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Catholic Women's College Students' Constructions of Identity: Influences of Faculty and Staff on Students' Personal and Professional Self-Understanding

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This article investigates the influence of faculty and staff on women students' constructions of their personal and professional identities. Situated in two Catholic women's colleges, this qualitative study analyzes the ways in which in-class and out-of-class interactions among students, faculty, and staff helped students envision their future intentions. Students described ways in which college personnel served as career role models, modeled a work/family balance, and advised them as they planned for their futures. This study's implications for the empowerment of women at both Catholic women's colleges and nonreligiously affiliated coeducational institutions relate to the benefits of college personnel who model a personal and professional life balance, the need to consider both service and leadership in learning experiences, and the ways in which institutions articulate their missions to students.

Women's colleges have consistently exerted positive influences on their students, including on their leadership and professional development (Riordan, 1994; Wolf-Wendel, 2003). Women's colleges aligned with the Catholic Church are unique within this group, as the Church holds particular perspectives related to women's roles in church and society (Goodstein, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2003; Poulson &

Higgins, 2003). In this article, we present an investigation of how involvement in a Catholic women's college affects students' personal and professional identities. Specifically, we look at how faculty and staff interactions influence students' constructions of their identities during college, as well as how they influence students' plans to negotiate personal and professional identities upon graduation. As researchers and practitioners attempt to craft practices that provide developmentally useful experiences for women in their institutions, the need to understand the roles of faculty and staff is critical.

Women in College: Literature on Context, Development, and Life Choices

Knowledge that informs our inquiry is focused in four areas. This section briefly discusses the present status of knowledge in each of these areas and articulates how our research contributes to and advances each of the areas. Specifically, the areas of research relevant to this study include (1) women's colleges, including Catholic women's colleges, (2) women's experiences in higher education, including their identity development, (3) faculty, staff, and student interactions, and (4) women's life choices related to work, family, and identity.

Women's Colleges

There are currently 52 women's colleges and universities in the United States (Women's College Coalition, 2009). Most women's colleges today are private, 4-year institutions. Many are either independent non-profit institutions or affiliated with the Catholic Church, and they tend to have smaller enrollments than most institutions of higher education (Harwarth, Maline, & DeBra, 1997). Still, women's colleges enrolled over 90,000 students in the fall of 2005 and granted nearly 19,000 associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees to females in 2005–2006 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2007).

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church in America, with 66 million members (Stange, 2009). There are 7.6 million students in Catholic education at all levels, including elementary and secondary schools, religious education programs, colleges and universities,

and seminaries (National Catholic Educational Association, 2009), and 245 Catholic degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States, including colleges, universities, and seminaries that offer academic degrees to lay students (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, 2005). Fifteen of these institutions are Catholic women's colleges (Women's College Coalition, 2009).

Existing literature related to women's colleges most often compares them to coeducational institutions. Studies focus on women's experiences, perceptions, choices, and aspirations while in college (Bank, 2003; Bressler & Wendel, 1980; Harwarth et al., 1997; Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, & Kuh, 2007; Lentz, 1980; Miller-Bernal, 1993, 1989; Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2006; Smith, 1990; Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995; Solnick, 1995; Tidball, Smith, Tidball, & Wolf-Wendel, 1999) and on the educational and occupational achievement of women after graduation (Giele, 1987; Harwarth et al., 1997; Oates & Williamson, 1978; Riordan, 1994; Tidball, 1980, 1989; Tidball et al., 1999). Significant positive effects of attending a women's college are noted in most studies, although studies of women's college students have been criticized for inadequately addressing the differences between students who choose to enroll at women's colleges and students who enroll at coeducational institutions (Wolf-Wendel, 2003). Also, students at women's colleges may be less satisfied with their social lives than women students at coeducational institutions (Smith, 1990). Still, according to various studies, women's college graduates are generally more satisfied with their college experience and have more academic and social self-confidence. Further, women's college graduates are more likely than female graduates from coeducational institutions to choose traditionally male-dominated areas of study, earn doctorates later in life, and be listed in *Who's Who of American Women*.

Many studies of women's colleges include data from the Seven Sisters colleges, the most elite women's colleges, and ignore Catholic women's colleges. This limits our knowledge of Catholic colleges because they differ from other women's and men's institutions in their history, values, and goals (McCarthy, 1989; Poulson & Higgins, 2003; Schier & Russett, 2002). The emphasis on spiritual growth, service, and leadership, and the explicit attentiveness to women's needs in Catholic women's colleges likely affect how faculty and staff view their roles and relationships with students.

Women's Experiences in Higher Education

Unlike the literature on women's experiences within Catholic women's colleges, there is a great deal of literature relating more generally to women's experiences as students in other postsecondary education institutions. Well-regarded texts have explored women's moral development (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Gilligan, 1982), knowledge construction processes (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Martínez Alemán, 1999), and identity development (Josselson, 1987), as well as issues that restrict women's abilities to take advantage of developmental experiences that colleges and universities might offer (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Vogt, Hocevar, & Hagedorn, 2007). This literature suggests that although women now constitute more than half of all university students, there remain areas of concern in the developmental experiences that are available to women students. This is perhaps especially apparent in many fields associated with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, particularly in coeducational institutions, where women remain in low numbers as students and faculty (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008). After finding that women students are less affected by academic engagement than men, Sax (2008) calls for a rethinking of common practices that are assumed to be uniformly beneficial to all students, such that gender differences and similarities can inform both policy and action.

