

## **No New Friends: The Desolate Realm of Higher Education/Student Affairs Pre-Tenure Faculty**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Institutional politics and emerging changes to the professoriate have potentially positioned tenure-track faculty within an academic labor system that assumes academic training and expertise guides their progression. This qualitative narrative study of 12 higher education and student affairs (HESA) pre-tenure faculty explored their navigation of tenure experiences at their institutions. Participants shared personal and professional challenges related to tenure in which they were challenged to negotiate academic and student affairs professional identities. Personal challenges included strained personal lives and relationships with feelings of isolation or loneliness. These findings offer insight into HESA pre-tenure faculty experiences as an avenue to better support this unique population. Study implications center equitable practices and community building.

**Keywords:** higher education, student affairs, faculty, pre-tenure

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The professional culture of higher education and student affairs (HESA) can be described to “provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 13). This professional culture consists of interconnected stakeholder associations which hold shared, collective investment such as College Student Educators International (ACPA) and

Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). Each of these professional organizations, along with the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE, 2023), have representative faculty commissions which support HESA graduate preparation programs or the departments housing these programs. Regional associations, along with functional area-specific associations, also have a vested interest in HESA faculty experiences as these educators shape graduate education to prepare HESA professionals.

These collective academic and professional associations coupled with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) set curriculum and professional standards such as the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies (2015) and the ACPA Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization (2019) that HESA faculty teach to emerging higher education professionals. Faculty teach formal curricula as well as informal or hidden curricula through professional socialization (Harris, 2020). We assert that this process of professional socialization is also a reciprocal relationship among members of the professoriate and within HESA faculty programs.

Although tenure-track faculty are a decreasing representative of the professoriate in higher education because of processes such as adjunctification, their scholarly and professional experiences are distinctive (Hutcheson, 2018). Faculty culture, particularly for HESA professors, requires faculty to assimilate and reproduce values, norms, and beliefs of their organization (Harris, 2020; Tierney, 1988). Yet, these expectations of social reproduction may facilitate affective tensions from being “constrained by traditional cultural paradigms and operating procedures” (Antonio et al., 2000, p. 376). Pre-tenure HESA faculty may be particularly vulnerable to these cultural tensions of negotiating the norms of the professoriate and the profession of higher education administration. Yet, there is no research which specifically elucidates their professional lived experiences in the context of HESA graduate programs.

Understanding HESA faculty experiences is an avenue to support these pre-tenure faculty who teach in graduate preparation programs which are “the primary site for professional training and socialization for student affairs educators” where HESA faculty “have the opportunity and responsibility to cultivate the next generation of student affairs leaders...” (Shelton & Yao, 2019, p. 157). ACPA Commission for Faculty and Graduate Programs [formerly Commission for Professional Preparation] (2023), NASPA Faculty Council (2021), and ASHE Council for the Advancement of Higher Education Programs (CAHEP) (2023) highlight the importance of scholarship to inform HESA faculty work. Moreover, in 2022 the NASPA Faculty Council (NASPA, 2021) acknowledged the important role pre-tenure HESA faculty serve in delivering higher education and influencing students’ lives, all while “faculty are simply trying to manage their everyday existence, family roles, and careers...” (Moore, 2022, para. 1). Understanding these realities can help institutions support HESA pre-tenure faculty who are in key roles for sustaining the field as faculty shape graduate education to prepare HESA professionals.

Thus, in the current study we posit that understanding pre-tenure HESA faculty experiences may allow stakeholders such as department chairs, deans, senior faculty,

and provosts to better understand how to support current and future generations of faculty to enhance the academic labor system. This goal is particularly pressing for HESA faculty, where the traditional values of the profession conflict with those within the academy or professoriate (Shelton & Ardoin, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to extend the current research to better understand experiences of pre-tenure HESA faculty. Findings provide greater insight into the expectations and responsibilities of those who engage in the professional preparation of HESA professionals. The following primary research question guided the study: How do pre-tenure HESA faculty navigate the various teaching, research, and service activities during their pre-tenure years?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is situated within a HESA lens through elucidating scholarship about specific HESA graduate programs and faculty. The changing nature of the tenure system and problematizing specific challenges of tenure-track faculty are also included.

### **HESA Graduate Programs**

There are 428 HESA graduate programs (NASPA, 2021) that train campus educators “who are dedicated to the growth and development of students outside of the formal curriculum” (Schuh et al., 2017, xxvii). Multiple studies have focused on HESA graduate preparation program learning outcomes related to skillsets and competencies of graduates (Ardoin, 2019; Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017; O’Brien, 2018). Studies on HESA graduate student experiences have also focused on the importance of supervised fieldwork such as internship, practicum, and graduate assistantships (Liddell et al., 2014; Perez, 2017; Young, 2019), and on avenues for professional development (Haley et al., 2015). Studies have also highlighted that HESA graduate programs serve as sites of socialization for future professionals (Arminio & Ortiz, 2016; Bureau, 2018; Lombardi & Mather, 2016; Perez, 2016; Yao et al., 2017).

