the issues that affect them, granting them not only the visibility they deserve but an opportunity to imagine equity in a way that most fits their needs and hopes. The aim of this report has been to showcase the many narratives of women administrative assistants while honoring their experiences. The recommendations made within this report are what the authors have found to be best practices based on these narratives, and could serve as models at other similar institutions and for other types of employees.

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Heather Ashley is a recent graduate of the University of Dayton with a B.A. in Women and Gender Studies and English Literature. Ashley will be continuing at the University of Dayton, pursuing a M.A. in English Literature. Heather's areas of interest include inclusive gender language and intersectional feminism, especially in literature.

Appendix 1

Questions we asked each individual who participated in the study.

1. What is your title?
2. How long have you worked at the University of Dayton?
3. Why did you decide to become an administrative assistant? If you want, tell us about your journey to become one.
4. What do you enjoy the most about your work?
5. Describe a time when you felt that you were an important and valuable part of this institution.
6. What practices, environments or structures in your unit or at the University make you feel included, important and valued?
7. Tell us about a time when you felt that you were left out or excluded. What happened?
8. What current structures, such as meetings or programs, help you grow professionally?
9. How has your department supported you in career advancement or professional development?
10. Is there/Has there been a space for you to share your experience at the University? If yes, how did this space work for you?
11. What would you recommend to your supervisor, colleagues, and the University in general, to make you feel part of the University and support you as a valuable member?

12. The dictionary defines courage as “the quality of mind that enables a person to face difficulty or danger without fear.” Tell us about something courageous that you have done or an occasion when you have felt that you have gone above and beyond.

13. Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix 2

GERF Post Survey

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study “Narratives of Belonging, Climate, and Courage of Non-Exempt Female Staff Members at the University of Dayton.” This research project is conducted through the Women’s Center and its Gender Equity Research program, in partnership with the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, and with the support of the Office of the Provost.

The purpose of this study is to recommend to the University concrete ways to improve the working conditions of female non-exempt staff members on our campus.

Completing this survey will involve a time commitment of less than 20 minutes. All your answers will be anonymous.

While we are using words such as “empowered,” “supported,” and “encouraged,” among others, we invite you to interpret these terms as to what they mean to you, and as it relates to your position.

Select the option that better suits your experience. There is space to provide comments in case you would like to.

Section 1: Questions

Options for this section

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

- Not applicable
- Comments:
 1. Being in my professional position is a result of a personal search and/or vocational path.
 2. The interview process at UD made me feel valued and included.
 3. I feel that my onboarding process allowed me to become acquainted with my role, my unit, and the culture of the University.
 4. I feel empowered in my position.
 5. I have a lot of varied experience prior to this position and I am encouraged to use the skills and knowledge I have developed over time.
 6. I feel encouraged to seek professional development opportunities.
 7. I feel supported when I find professional development opportunities.
 8. I feel that there are opportunities for me to express my ideas, hopes, and concerns with implied confidentiality.
 9. I feel content in my position because it is fixed and there are not many pathways for advancement.
 10. There are opportunities for me to advance in my position.
 11. If yes to the previous question, do you feel motivated to advance?
 12. I feel tied to a desk.
 13. I have access to information, resources, and people that allow me to perform my duties well.
 14. I feel motivated in my position because there are opportunities for me to advance professionally.

15. I feel comfortable asking questions to my supervisor.
16. My supervisor does a good job helping me navigate the culture of my unit and the University.
17. I feel I have enough contact with my supervisor.
18. I feel my supervisor is available for me to ask questions.
19. I work with someone, not for someone.
20. I only speak when I am asked a question during a meeting.
21. I feel that I can speak freely during meetings without necessarily being asked by my supervisor or other members of my unit.
22. My input is valued during meetings.
23. My participation in monthly meetings with people in similar positions as mine allows me to feel included and do my job well.
24. An annual review and a development plan will benefit me as a professional here at UD.
25. I think that my presence would be/is beneficial in University committees.
26. During my time at UD, I have been able to participate in key unit or University committees.
27. I feel that the perception of the value of my position has changed over time.
28. The Marianst values of the University of Dayton contribute to make me feel included through the way that they are practiced on campus and in my unit.
29. I feel that I am recognized when I do something that goes above and beyond - something courageous that is not listed in my position description.

Section 2: Demographic information

30. How do you identify in terms of race and/or ethnicity? Feel free to use a description that best suits you. You can use race (black, white), ethnicity (Hispanic, Asian) or national origin (German).
31. What is your sexual orientation? (For example, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, asexual, etc.)
32. What is your gender identity? (For example, woman, man, womxn, etc.)
33. What is the highest level of education you have achieved?
34. How long have you worked for UD?
- 1-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - 11-15 years
 - 16+ years