Faculty, Staff, and Student Interactions

It has been well established that faculty interactions with students play a significant role in shaping students' college experiences on multiple levels (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, substantive interaction between faculty and students related to academic work or class expectations positively affects academic development (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Also, faculty and staff embodiment of the institutional mission in their interactions with students both in and outside of classrooms helps to create a culture in which students are both engaged and retained in academic settings (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). However, recent scholarship has suggested that at coeducational institutions, women and men may be affected differentially by their interactions with faculty (Sax, 2008). More specifically, for men, spending more time with faculty correlated with having less traditional beliefs about gender roles, whereas for

women, the opposite was true. Also, women are more negatively affected by dismissive interactions with faculty members than men, and “female students become less likely to consider raising a family as an important personal goal at campuses employing more women faculty” (Sax, 2008, p. 165). In her important book, Sax calls on the entire campus community to recognize the importance of understanding how different students experience college and to shape practices that are developmentally appropriate for those students.

Given that family and professional identities are key dimensions of college graduates' development (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the research reported by Sax and others above indicates a need to look at the ways in which college environments help students develop in those areas. While previous findings focus generally on gendered experiences in coeducational higher education institutions, our investigation into students' experiences in Catholic women's colleges illuminates important college experiences—those fostered by responsive faculty and staff—that help women develop their identities within a unique environment whose main purpose is to enhance the academic and personal development of women.

Women's Life Choices

The identity negotiation that well-educated women face as they determine where to dedicate their time and energies is one that is shaped in complex ways both by educational experiences and by other social norms and expectations (Glazer-Raymo, 2008; Neumann & Peterson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ropers-Huilman, 2000, 2008). Current research emanating from multiple disciplines, including sociology, education, women's studies and law, suggests that college-educated women wrestle with decisions associated with their professional and personal paths. This difficult decision-making process is not unexpected, as the construction of the “ideal worker” in U.S. society directly contradicts with our expectations for an “ideal mother” or caregiver (Bolton, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Williams, 2001). Scholars have examined some women's desires to mother their children on a full-time basis (de Marneffe, 2004), while others have suggested that some women's desire to be the perfect mothers leads to “perfect madness” (Warner, 2005), regardless of whether they work outside the home or inside. The current status of knowledge about women's choices to participate in society as

mothers and family members and as employed workers indicates that many women are placed in a no-win situation as they are pulled internally and externally to meet contradictory expectations. Some women address these expectations by becoming full-time care providers for their families. Some choose to assume professional positions wherein they have a family-friendly schedule. Some choose to rely on others to provide family care, housecleaning, yard care, or other household necessities so that they can work in inflexible positions outside their homes. Some choose not to have traditional families because this role is inconsistent with their professional goals. Regardless of the choice, it was clear both in the literature and in conversations with our research participants that women are struggling to forge their paths, and would benefit from guides along the way.

Guiding Framework

The intent of this study is to enrich each of the areas of scholarship discussed above by generating a better understanding of the experiences of college students in Catholic women's colleges. In interviews, students told us how influential their relationships with key faculty and staff members were in shaping their experiences and self-understanding. Given their attention to this facet of their experiences, we focus on how faculty and staff at Catholic women's colleges, both lay and religious, influence the professional and personal identities of their students. This approach illuminates how educators in Catholic women's colleges interpret and embody their role in influencing women's life choices related to work, family, and identity.

Leaders from educational and broader social sectors emphasize the need to create a well-prepared workforce and to develop and sustain community-oriented citizens. They also draw attention to the need for strong families with members, both men and women, who are able to dedicate their time to the development of those families. If we are to construct educational institutions that help women students, who now make up more than 57% of the undergraduate population (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2007), develop in ways that are beneficial to the multiple communities they will inhabit, a great deal can be learned from women who have attended college in settings that purposefully focus on their development as leaders and women.

Methods

The data informing this research were gathered from interviews conducted with 26 seniors at two Catholic women's colleges. Interviews lasted for approximately 45–90 minutes and were conducted at a place of each interviewee's choice; most were conducted in the campuses' unions. All participants in our study were of traditional college age (in their early twenties), and all but one of the participants self-identified as White. Over half of the participants (15) identified as Catholic, and other participants identified as Lutheran, Protestant, and agnostic. Most of the participants perceived their families to be in the socioeconomic middle class. Participants reported a wide variety of majors, including communication, biology, psychology, physical therapy, chemistry, philosophy, and nursing, for example. We deliberately sought participants who had expressed aspirations to obtain a graduate or professional degree at some point in their lifetime. We used this as a selection criterion to ensure that those involved in our study were, at least upon college entry, committed to a professional identity. Although many professional women do not pursue graduate or professional education, we believed that this criterion would likely connect us with students who saw career as an important aspect of their lives as they entered college. Institutional research representatives at each institution distributed an initial e-mail request for participation to a random sample of students who had indicated in a first year survey that they were planning to attend graduate school. Those students interested in participating were asked to contact one of the researchers to arrange time to meet.