HESA graduate programs are based on professional standards as well as values drawn from the seminal *Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2022; ACPA & NASPA, 2016; NASPA, 1989). These offer a foundational means for evaluating if programs are achieving benchmark guidelines for the profession (Arminio, 2009; Dean, 2013; Henning et al., 2008). Scholars have noted the necessity of assessment of these standards as a larger effort of overall program evaluation (Finney & Horst, 2019). Faculty have been challenged to question the competencies in advancing their progression by suggesting, “you cannot be competent in this system, you can only do competence over and over” (Smithers, 2022, p. 4). Yet, the role of faculty in teaching professional competence in student affairs through graduate professional preparation is a common expectation (Eaton & Smithers, 2020; Smithers, 2020). Also, within the context of professional competencies and curriculum assessment, there is little contextualization of the

experiences of HESA faculty given the centering of student affairs certification and professional competency (Smithers, 2022).

### **HESA Faculty**

HESA graduate preparation faculty play important roles in the socialization of graduate students (Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Faculty work generally falls into three main categories, (1) teaching, (2) research, and (3) service, which guide faculty work and set the standards for faculty evaluation which is often tied to pay and ongoing employment opportunities (Shelton & Ardoin, 2020). HESA faculty are key educators as, “For many entering student affairs, graduate preparation faculty members are looked to as not only professors but also students’ first confidants, mentors, advisors, and coaches” (Schuh et al., 2017, p. 545).

Faculty also socialize students to the profession, professional practice, norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes (Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). HESA faculty delivery of curricula serves a central role in socializing graduate students to the norms, values, and behaviors of the higher education administration profession (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). These curricula are typically rooted through teaching the canon of college student development theory (Harris, 2020).

Graduate students as well as faculty learn and adopt these knowledge and administration skills through this socialization within curriculum which make them agents within their organizations (Boss & Dunn, 2023). However, Harris (2020) describes this socialization and teaching process as “contestable” (p. 1) in which some HESA faculty may opt out from teaching the traditional cannon; instead, they will challenge the dominant lens which other colleagues may perceive as unnecessary or disruptive. HESA is often considered to be a low-consensus educational context open to many different perspectives about teaching and curriculum (Torres et al., 2019).

Additionally, some programs purposefully have faculty who focus on diversity, belonging, or multicultural competencies (Kelly & Gayles, 2010). These faculty are frequently women-identifying or from other diverse backgrounds (Hubain et al., 2016; Patton & Catching, 2009). Students of Color in HESA graduate programs experience racial microaggressions by well-intentioned peers, faculty, and assistantship supervisors and often faculty have to support students through these experiences while negotiating their identities as well (Linder et al., 2015; Linder & Winston Simmons, 2015). Yet again, there is a lack of deeper understanding about the experiences of faculty teaching in professional preparation of higher education leaders and administrators (Harris, 2020).

### **Experiences Within the Professoriate**

Tenure exists in a politically sensitive climate which facilitated the socialization of a new generation of academics into marginalized positions with neoliberal policies (Hutcheson, 2018; Shelton & Ardoin, 2020). The professoriate is generally misunderstood and lacking in support from the public arena, leading to questions about who else may not understand the role of higher education faculty (Hutcheson, 2018). Scholarly critiques of tenure typically have included interrogating the power

systems that co-constructed the tenure system which has benefited cisgender white men marginalized women and other Faculty of Color (Blockett et al., 2016).

In particular, female faculty are less likely to be recognized for their work by their male colleagues and more frequently report job dissatisfaction (French et al., 2020; Ponjuan et al., 2011). Although women faculty publish at equal rates to men, they also tend to be burdened with higher teaching loads than men and increasing service loads (Monroe et al., 2008; Rosser, 2004; Sax et al., 2002). Family obligations and childcare are often challenging for women faculty as academia can be unaccommodating to faculty with children (Mason et al., 2006; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

Moreover, there is a "graying and staying" nature in which older, senior tenured faculty retain their tenured positions (Camblin & Steger, 2000, p. 4). The number of faculty over 65 has doubled since 2000 (Kaskie, 2017; Witcher & Sasso, 2022). Furthermore, the faculty job market has become increasingly competitive for PhD graduates given that the market is saturated and "candidates are often expected to have several publications in leading journals, putting lots of pressure on them" (Larson et al., 2013, p. 745). Also, department chairs and senior faculty develop and define what constitutes quality and productivity, how publications and research are valued and weighed, and which areas of scholarship should be emphasized (Eagan & Garvey, 2015). However, the systems of academic freedom and tenure have been leveraged into a culture of scoring to measure scholarly impact (Youn & Price, 2009).

Pre-tenure faculty frequently report experiences of political tensions, academic bullying, racism, sexism, and social isolation (Yudkevich et al., 2015). These experiences in the tenure system often led to delayed maturation toward lifespan benchmarks including foregoing long-term kinships, home ownership, enlargement of the family unit, as well as engagement in leisure activities (Yudkevich et al., 2015). Other researchers have suggested there are gaps related to intersectional research examining different subgroups of faculty (Blackwell et al., 2009; Eagan & Garvey, 2015). Filling this gap is important, as faculty demographics have shifted to become more diverse across gender and racial identities (Kaskie, 2017).