Interviews were conducted using a protocol that focused on the overarching research question: How do students at Catholic women's colleges construct their identities? (see Appendix A). Specific questions focused on students' constructions of their own identities, how they defined success, their educational and career aspirations, and their expectations for their futures. They also elicited information on the ways in which participants thought their institution's focus on women and Catholic affiliation shaped their experiences. In addition to the interviews, two focus groups of 12 participants (five at one institution and seven at the other) convened to engage in a process of member-checking and to ensure trustworthiness of our data.

All interactions occurred during the spring semester of 2008. All interviews and both focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed.

Data were analyzed using an initial coding scheme developed from key themes in the literature. These themes were initially grouped around how college experiences shaped students' identities generally and, more specifically, how those experiences shaped students' plans to negotiate their personal and professional identities after college. As participants expressed different themes, we expanded or modified our coding structure. Our final coding structure included nine subthemes for how college experiences shaped students' identities and six subthemes for how participants planned to negotiate their personal and professional identities after college. We used a multilayered coding process whereby two members of our research team coded each transcript independently. Then, we all discussed the accuracy of coding items and categories.

Students' comments led us to believe that their relationships with faculty and staff—whether positive or negative—were particularly salient to their self-understanding. Therefore, we focus on the following questions in this article:

1. How do faculty and staff influence students' self-understanding in college?
2. How do faculty and staff influence students' plans to negotiate their personal and professional identities after college?

As Baxter Magolda (2004) asserts, self-understanding is a key process in identity development. It encompasses interpersonal, intrapersonal, and epistemological dimensions and an awareness of one's growth and change along those dimensions. In our research, we listened for students' perspectives on how they came to understand who they were, recognizing that identities are not static but are instead interactive with the contexts in which they are developed. We listened for what students hoped for and intended to do in their personal and professional lives, but we simultaneously recognized that these choices were, like students' identities, embedded within contexts. Since interactions with faculty and staff have the potential to significantly affect students' college contexts, we focus on what students told us about how those interactions affected their self-understanding both generally and as related to their intentions for their professional and personal futures.

Our research is limited in several ways. First, this research was conducted at two institutions with 26 participants. Additionally, most participants were White and all were traditional-aged. If scholars wanted to better understand how diverse women students at Catholic women's

colleges interacted with faculty and staff to further self-understanding, a more diverse pool of students would be required. Second, an important question of research conducted on women's colleges is that of college choice. In other words, are the students who choose to attend women's colleges (and, in this case, Catholic women's colleges) different in some way than those who attend other types of institutions? Given this likelihood, our findings may have limited applicability to other settings. Within these limitations, this research is one step toward a richer knowledge about how students' interactions with faculty and staff influence women students' self-understanding, particularly as it relates to personal and professional identities.

Context

Interviews and focus groups for this study were conducted at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States that we will refer to as Aurora College and Regina College. The institutions were founded by separate women's religious orders in the early twentieth century. Each college retains ties with their founding religious community; in both cases, members of these communities live adjacent to the campus. Members of these religious communities continue to serve as both staff and faculty members at both institutions, although they are increasingly replaced by lay people. The mission statements of the two institutions reflect their continued commitment to women's liberal arts education in the Catholic tradition, and both mission statements stress the importance of leadership and service. Regina College explicitly values both ethical leadership and social responsibility, while Aurora College promises opportunities to engage in both leadership and service such that graduates are empowered to become agents for change and contribute to their communities.

While the missions of these two Catholic women's colleges seem similar in many ways, the institutions differ in important respects. Aurora College is located in a rural community a few miles from a mid-sized city. It enrolls over 2,000 women in traditional full-time day programs. Aurora does not offer associate's or graduate degrees, and maintains an academic partnership with a nearby men's university that allows students to register for classes on either campus. Forty-four percent of full-time

faculty members at Aurora College are women (American Association of University Professors, 2008).

Regina College serves more than 5,200 students on two campuses in a large metropolitan area. About 2,000 of these students are enrolled in a traditional women-only day program to earn bachelor's degrees. Other students include weekend students in various bachelor's degree programs; students seeking professional certificates or degrees at the associate's, bachelor's, masters', and doctoral levels; and women and men enrolled in continuing education. Regina College has an agreement with several nearby private coeducational colleges, which allows for cross-registration among colleges. Still, undergraduate day classes at Regina College remain predominantly female. Eighty percent of full-time faculty members at Regina College are women (American Association of University Professors, 2008).

It is important to note that the interactions described here take place within institutions whose explicit and implicit missions are articulated and enacted differently by various community members. For example, many student participants indicated that the Catholic focus of the institution was insignificant, inadequate, or simply went unnoticed. They identified many lay faculty and staff who deeply influenced how they saw themselves and their options for the future. Much less frequently, they noted members of the religious community at their campuses as being influential to their self-understanding. Additionally, faculty and staff are not uniformly positioned in relation to the Catholic Church or even to Catholic social teaching. Therefore, they may embody, resist, or simply ignore the Church's teachings in their interactions with students.

Given this backdrop, most students did not wholly embrace Catholic doctrine as they understood it. Most also did not believe that the Catholicism of the institution affected their college experience in a substantial way. They tended to believe that their institution's status as a women's college was more significant to their experience than its status as a Catholic college. Yet, many referred to Catholic social teaching as an important dimension of their current and future plans. To illustrate, many students at both institutions conceived of themselves as highly engaged in either leadership or service. At Regina College, students told us about leadership opportunities rather than service experiences. At Aurora College, students spoke about their service commitments without articulating these experiences within the context of leadership. Many

students seemed to take to heart the values of leadership and service that are exemplified in these institutions' missions, and noted the connection between leadership and service and Catholic social teaching. As such, the Catholic nature of these institutions may have had deep (and varied) influences on students' understandings of themselves as community members because of the institutions' explicit attention to service and leadership. Yet, we did not explicitly hear this connection from the majority of our participants.

Findings

In these findings, we first present data associated with how faculty and staff influence students' self-understanding in college. We then focus more directly on how interactions with faculty and staff informed students' thinking about their professional and personal identities.

How Do Faculty and Staff Influence Students' Self-Understanding in College?

The first section addresses how faculty and staff influence students' self-understanding in college by considering in-class interactions related to both content and pedagogy, as well as out-of-class interactions with faculty and staff.

In-Class Experiences. Students conveyed to us that their self-understanding is fostered through the college curriculum in two aspects: required courses and discussion-based classes. The two Catholic women's colleges in this study require students to take particular courses. In those classes, issues such as the roles of women in a relationship and family, challenges that women face in a relationship and society, and overcoming challenges to social justice are discussed. Consequently, as students told us, their identities as women are strengthened and they examine their values related to social justice and service.

Regina College requires all entering students to take a course specifically focused on women's experiences, and this course was commonly referred to by participants. Through the course and several others, students became reflective on women's positions in a society, historically and currently, as well as opportunities and challenges for women. For example, Riya said: "My identity as a woman has been

strengthened. . . . I have a lot clearer vision of what women are doing in the world and how gender does play a factor in society. . . . I think [these understandings are] mostly [through] coursework.” In contrast to requiring all students to take a common women-oriented course, Aurora College requires all students to take at least one course that is designated as focusing on gender. As a result, students’ experiences varied according to the courses they took. For instance, some students were critical about what they learned in class about the Catholic Church’s idea of the submissive role that women play in a relationship and family. Kyra said: “I do not want [the role of women] to be that way. . . . I think it should be more equal, not gender-specific.” In contrast, Deb’s gender class made her think more about the female caretaker role and the relationship she wants to have with her husband and family in the future. Although gender courses influenced students’ self-understanding in both colleges, the effects differed.

Aurora and Regina also influenced students’ values on social justice in different ways. Regina College requires all students to take a course related to social justice. Some students told us that they were aware of the privilege that they have in their society and the world, and that they want to work on social justice. For instance, Riya said: “Both classes have helped me to see problems in the world, in areas that I think I could make a difference in and change.” In contrast, students of Aurora College did not often use the term “social justice,” although many of them articulated a commitment to serving various communities that promote social justice and equality in the world, sometimes expressed as an element of Catholic social teaching.

Another noticeable influence on students’ self-understanding was from discussion-based classes that exposed students to different opinions and helped them further understand their own aspirations. For example, Maria emphasized that her discussion-based classes were “geared toward the way that women best learn.” Marie shared this view that her self-understanding was deeply enhanced by class discussions. In her words: “[Class discussion is] really stimulating, really gets me thinking ideas I’ve never thought of before. . . . That’s what got me thinking more about . . . what I was going to do to effect change.” Class discussions helped students become aware of options for their futures, in terms of what they want to do and do not want to do. These students believed the in-class discussions contributed to their understanding of both the world around them and themselves within that larger context.

Out-of-Class Interactions with Faculty and Staff. Through interviews with participants, we learned that faculty helped students identify their strengths and passions, provided varied options, and guided students in achieving their goals. Several students felt that out-of-class interactions were particularly valuable. Suzanne said: "I met with [a professor] outside class to explore options. . . . She really helped me to figure out what I was most passionate about . . . and what was very important to me." Rose said: "[One professor] makes it her goal to help me achieve [my goals]." Moreover, a couple of students stressed that their professors were easy to be close with and really cared about them in a way that helped them shape their aspirations. For example, Gwendolyn said: "[My professor] is obviously involved in my future and helping me get to where I want to [go]. . . . She is very down to earth and cares about me." Mal said: "[Professors] really care about who you are and really helped shape me into what I want to do." In addition, Stephanie's close interaction with her advisor helped her understand her interests and opportunities. All these findings are consistent with an empirical study showing that female students' interactions with, and perceptions of, faculty members are significantly associated with their scholarly self-confidence and aspirations (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005).