The power dynamics and structures of the tenure process particularly marginalizes faculty of color and women (Blockett et al., 2016). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty and women on the tenure track often examines both sex and race, and some authors have included a range of sub-populations such as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, American Indian, Arab-American, and Native American faculty (Porter, 2007; Settles et al., 2018; Victorino et al., 2013). Given that BIPOC faculty are not a monolith and sub-population experiences likely differ, other authors focus on the experiences of specific populations such as Black faculty (Arnold et al, 2016; Patton & Catching, 2009). For example, Black faculty exploitation is a concern as the professoriate can be tenuous and complex to navigate (Patton & Catching, 2009). Race and sex relate to student ratings and service expectations which impact career advancement and retention (Blockett et al., 2016; Settles et al., 2018).

Women and BIPOC faculty may become trapped in a negative feedback loop of committee assignments. Some of these obligations may not be counted for tenure and promotion (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Porter, 2007; Settles et al., 2018; Youn &

Price, 2009). In particular, Black faculty experience racial microaggressions from students and peers and larger service burdens (Patton & Catching, 2009). A negative campus climate often leads to attrition for women and BIPOC faculty (Victorino et al., 2013). Black faculty particularly experience racial battle fatigue and cultural taxation in the promotion and tenure process (Arnold et al., 2016). It is unclear how the realities of the tenure-track experience are nuanced for HESA pre-tenure faculty, although one auto-ethnography specifically addresses the need for identity-conscious mentoring and support for student affairs professionals who transition into tenure-track faculty roles (Perry et al., 2019). Layering these identity-based realities for pre-tenure HESA faculty provides a more holistic view of faculty experiences as an avenue to support that career advancement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To guide the study, we used theories of doctoral and faculty socialization as a lens from which to understand what faculty are trained to expect in their work and to help make meaning of participant stories. Weidman et al. (2001) conceptualized socialization as a set of overlapping factors influencing the emerging scholar within the broader context of academia. Some of the factors included in their model of socialization were institutional culture, peer climate, interaction and integration with the institution, and the overall climate within which the scholar is developing. Austin (2002) raised some areas of potential significant effect on the socialization and preparation of graduate students toward faculty careers, such as an insufficient sense of community, unclear expectations and limited perspectives on academic life, and how the program prepares and develops individuals for faculty work. The dynamics of socialization described above provided a structure for the study to conceptualize what kinds of experiences faculty may go through during their pre-tenure years which informed the design of the semi-structured interview guide and make meaning of the data with participants across different institutions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this qualitative study, we drew from narrative inquiry (Tyson, 2006) to analyze qualitative interviews collected from 12 HESA pre-tenure faculty members. For data collection, we engaged in semi-structured interviews, followed by drawing from narrative data analysis (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). Lastly, the entire study was rooted in a foundation of attention to reflexivity and positionality (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021).

### **Research Design**

This qualitative narrative inquiry studied how HESA faculty negotiated their tenure-track experiences. We drew from narrative methods to explore the experiences of individuals through participants telling stories about their lives (Riessman, 2005). The selected elements of narrative inquiry such as thematic analysis (Riessman, 2005) allowed us to center multiple narratives. This approach validated participants' agency

in their lived experiences as sources of important knowledge (Clandinin, 2013). The researchers also drew from narrative inquiry due to the complexities of professional and personal identity expression of faculty which allows for the researchers to center, “discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality as part of a larger political and epistemological struggle for a better and just future” (Tyson, 2006, p. 25). Although we drew on the aforementioned narrative inquiry elements, this study deviates from traditional narrative inquiry in that the intent was not to focus on one individual, or retell a story in chronological order (Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 2005). Rather, general narrative research does not require representing findings chronologically, as there are various ways to understand and inquire into human experience as situated in relationships and community (Clandinin, 2013). The intentional use of selective elements of narrative inquiry allowed for an overall richer approach and understanding of the data shared across our participants. This study also followed the research design of similar studies about tenure-track faculty experiences (Harris, 2020). The following primary research question guided the study: How do pre-tenure HESA faculty navigate the various teaching, research, and service activities during their pre-tenure years?

### **Participants**

We used snowball sampling to construct an authentic sample, and no gatekeepers were used to avoid a potentially skewed sample or sampling bias (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Four initial participants were recruited through social media (Facebook, Instagram) and then participants made recommendations for others based on inclusion criteria. Criteria included: (1) teaching in a HESA graduate program at the masters or doctoral level; (2) holding a tenure-track position with pre-tenure status; and (3) employment at an accredited private or public institution. Current study participants self-identified race and/or ethnicity and gender. Notably, all participants provided their sex when asked to share their gender, had no known *a priori* experiences with the researchers, and were all from different institutions and academic programs (see Table 1).

### **Positionality**

Given our proximity to the narratives as tenure-track faculty, we engaged in processes of reflexivity to interrogate their assumptions and engage their positionalities to avoid complicity, invalidating beliefs, and reinforcing systems of power (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). We all brought our personal and professional perspectives to the study throughout the research process, ranging from study conceptualization to data collection, data analysis, and dissemination. Professional perspectives influenced our investment in the study, as we were all pre-tenure HESA faculty during early study stages and were eager to make meaning to inform our own careers while also using knowledge to help others in their HESA faculty journeys. Thus, as researchers we acknowledge our privilege and power due to our professional identities and the responsibility that comes with them to advocate for equitable workplace environments for pre-tenure faculty. We also brought personal perspectives to the

study, especially regarding social identities and framing the topic in a way that reflected our lived experiences and awareness of others' realities as HESA pre-tenure

**Table 1. Participant Self-Identified Demographic Information**

Participant	Gender Identity	Age	Race and/or Ethnicity	Faculty Years	Institutional Type	Administrative Experience
Chandler	Man	34	White	4 Years	Liberal Arts	6 years
Ira	Man	29	White	2 Years	Masters Comprehensive	3 years
Joey	Man	35	White	2 Years	Research Intensive	10 years
Khadijah	Woman	37	African American	New	Research Intensive	10 years
Monica	Woman	33	Latina	1 Year	Liberal Arts	4 years
Overton	Man	31	African American	2 years	HBCU	3 years
Phoebe	Woman	32	Jewish	New	Masters Comprehensive	3 years
Rachel	Woman	36	White	5 years	Catholic Heritage	8 years
Regine	Woman	35	Asian	5 years	Research Intensive	8 years
Ross	Man	31	Latino	3 Years	Research Intensive	None
Russell	Man	37	White	6 years	Christian	10 years
Synclaire	Woman	31	Biracial	2 years	Hispanic Serving	2 years

faculty. As a research team, we all experience different intersecting identities of race and gender respectively as either mixed-heritage Latino, LGBTQ+, or White. These parallel experiences created a shared connection with participants in which disclosure levels may have varied based on dynamics rooted in varying social identities. However, we believe our collective identities and approaches to this study helped provide a nuanced understanding of the HESA faculty pre-tenure experiences.



## **Data Collection**

We used a semi-structured interview guide which was developed by the primary researcher and reviewed by two subject-matter experts who were full professors of higher education administration specializing in qualitative methods. The guide included questions such as “In what possible ways, if at all, did your pre-tenure status influence your faculty experiences?” and “Tell me what it is like to navigate tenure for you.” The first author conducted all participant interviews in which data were masked to the other study researchers. Interviews took place on site at HESA professional conferences where the first author provided participants with a standard informed consent form. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and data collection continued until saturation was reached at 12 participants (Guest et al., 2006). A professional third party performed interview transcriptions to prepare for data analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

Findings were conceptualized through the interpretive relativist ontology paradigm in which epistemology assumes that the researcher cannot separate themselves from what they know (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Data analysis was conducted through narrative analysis in which researchers “make sense of stories outside of the context in which they are situated” which were located within political, social, and historical contexts (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 149). Data analysis also followed the general question of, “how does this context bear witness and shape the story?” (p. 149). This question was used to begin data analysis in which we constructed preliminary memos about salient concepts (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Saldaña, 2021).

An initial listing of patterns was developed for each participant using these narrative analysis documents. Significant focus was given to participants’ meaning-making of pre-tenure experiences, professional identities, and relationships with other professional peers (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). This initial coding process assisted the researchers in understanding how individual participant lived experiences amplified the convergence of themes (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Each interview was individually coded because of the nuances between different institutional contexts in congruence with this approach to narrative inquiry.

Interconnected patterns across participants related to the research questions were applied and sections of transcripts were structured into thematic clusters (Saldaña, 2021). Additional narrative pieces that did not fall into these themes were also identified. Two rounds of narrative analysis were conducted using this process to reconcile any potential incongruencies. Final narrative analysis documents were generated to further refine the themes using code mapping as an organizing heuristic (Saldaña, 2021).

## **Trustworthiness**

We continuously reflected on our subjectivities to remain aware of how they influence data analysis. The primary researcher conducted all data collection and analysis, the second author assisted with subsequent data analysis, and the third author served as a final reviewer for study dissemination. We then employed Esposito and Evans-Winters's (2021) trustworthiness strategies: (1) the use of an external auditor, who was a retired university professor from a student affairs graduate program with *a priori* experience and knowledge in that area; (2) the use of a subject matter expert, who assisted in reviewing and questioning the main themes and questions to clarify researcher bias; and (3) member checking using the interview transcript data and preliminary analysis. None of our participants suggested any changes, nor disagreed with the data analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings highlighted that pre-tenure HESA faculty struggled with professional and personal challenges. Professional challenges included difficulty navigating tenure and feeling like an academic outsider by straddling student affairs and academic professional identities. Personal challenges included delays in achieving adult milestones as well as affective sentiments of isolation and loneliness. Throughout the study, we mirrored both participant's self-identified language and language from existing literature, which at times results in the inclusion of both sex- and gender-related terminology for different constructs.