Generally, interactions between faculty and students furthered students' self-understanding. Students did not often discuss explicitly with us whether they felt that women faculty influenced them differently than men faculty did. However, when faculty members, particularly women, shared their life and career paths with students, it helped students become confident in balancing personal and professional goals. For instance, when women faculty mentioned their families and stresses, and used themselves as examples, it encouraged students to believe that balancing personal and professional goals is achievable.

In addition to the interaction between students and faculty, student interactions with student services staff functioned as a support system that allowed students to explore identity issues in a relatively safe way. For example, Maria said: "If you get in the multicultural office, they become like your big sisters or your mom. . . . They were able to guide me . . . from their own personal experiences." Moreover, Marie participated in a college-organized group about spiritual self-reflection and exploration, and believed that the questioning she experienced in that group was really useful, "By asking you questions, [it] helps you dig deeper into it. . . . That

has helped me in my personal growth.” Both faculty and staff played a key role in helping participants come to deeper self-understanding and in enhancing participants’ overall educational experiences at college.

In addition to typical in-class and out-of-class interactions, students mentioned a few other experiences that contributed to their sense that faculty and staff influenced their self-understanding. For example, Suzanne talked about a professor who introduced her to a variety of people who were working in her field and helped her narrow down what professional path she wanted to take. Additionally, some students also reflected on their own personal and professional development by observing faculty that they admire. For example, Rachel said: “I have some really influential professors . . . who took their own life in their own hands and did what they wanted to do. . . . [Then] I think about my own goals.” Informal interaction between students and their campus role models also helped students’ self-understanding.

In sum, students’ self-understanding was strengthened through interaction with faculty and staff at both Regina College and Aurora College. The curriculum structures and pedagogy had a significant impact on students’ self-understanding. Regina’s requirement that all students take common courses seemed to affect students more consistently. At both campuses, in-class discussions were also noted as being particularly influential on how students developed self-understanding. The effects of out-of-class interactions with faculty were particularly important because those interactions helped students identify their strengths and passions, provided varied options, and guided them in achieving their goals. Furthermore, students’ self-understanding benefited from women faculty members’ sharing of their own experiences, including how they balance personal and professional goals.

In considering the ways in which faculty and staff influenced students’ self-understanding, it is important to note a few significant exceptions to students’ positive characterization. These exceptions related primarily to students who did not view themselves as adhering to either the traditional “leadership” model or the “woman” model predominant at the college. One student, Jane, spoke of her experiences in this regard. She first described how her various on-campus jobs have reflected her discomfort with what institutional interactions were teaching her about herself.

There are things that quite clearly weren’t accepted in our office such as my sexual representation and my gender presentation. Everybody

in the office is very feminine with those cute shoes and the painted nails and their husband, and two and a half children and white picket fence and their quiet dog. . . . It's not that I particularly disliked the people in the office, but it was hard for me how they dealt with the fact that I was in relationship with another woman. And that I constantly felt that I was out of place because I don't present in a very feminine way.

Jane then noted that although she likely would have received outstanding professional development opportunities in that position, if she had stayed, she would have had to compromise herself to the point that she "felt kind of like a whore." Instead, Jane took a position with much less responsibility and growth potential because it was in an environment that let her "be herself." She is happier, although she has significantly diminished professional growth opportunities. "At the [place I work now], I am just another student worker. I have projects I work on, I make copies."

In this paper, we primarily stress the positive ways in which faculty and staff affected students' self-understanding. Indeed, this was by far a dominant theme in our data. However, it is important to note that for those who did not fit the image of what a Catholic women's college should produce, those effects were not necessarily positive.

How Do Faculty and Staff Influence Students' Plans to Negotiate Their Personal and Professional Identities After College?

Most of the women in this study noted ways in which college faculty and staff members influenced their plans to negotiate their personal and professional identities after college. The interviewees described ways in which college personnel served as career role models, modeled a work/family balance, and advised them as they planned for their futures.

College Faculty and Staff as Career Role Models. College faculty and staff served as career role models directly and indirectly. After observing one of her professors, Mary was able to envision herself as a professor, teaching the types of courses her role model teaches. Mary told us the following:

All the things that she's teaching – [that's] what I want to teach so I can see myself doing what she can do. . . . [I consider]: Is this what

I really want to do? And I'm like, yes. So I think she's definitely a role model, probably the biggest one as far as professors go.

Because Mary saw a woman professor enacting the career that she wanted to pursue, she was able to solidify her goals. As she later told us, it was her direct observation of this professor in the classroom that stimulated her desire to be a college professor.

For other students, college faculty and staff members served a more indirect role in their plans to negotiate their professional lives. Students in this study specifically identified women college personnel as role models and commented on particular things these women did well that they wanted to emulate. Participants described faculty and staff as supportive, appreciative, hard-working, respectful, intelligent, and well spoken. Tessa noted that one of her professors was "the epitome of what I would think would be a successful woman," noting that she was professionally accomplished and an excellent communicator, and also had a sense of humor. Interaction with college faculty and staff through on-campus jobs seemed to help students find role models. Marvel identified all three of her student job supervisors as role models. Working on-campus, she noted that strong relationships between staff members, student workers, and students helped a particular office in which she worked run smoothly. She spoke particularly highly of the office coordinator:

If you want to talk about superwomen, she's one of them. We call her our "shero" because she knows so much; she has everything in line. Whatever you ever need, she's there for you. And she can read you like a book. . . . That's something I really respect.

Marvel noted that others in her office connected well with students, maintained a positive perspective on life, and served as role models. She respected these women staff members because their strong personal characteristics enabled their career success. In their success, she saw her potential future.

As mentioned earlier, students develop their self-understanding within contexts that affect that understanding. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that while several participants mentioned spirituality as one aspect of their off-campus role models, they did not identify Catholicism or spirituality as important attributes of their faculty and staff role models.

College Faculty and Staff as Models for Work/Family Balance.

College faculty and staff also modeled a work/family balance for the participants. Six women named professorial role models who had exhibited a work/family balance that the students hoped to emulate. Most of these role models were identified as women. Some of the students, like Christina, had explicitly heard both individually and as a group from their professors how they were able to balance work and family commitments. She noted that listening to panels of professors talking about their own experiences in graduate school prompted her to think about how her various goals would fit together and helped her establish a timeline for her educational and personal goals.

Other women learned about work/family balance from their professors through class interactions. For example, Kyra's communication professor used examples from her partner and children in classroom discussion. Kyra found this professor's integration of work and family life very reassuring to her, since she planned to pursue a master's degree, attain a job in human resources, travel extensively, and raise a family and was unsure how all of those roles would complement each other. She interpreted the professor's work as strengthening her ability to be a good parent. Kyra described the professor's balance in this way:

In her . . . class, she would . . . bring in examples with her kids, mention her husband a few times. It just made me realize, okay, she can do this. She has her doctorate and she's very good at what she does, but she's also a mother. She would explain . . . certain commercials and how she was trying to teach her kids already about gender roles and things like that. That just really impressed me and made me think okay, I can do that, too, be able to balance both.

Kyra noted feelings of relief in seeing that a work/family balance was possible for her professor, and planned to situate her own work/family balance a similar way. Other participants also noted similar feelings of relief in seeing that balancing work and family was possible. Many of the participants saw their professors as "having it all." Danielle, for example, admired her psychology adviser:

She's a woman; she's got a family; she's got a very strong career. She's in a leadership position. She is able to balance a family with a career. . . . She's been able to find a balance that probably took a few years to find, but just being able to see it's possible [is reassuring].

Overall, participants were less concerned about future work and family balance than we expected. They reported ambitious educational, career, and personal goals, but seemed relatively unconcerned about how these goals would coexist or conflict in the future. In their focus group responses, participants suggested that perhaps they were unaware of how difficult it would be to pursue seemingly competing goals simultaneously. Perhaps the availability of role models who were balancing work and family helped the interviewees envision balance in their own lives and assuaged their concerns for the future. Or, less optimistically, perhaps participants were sheltered from the tensions faced by women trying to “do it all,” either by a campus culture informed by the intersection of gender norms and Catholic teaching about women’s roles that promotes selfless service to community, or by faculty and staff decisions not to share those aspects of their life. Regardless, student participants seemed optimistic about their chances to attain their multifaceted goals.

College Faculty and Staff as Advisers. Many of the students interviewed also identified college faculty or staff members who had offered advice and encouraged them as influencing their college experiences and plans for the future. Participants reported that their professors told them about opportunities within college and for after graduation. One student noted that a professor had first given her the idea to go to graduate school; another participant noted that a professor had suggested the field of study she eventually chose. Both women described their professors’ guidance as helpful and leading to self-understanding about their professional intentions. The professors did not dictate what these women should do after graduation; instead, they made suggestions that led to introspection. The professors’ suggestions were based on their close working relationships with the students.

Participants identified many professors who had encouraged them and offered advice, but they described their relationships with men and women professors differently. Students in this study tended to identify men professors who had encouraged them to pursue graduate school or a particular career. In comparison, participants identified women professors who had helped them deal with personal issues such as emotions or anxiety that might arise in educational or career-related situations. Rose described the way in which she needed special encouragement because she was studying in a field dominated by men. Rose’s expressions of emotion were often misunderstood and belittled within her

male-dominated and male-led classes. Rose's female adviser assured her that those feelings were normal and not incompatible with being a powerful woman. Rose described the situation:

I like to find women in power positions that I can mirror. . . . I like to find mentors that understand not only just the stereotypes against women in those career fields but also understand the emotions. Because a lot of times I think that a lot of my male accounting professors, the older ones especially, they don't understand when I get super frustrated, that I do start to cry. They're like, "What are you doing? Why are you crying? It doesn't make sense."

Deb indicated that all women are role models for her, as she is constantly looking for advice on how to negotiate her future personal and professional goals.