### **Professional Challenges**

The tenure system disillusioned the HESA pre-tenure faculty. They all described how the tenure process reduced their professional ambitions for scholarship because they had to pivot to service obligations to support diversity activities. HESA faculty engaged in what they termed as the "politics of respectability" because the "old heads," or senior faculty, policed their professional activities through the tenure evaluation process. This was coupled with straddling professorial and student affairs professional identities which made them feel like academic outsiders.

### ***Difficulty Navigating Tenure***

All participants shared they felt subordinate to their senior colleagues and described significant power dynamics. HESA faculty struggled with these faculty within their academic programs and across their department who were in other professional programs or K-12 education. They suggested that they felt powerless because they remained untenured and were perceived as immature by their senior tenured colleagues. Chandler described this age gap as problematic, because "[t]he gap between myself and my adjacent colleagues by age is almost 20 years." Older faculty often frustrated the younger women faculty in nuanced, gendered ways. Regine shared she "felt compressed by the male hegemony" within their respective academic departments who were mostly retired principals, teachers, or superintendents.

Similarly, Phoebe described the male culture in their department as “just like the show *Madmen*” in which hypermasculinity benefited men and subordinated everyone else. Synclaire expressed that she was excluded and poorly treated by other women faculty who assigned her undesirable committees that she felt pressured to accept because “they often say that they have childcare and that I wouldn’t understand these demands until I have my own children. I get told I have to teach the later courses until 10:30 PM because of this too.”

Participants ubiquitously noted that older faculty often pressured them to ghostwrite manuscripts even if it was not related to higher education or student affairs and assume personal administrative tasks through acts of servitude such as pet sitting. Multiple participants were pressured to co-author research with their senior department or institutional colleagues in which they performed most of the authorship and were only added as the last author. Overall, participants felt like they had little support or guidance. Monica shared her perspective about tenure:

I feel like the tenure system is really a structural barrier, rather than about academic freedom. I also struggle as a pre-tenure faculty member with receiving clear guidelines. I have had 2 department chairs and each of them provide me with very different guidelines. Candidly, I think tenure is a socially constructed system that is a bunch of bullshit.

Expectations were different for HESA faculty and often based on K-12 or professional education scholarly productivity, rather than native to the HE/SA academic discipline. Further, these were challenges expressed by all participants as they cited a lack of collegial and institutional support in navigating tenure. Khadijah expressed frustration about her research in the tenure process which required her to produce one presentation and peer-reviewed scholarly article per year, but “...there is one pool of conference funding that I have to compete with others to get. How the fuck do I get tenure when they don’t support anything for me?”

Pre-tenure faculty also shared stories about increasing assignment of responsibilities by their senior colleagues. Some participants were given extra service burdens by senior faculty such as student recruitment, committees, advising, and dissertation or thesis responsibilities. Synclaire noted, “As a [Biracial] Black woman who teaches in a masters level student affairs program, all the minority students and even professional staff come to me to vent.” These power dynamics and additional tasks led to sentiments of frustration and difficulty navigating the tenure-track in which pre-tenure faculty did not feel supported. For example, Ross, like many of the participants, described how he struggled with the faculty professional culture and negotiating the tenure process as a HESA faculty in relation to other faculty who receive more support. Ross shared:

There is this meme that my students often use with Donald Glover who is the hip hop artist Childish Gambino. When he was on the show ‘*Community*’ there is a scene where he walks into a room holding a pizza box and then walks right out as everything is on fire. I feel that this is my life right now. Everything is on fire, but I can only pretend to eat pizza. I cannot demonstrate any vulnerability or struggle to my colleagues because it will be perceived as unacademic. Our professorial culture does not allow for feelings or affective expression.

These difficulties navigating tenure were often rooted in differences between academic generations, as well as gender and a lack of support or guidance.

### ***Academic Outsiders***

All but one participant previously served as a student affairs professional. Professional identity was often conceptualized by participants as a struggle between the polemics of faculty or student affairs professional identities. Chandler noted this duality: “I received such mixed messages as I feel there is a lack of respect for our profession as an academic discipline and then other SAPros [student affairs professionals] do not trust me as a faculty member.” Chandler describes feeling unsure about how to demonstrate his commitment to the two functional areas of his career: faculty member and industry professional. These mixed messages contributed to tensions in navigating scholarly and practitioner identities which participants felt led to a diffused professional orientation. These two tensions of first not being respected as a legitimate scholar and faculty member by many other faculty and the second of no longer being trusted as a professional of student affairs resulted in feeling unwelcome in both professional homes for HESA faculty.

For participants, these professional identities held salience and they felt compelled to code switch because other student affairs professionals often saw faculty as a professor, and not as an administrative colleague. Their attempts to balance their professional identities led to tensions and Joey shared their professional identity diffusion:

As I progressed through my first-year as a full-time faculty member, I felt like I lost my identity. I did not fit into the boxes of faculty culture, and I did not have the hours of a student affairs professional anymore. I am so torn between my SAPro identity and my faculty identity. I feel confused about who I am supposed to be.

All HESA pre-tenure faculty were often questioned by other student affairs professionals why they felt compelled to transition into a faculty role whether or not they had previous experience in student affairs or higher education administration. Other faculty shared they encountered microaggressions from other professionals to not become a faculty member because they were not ready or incapable of making this shift. Overton shared:

I worked in residence life and in student involvement as a mid-level professional before I joined the professoriate. I often get asked at NASPA or ACPA conferences why I joined the dark side.

In addition to other campus professionals, faculty from different academic disciplines also questioned their legitimacy, which made them feel invisible or disrespected. Other faculty questioned the validity of their HESA research and their doctoral degrees, and this disrespect typically occurred in department meetings and cross-campus committees. Other faculty were often confused about the purpose of HESA programs and felt that the research was just about the “fun of college” as summarized by Synclaire who added, “I feel I have to constantly prove my worth. No one respects higher education as an academic discipline.” Pre-tenure faculty had limited connections with senior faculty or non-HESA faculty, and instead engaged in

collegiality with student affairs professionals or with HESA faculty from other institutions.

### **Personal Challenges**

The tenure system particularly positioned the pre-tenure HESA faculty with higher service and teaching burdens which they felt impacted their personal lives. They suggested their quality of life was better when they worked in student affairs or in administration. The participants cited the tenure system as frustrating and dehumanizing. They also felt the imposed system of shifting productivity and metrics associated with tenure shaped their professional lives and bled into their personal relationships. Participants felt this limited their capacity to achieve adult milestones and led to isolation or loneliness.

### ***Delays to Adult Milestones***

Pre-tenure faculty contextualized their individual experiences tethered to their pre-tenure status as a general lack of support during the tenure process as HESA faculty. They firmly believed their pre-tenure status negatively impacted their personal lives in what they termed as a process of *adulthood*. They compared how other faculty across disciplines at their institutions were able to progress in their personal goals and milestones. Russell stated, “I feel like I am eschewing life commitments to pursue this life of the mind.” Participants felt like they were engaging in forms of delayed adulthood by missing traditional life benchmarks such as home ownership, marriage, and having children to pursue their faculty career. They disclosed and described various ways in which they struggled to afford and matriculate towards these life benchmarks as highlighted by Russell and considered their low salaries as HESA faculty as preventing adulthood. In particular, women-identifying HESA faculty highlighted their lower salaries in comparison to men and other education faculty. Pre-tenure faculty shared their low salaries which they believed were compounded by high student loan balances accumulated in their doctoral programs.

Student loan debt was typically in excess of \$100,000. Ira and Regine specifically suggested this was because they had to take low paying graduate assistantships in their HESA masters and doctoral programs in student affairs divisions which forced them to take out more student loans for financial support. HESA faculty felt their student loan burden prevented them from purchasing a home, which limited them to renting instead. Rachel shared that, “My loan debt is preventing me from buying a house, and I rent because of this.” They felt they were not engaged in the same material culture because they did not make enough money and lagged behind their peers in achieving other benchmarks, such as having children or getting married, which they believed they were sacrificing to be in a tenure-track position.

In particular, many of the women-identifying faculty discussed their guilt about having a family or children and wanted to wait until tenure was granted. Regine shared, “As a woman, I definitely feel pressure with my biological clock rapidly ticking.” Women-identifying HESA pre-tenure faculty noted that their career as an administrator and then starting over as a professor kept pushing back their timeline

for family planning. HESA faculty compared these benchmarks to other peers in their personal or professional lives through examples they saw on social media, such as posts about baby announcements and weddings. These sorts of benchmarks were described with a sentiment of nostalgia and loneliness as pre-tenure faculty described maintaining these personal and professional relationships as a significant challenge.

### ***Isolation and Loneliness***

HESA faculty longed for the sense of professional community and camaraderie they developed as student affairs professional or cultivated as a graduate student. Yet, as pre-tenure faculty they felt marooned in social isolation and experienced difficulties with loneliness, as Monica suggested she felt “like Rapunzel in the ivory tower of academe.” Overton referred to his loneliness as a “desolate realm” because he suggested that pre-tenure faculty are left alone for their own resilience in navigating the professoriate. Ira further described this challenge as, “I think one of the biggest struggles for millennial [younger] faculty members is the sense of isolation...I go to coffee shops just to be around people.”

Any new personal friendships HESA faculty formed were limited to student affairs staff or other younger faculty and maintaining regular contact with old friends was challenging. Kim described how she connects with others:

The only warm glow I get is not from a potential partner, but from my screen when I am reading dissertations or student papers. When I moved to [insert town] to begin this position, I had no friends. Now in this interview...I still have no friends. I take trips home and to meet friends during the academic breaks.

However, there were some additional nuances among pre-tenure faculty. Women described making friends with other student affairs professionals but struggled to maintain these friendships due to high staff turnover. Men discussed feeling lonely and unable to form new authentic friendships, particularly when there were no other men in their department or when they relocated to college towns. Joey described the process of making friendships and struggles dating:

I am like the Drake song ‘No New Friends.’ All my friends are limited to the student affairs professionals on my campus. I really feel isolated sometimes because of the college town. I fear that I will never find a significant other.