Two students at Regina College also noted that college personnel had guided and protected them in a mothering way. While the students expressed these interactions as positive, they may also be construed as overprotective. Jennifer described the professors supervising a study trip as "moms . . . protecting us now and then." Maria also described an experience in which getting relationship advice from staff in the multicultural office was as if staff members were becoming like "your big sisters or mom." Statements such as these reminded us that these women are just beginning their adult lives and that they are still finding ways to craft adult relationships with college personnel.

Students at both colleges believed that they would not have gotten the same attention at larger universities. They attributed their positive relationships with college faculty and staff members to the identities of their small, Catholic women's colleges. Rebecca noted:

[At another college] I wouldn't have gotten that same attention from my professors and the direction that I needed. [When I decided to switch from pre-med,] . . . that was a really, really scary moment for me because I had wanted to do that since I was seven. And I think that had I gone to [a large, public university in the area] for my undergrad, I wouldn't have known who to turn to. But because I had smaller classes and all of that, I knew my professors on a one-on-one basis and I knew [residence hall staff] really well and so I could go to people that really knew me as a person, and just get some direction.

This direction came in the form of career advice, models of work/family balance, and personal encouragement. While it could be argued that Rebecca may have experienced similar relationships at a coeducational and independent private liberal arts university, these students believed their experiences at both Regina and Aurora were unique because faculty and staff at their institutions explicitly foregrounded their development as women. A few students also noted that their campus interactions were situated within the social justice mission that is part of Catholic social teaching. Their interactions with faculty and staff, they believed, were important parts of their self-understanding in college and would help them construct their personal and professional identities after college.

Discussion and Implications

The findings about the influence of faculty and staff on students' self-understanding and plans to negotiate personal and professional identities illustrated how both out-of-class and in-class experiences were significant for students' experiences. The findings also illustrated how faculty and staff served as role models for career success as well as work-family balance and provided advice and encouragement for students at critical times as they attempted to make sense of their current and future lives. In this section, we discuss implications of our findings for understanding women's development in these settings.

This research falls largely in line with existing research on women students' experiences in women's colleges. For example, similar to other studies (Kinzie et al., 2007; Miller-Bernal, 1993; Tidball et al., 1999), the vast majority of participant comments indicated that they were very satisfied with their experiences at Aurora and Regina. This is despite the fact that most of them did not initially seek to attend a women's college when making their college choice. Instead, something about the college felt like a "good fit." Participants also felt generally prepared by their college experiences for whatever was planned after graduation, which is also supported by literature on women's colleges (Harwarth et al., 1997; Riordan, 1994; Tidball, 1980, 1989; Tidball et al., 1999). However, similar to Baxter Magolda's (2004) ongoing research on college students, some participants had not yet considered how to incorporate all aspects of their desired lives into a coherent whole. Those who had considered this question appeared to be at a crossroads in making decisions about

how to proceed. Most participants, though, indicated that they had observed and interacted with faculty and staff in their colleges such that when they were prepared to make those decisions, they felt they would be ready.

This research suggests that faculty members, especially lay women faculty members, are key to women students' self-understanding in many ways. While students did not talk about the influence of religious community members in any depth, they noted many instances when lay faculty members suggested ideas about career opportunities and served as intellectual role models. Specifically, women role models came to mind when students were asked how they envisioned their future personal and professional lives. In their capacities as professionals, women faculty members not only serve as role models but also show students both what is possible and what is realistic. In discussing with students the difficulties as well as opportunities associated with their personal and professional life paths, women faculty members offer themselves as real people who have managed to craft a life with both significant family or community responsibilities and professional responsibilities. In thinking broadly about why women choose to opt out of some science and engineering fields, it makes sense to acknowledge that if women do not see or hear women leaders in those fields succeeding in their various roles, then women students may not believe it is possible for them.

Given the gendered composition of faculty at Aurora and Regina as well as at other women's colleges, it is likely that women at these colleges are positively influenced by seeing professional women in faculty and staff positions. Many institutions do not have sufficient representation of women on the faculty or in senior administrative positions. This article underscores the importance of ensuring that women students in all disciplines see and develop relationships with women faculty members who will be role models for them, and who can help them envision how to succeed as a professional in any field and as a family member.

Through this study, we further learned that staff members as well as faculty members serve important roles in students' self-understanding. Particularly for students who found themselves uneasily positioned in a Catholic women's college because they did not identify with the "ideal" graduate of such an institution, interactions with staff members had both positive and negative effects. As with Jane, opportunities for professional development declined because the college's expectations for her identity were different from those that she had for herself. This suggests that, like

other institutions, women's colleges are not immune from enabling a culture that reinforces certain gender expressions and significantly limits others. Within the Catholic context of the institution, this is a particularly complex topic, as the Catholic Church circumscribes gender roles through its insistence that church leadership is primarily male, and dictates what is "appropriate" in terms of people's sexual orientation. As the feminist movement has long asserted (Lorde, 1984; Wing, 1997), restriction of any part of one's identity affects all other parts.