The HESA faculty indicated that the tenure process was taxing on their intimate and amorous relationships. Only two participants (Ross, Monica) were currently living with their partner and others were ashamed of their current situations and unsure how to move forward in their thirties. Khadijah stated:

I signed up for online dating services...I have to literally lie and say that I am a teacher and then tell them I am a professor after a few dates. Why should I have to dumb myself down to accommodate male fragility?

Phoebe candidly disclosed that the strain of the tenure process may have influenced their partner’s decision to separate from them:

I am divorced. That is such a blunt statement and I hate to say it aloud. My husband was tired of supporting my ups and downs with the tenure process. I had to keep assuming more responsibility which took time away from my marriage. I feel like a failure. My career success has cost me in my personal life, and I find

it difficult to move on, so I continue to be a workaholic to avoid my feelings. I feel like I will be a cat lady wearing Thanksgiving sweaters in June very soon.

For HESA pre-tenure faculty, these experiences of isolation, failed intimate relationships, and loneliness connected to their tenure process were all related to other issues with mental health. Overton highlighted this concern, stating that his work was “done in such isolation, that I forgot how to be successful at socializing. I struggle with depression and intimate relationships. I no longer know how to be vulnerable or my truest self.”

These personal challenges of professional adulthood shared by the participants were about forming relationships and progressing towards their expected life benchmarks. Personal or strained relationships often led to sentiments of isolation and lack of connection to others. Relationship challenges conveyed by pre-tenure HESA faculty also related to some identity diffusion about their professional role.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study contributes to an ongoing scholarly conversation about faculty experiences by adding nuanced perspectives on how pre-tenure HESA faculty negotiated their tenure process. This tenure experience negotiation included personal and professional challenges within their tenure experiences that were professionally marginalizing and taxing on their personal lives. These findings from this research further nuance the experiences of HESA faculty and extend support for extant research about the socialization experiences of tenure-track faculty.

Our discussion is couched within the study framework of doctoral and faculty socialization (Austin, 2002; Weidman et al., 2001) to understand faculty pre-tenure experiences. Participant stories reflected how socialization involved overlapping factors of negotiating the institution, peers, and broader climate (Weidman et al., 2001). These realities connected to participants’ faculty career socialization related to a potential lack of preparation and clear expectations, lack of community, and unrealistic expectations around academic life (Austin, 2001). Notably, HESA faculty were our population of interest based on our experiences and expertise, but we discovered that many findings could potentially apply to other populations beyond our field.

Personally, pre-tenure HESA faculty struggled to work towards traditional life benchmarks of “adulthood” they associated with others their age such as home ownership or marriage. Participants felt saddled by student loan debt and inhibited by lower salaries. They felt reminded by their lack of progression towards adult benchmarks such as having children by comparing themselves to others on social media. These faculty felt isolated and lonely as they struggled to maintain personal relationships and sustained professional connections. These findings about the personal struggles of tenure-track faculty support existing research which highlight the personal tax accrued for professional achievements (Yudkevich et al., 2015).

Professionally, women-identifying faculty were assigned more service and higher expectations for the labors of mentoring which supports extant research findings (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Porter, 2007; Settles et al., 2018). Moreover, all faculty faced conflict with senior faculty, high service burdens, marginalization from

other academic disciplines, and struggled to manage expectations of other academics and student affairs professionals. These findings mirror research which suggested that younger faculty are more likely to struggle across their intersecting personal and professional lives (Hoeller, 2014). Personally, these experiences led to challenges with social isolation and delayed maturation toward lifespan benchmarks such as home ownership or having a family (Yudkevich et al., 2015). Pre-tenure HESA faculty community, connectedness, and clearer guidelines for tenure. Lacking these elements led to professional identity diffusion in their need for recognition. These issues are consistent with research suggesting that younger faculty struggle with role ambiguity and have a higher need for community and collaboration (Manning, 2017).

Pre-tenure HESA professors are a newer class of faculty which mirrors the evolution of the professoriate across HESA graduate programs. These individuals are *post-praxis* in that their primary identity is assumed to be as professor, rather than student affairs professional (Manning, 2017). They assume a more cosmopolitan scholarly identity rather than a more local identity of the student affairs professional (Manning, 2017). Many had limited professional experience beyond the entry-level or new professional classification (typically classified as 0-3 years). However, participants in the current study cited their experiences based on their research and teaching roles and shared little about their HESA practitioner professional experiences even when prompted in interviews.

Based on the study, integration and treatment of pre-tenure HESA faculty may be a contradiction of the values of student affairs and higher education. While the core values of the profession of student affairs are outlined within *The Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV) or other historical documents, it is stressed that higher education's purpose is to not only transmit knowledge, but to develop learners who see the world beyond themselves (NASPA, 1989). Yet, student affairs was described as a low-consensus educational context (Torres et al., 2019).

This tension is expressed by pre-tenure HESA faculty in this study who identified feeling insufficiently supported as junior faculty. They perceived that tenure track realities of a competitive, less-collaborative faculty culture were at odds with the collective, humanizing, constructive values, and foundations of HESA culture. Participant experiences reflected research on problematic faculty labor expectations, as the nature of faculty work was an additional difficulty to navigate with little individual agency and with invisible or uncompensated labor (Yudkevich et al., 2015). Overall, participant stories highlighted key themes from existing literature while providing a nuanced understanding of pre-tenure HESA faculty experiences.

## **Limitations**

This study has some acknowledged limitations such as a small heterogeneous sample of tenure-track faculty from HESA programs. The researchers of this study are faculty members and may have perceived *a priori* participant knowledge which may have influenced the responses of the participants. Participants may have selectively disclosed details of their experiences given their potential knowledge of or relationship with the researchers. Given these considerations, the results are not



necessarily transferable across all faculty demographics despite a heterogeneous sample of participants and institutional types.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

These study findings illustrate that tenure as a social institution of expectation and evaluative performance holds to standards that may not accurately represent the effort and commitment provided by pre-tenure HESA faculty. Tenure processes were designed for academic freedom pursuits in a previous era of higher education with scant updating of teaching, scholarly, and service expectations in ways that provide support for faculty (Hutcheson, 2018).

Pre-tenure HESA faculty experiences illustrate the need to review how faculty are incorporated, developed, and supported in HESA graduate programs. Individual faculty members are ultimately responsible for navigating academia, and untenured or non-tenure-track faculty may not be able to express agency or even identify areas in which they need support (Hutcheson, 2018). Given that participants reported similar experiences, institutional leaders can use this knowledge to review and recommit to the values of the HESA field within the purview of faculty work.

Study findings indicate a lack of ambiguity about navigating tenure, including a lack of clarity on how to be successful in the process. To alleviate this ambiguity and lack of clarity, we suggest multiple formal feedback milestones via departmental and college-level evaluations of pre-tenure faculty during years three through five of a faculty member's progress toward tenure. These evaluations could be included in the faculty member's application for promotion and tenure. If a faculty member receives support and praise for their work in teaching, scholarship, and service in these evaluations, then this support of positive performance should be taken into consideration during the promotion and tenure review process (leaving less ambiguity of the faculty member's quality of work for promotion). Also, during such evaluative processes, faculty members can be given direct feedback regarding their progress regarding teaching, scholarship, and service. If a faculty member has been engaging in well-supported and meaningful service to a point of detriment in their areas of scholarship or teaching, then those evaluating the faculty member can be much more specific in the reprioritization of these tasks as the faculty member progresses.

In support of tenure navigation, pre-tenure HESA faculty negotiated unclear expectations or responsibilities. There should be a career ladder approach for pre-tenure HESA faculty that allows them to assume progressive responsibility for program administration (Victorino et al., 2013). These career ladder approaches should also consider the impact of cultural taxation in which Black HESA faculty or other Faculty of Color are placed with higher service burdens (Patton & Catching, 2009), which was reflected in the current study when pre-tenure HESA faculty struggled to balance teaching, research, and service expectations. They were forced to assume greater obligations across all three domains and there needs to be greater equilibrium by letting faculty decide their own service and research obligations (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011).

Study findings also highlighted personal and professional challenges regarding being academic outsiders and feelings of isolation and loneliness. As such, we suggest

centering ways to help pre-tenure faculty develop community. Institutions can implement intentional mentoring programs and find ways to connect pre-tenure HESA faculty to others in similar life and career stages. Particularly, participants wanted to connect with others and felt isolated. Additional efforts could be made to organize writing retreats or other professional development events such as “teach ins” or identity-based, faculty interest groups as opportunities for social connection. These opportunities would be highly salient for Black HESA faculty or other Faculty of Color by facilitating an increased sense of belonging (Patton & Catching, 2009). Building in this intentional community can provide support for those in similar life stages who may also feel challenges to adult milestones that our participants noted, resulting in less feelings of isolation.

Future research should consider the limitations of these findings and further explore the experiences of other HESA faculty such as those in contingent (adjunct) and clinical (teaching) roles. Future research should also consider how previous professional experience may facilitate different scholarly identities such as focusing on student affairs, higher education, and/or critical scholarship. Additional research is needed to better understand the experience of HESA faculty which may illuminate the ways in which their experiences can be improved.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest that the HESA academic discipline is still evolving in which cultures from the profession buttress against those of traditional academia. In this sample of pre-tenure HESA faculty, participants lacked social connectedness concurrent with quality of life and tenure navigation issues, as well as issues of professional self-worth and agency. Additional roles were often given to pre-tenure HESA faculty as a response to their gender identities, as expected or required as part of their HESA faculty roles. For these issues to exist within student affairs graduate preparation programs, it suggests a disconnect between the espoused and de facto values of the field when operationalized via the treatment of pre-tenure HESA faculty. Knowledge from participant stories can guide practice for improving the experiences of pre-tenure HESA faculty.

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