Faculty and staff members are well positioned to help students negotiate how they will respond to the multiple societal pressures they will inevitably face in their lives. Our research reminds us of the power each individual has in the larger academic community to facilitate students' experiences and development. It is important to remember the benefit that students derived when faculty and staff members presented themselves as "fully human," with associated complexities and challenges that conceptions related to being an "ideal mother" and "ideal worker" impose (Williams, 2001). In our research, most students spoke about the importance of staff with a range of responsibilities, including staff from food services and the president's office. They noted that their interactions with staff members affirmed or questioned the paths they wanted to take in their lives, and either provided support during especially challenging times or created particularly challenging times within students' educational experiences.

An important implication for Catholic women's colleges arises from this finding. If, as our participants suggested, faculty and staff are key to students' self-understanding, and if Catholic women's colleges' missions are unique and central to students' educational experiences, then such institutions may want to be more deliberate in ensuring that faculty and staff members help students see the purposes of and connections among the many values enacted through institutional policies and practices. While most of our students noted faculty and staff as being significant in their development, they did not often characterize lay faculty and staff members as embodying or enacting Catholicism. This finding suggests that Catholic institutions may want to examine the ways in which their particular enactments of Catholicism affect the gender norms on their campus and, relatedly, the choices that students make about their personal and professional lives.

The findings of this study, while drawn from students attending two Catholic women's colleges, have many implications for women's

development at coeducational institutions as well. This is perhaps especially true as they relate to leadership and service, concepts that are widely embraced in coeducational institutions today in the form of service learning, community engagement, civic leadership, leadership development programs and degrees, as well as less formal initiatives. We suggest that a combination of the two approaches found at Regina and Aurora would assist in students' negotiation of personal and professional aspirations. If women's colleges (or any colleges) purport to educate "leaders," without also considering how communities need those who are oriented toward service of their families and the broader society, women whose intentions are not to "lead" in a traditional sense may not feel connected to that institution. If institutions overemphasize service (and particularly gender-inflected and perhaps religiously informed understandings of selfless service), they risk failing to create an environment in which women students see themselves as potential leaders in both personal and professional spheres. It is important for faculty members and staff members to balance their actions and interactions so that women students see the full range of possibilities as they develop self-understanding and, by extension, personal and professional ambitions.

Conclusion

Catholic women's colleges offer multiple lenses for how women craft their identities and lives. Yet tensions in those environments shape those lenses. As Sister Andrea Lee, President of St. Catherine University, articulated, "It's a challenge at a Catholic women's college to say to women, 'We'll help you develop your abilities so you can be whatever you want to be—unless you want to be an ordained minister in the Roman Catholic Church'" (Rosengren, 2000). Faculty and staff at Catholic women's colleges are called on to help students negotiate the tensions unique to their contexts, and our research suggests particularly salient ways in which women's self-understanding and negotiations about personal and professional lives are enhanced by their interactions with faculty and staff. Yet, women in all college contexts negotiate multiple desires, constraints, and discourses about who and what they should be. We argue that faculty and staff at all types of institutions are poised to significantly affect how students—both women and men—negotiate the paths upon which they might travel and how gender shapes those paths.

Biographical Information

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Appendix A: Women's Experiences Protocol

1. Please tell me how you came to enroll at this institution? What does college completion mean to you? What are you doing right after graduation?
2. Tell me about who you are. Prompts: We're interested in some particular identities in addition to those you've mentioned. Can you comment on how your gender, race, economic class, and/or religion play a part in your identity?
3. Tell me about the family you grew up in. Prompts: What roles did your family members play in the family? Do you see yourself mirroring another family member in your anticipated life path? If so, how? If not, how are your plans different?
4. What is your definition of a successful woman?
5. Describe your educational/career aspirations. Describe other life goals.
6. How likely are you to achieve your aspirations? How do you see those aspirations as coexisting or conflicting? How will you negotiate/balance any conflicts that arise from those aspirations?

7. What do you see yourself doing in ten years? Prompts: Do you expect to be in the workforce? To have a family? Do you expect to be in any leadership roles?
8. Who are your role models, both on-campus and off-campus? Why?
9. You've been at your institution for several years. What have you learned about being a Catholic woman? In what ways do you fit that image?
10. How have your in-class experiences shaped your aspirations and intentions around work and family? How have your out-of-class experiences shaped your aspirations and intentions around work and family? Prompts: Specific situations/examples, and (a) friends, (b) faculty, (c) staff, or (d) members of the religious community.
11. Did you study abroad? Did that have any effect on your thinking about who you are and what you want to do in your life?
12. Does it make a difference that your institution is Catholic? Why or why not?
13. Does it make a difference that your institution is a women's college? Why or why not?
14. Project 50 years into the future. What do you want people to say about the life you lived? How do you want to make a difference in the world? How did that desire develop? Looking back, do you believe that this particular institution affected your life's path?
15. How do you position yourself in relation to feminism? How have those beliefs affected your decisions about your personal and professional life?
16. We are especially interested in the ways in which your college experiences have shaped how you think about negotiating the various roles you may choose to play in your future. Given this purpose, is there anything else you'd like to tell us?