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Higher Education Mergers: Challenges Blending Organizational Culture And The Influence Of Leaders

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HIGHER EDUCATION MERGERS: CHALLENGES BLENDING ORGANIZATIONAL

CULTURE AND THE INFLUENCE OF LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face when blending the organizational culture of two or more institutions as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. This phenomenological qualitative study drew findings from interviews with 12 individuals who have experienced a merger, are currently in leadership or faculty positions, and work for the Technical College System of Georgia. Using Moustakas's (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology and the open systems theory, the researcher sought to uncover the human experience of a higher education merger. As a result of the data analysis, the following major themes emerged from the data: organizational culture, community resistance, communication, transparency, relationship-building, model behavior, change management, decisive leadership, visibility, decision-making, and integration. Findings in the study provided details of the challenges faced and the influence leaders associate with leading a merger in higher education.

The study objective was to identify key strategies used to influence a sustainable and healthy organizational culture as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. There are several significant findings that suggest that leadership has great influence on blending the cultures of two higher education institutions as the result of a merger. A compelling finding is the noted community resistance to the merger for their respective local technical college.

Additionally, mergers in higher education present operational challenges that are unprecedented in higher education.

Key Words: Mergers in Higher Education, Higher Education Leadership, Influential Leadership, Blending Culture, Organizational Culture, Organizational Communication, Merger, Change Management

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, mergers of higher education institutions (HEIs) have become an increasingly common occurrence (Harmon, 2002). College mergers have been used over the years to address varying concerns, but there is currently a focus on the lack of financial and academic viability. Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs, and Ladd (2017), explained that, as funding for public institutions of higher education continues to decrease, the need for greater efficiency becomes critical. Harmon and Harmon (2003) explained that mergers in higher education are also used to address external threats, largely those related to decreasing enrollment and increasing access to postsecondary education. While the drivers of HEI mergers may vary from one institution to another, the intentions typically are "to ensure continued growth and impact, greater efficiency, greater economies of scale, better value (to both consumers/clients and share-holders), improved competitiveness, and in some cases, improved chances of long-term survival of constituent units, jobs, and/or work product" (Azziz et al., 2017, p. 1). Even with the ever-increasing decisions to merge HEIs, a significant gap in the literature exists. Research that defines the challenges college administrators face and explores the influence they have on organizational culture during a time of significant change, more specifically a merger, is needed.

Harmon and Harmon (2003) offer several ways to classify a merger; voluntary or involuntary, vertical or horizontal, and single sector or cross-sectional. This study focuses on the involuntary, single sector merger of two-year, public higher education institutions and the sustainability of a blended culture. Through the lens of organizational fit, this study determined the challenges faced by and strategies necessary for administrators in higher education to blend

different institutional cultures into one. Inherently, merged institutions tout positive aspects of a merger; more rarely discussed are the implications on organizational culture in the aftermath. Scanlan (2005) cautions that one of the most significant challenges leaders experience during a merger is blending existing employees from separate organizations into one cohesive organization.

The greatest fear surrounding a merger stems from the potential for job loss (Cartwright et al., 2007). With fear as a driver, faculty and staff undergoing a college merger will potentially create additional challenges by spreading rumors or untrue information among their peers, making clear communication critical in this seemingly unpredictable environment. The undesirable outcomes of many mergers have been attributed to the neglect and mismanagement of employee stress and the impact that significant change has on the employees involved (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Mergers of HEIs bring with them a different set of obstacles (McBain, 2012). Each HEI brings with it divergent policies, procedures and processes, culture, accreditation differences, and social dynamics. Due to the highly recognizable, deep-rooted traditions an HEI often shares with both its college and local community, leaders of HEIs are often under a community microscope during the process of a merger. Azziz et al. (2017) said that there are seven critical components to successfully lead a HEI merger; they include "a compelling unifying vision; a committed and understanding governing body; the right leadership; an appropriate sense of urgency; a strong project management system; a robust and redundant communication plan; and sufficient dedicated resources" (p. 2). Fullan (2001) explained that, during a time of significant change, it is vital for the leader to understand culture and sub-culture within the organization, making the

identification of the differences and similarities of the individual institutions critical so that the organization might achieve a sustainable, healthy newly blended culture. Thus, possibly the most important area of concern during a merger, that potentially requires the most amount of time, energy, and patience, is building a unified organizational culture.

Through the exploration of how individuals in leadership positions influence organizational culture throughout the merger process and in subsequent years, the behaviors and leadership styles that influence organizational culture can be better understood. This study identified leadership strategies that helped decrease conflict and fear while creating a sustainable and health organizational culture during a two-year college merger.

Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as a philosophy where leaders and subordinates work together to identify areas of need while focusing on effective communication strategies. A leader prioritizes their time to ensure that staff feels that they have been included in the decision-making process and that they are heard, resulting in higher morale, higher production, and higher job satisfaction (Burns, 1978). Conceivably, the most important area of concern during a merger requiring significant time, energy, and patience, is building a unified college culture. It is of the utmost importance that a leader develops a clear vision and communicates it to all followers, continuing to reinforce the tasks being completed during the transition process of a merger. Change is constant in higher education, making change management essential to understand.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research was to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face when blending the organizational culture of two or more institutions as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. This study identified leadership

behaviors and styles that are most likely to positively impact cultural change of a newly consolidated two-year college in the State of Georgia. As postsecondary institutions across the nation consider mergers, this research study will assist leaders who face the uncertainties created for faculty and staff. Participants included college administrators, faculty, and staff from colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) who have experienced a merger at their respective institutions. Through a series of interviews, participants' perceptions of the merger were documented and analyzed to identify the challenges faced and the influence of leadership throughout the process of a higher education merger.

Definition of Terms

Merger in Higher Education. "The combination of two or more separate institutions that surrender their legally and culturally independent identities in favor of a new joint identity under the control of a single governing body" (Harman, 2002, p.92).

Voluntary and Involuntary Mergers. A voluntary merger transpires when two or more institutions have initiated the merger, while an involuntary merger occurs when external factors force institutions to merge (Harmon & Harmon, 2003).

Single Sector and Cross-Sectional. Institutions may come from one sector or multiple (Harmon & Harmon, 2003). For example; two, two-year colleges are considered single sector. However, one two-year college and one university would be considered cross-sectional.

Organizational Culture. The artifacts, values, and assumptions of an organization which dictate behavior and climate within an organization (Schein, 1992).

Higher Education Institution (HEI). Merriam-Webster defines HEI as an educational institution of collegiate or more advanced grade.

Transcendental Phenomenology attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgments or assumptions. It requires researchers look at things openly, undisturbed by the habits of the natural world (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological Study "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their learned experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Research Questions

In an effort to identify the challenges higher education leaders face during a merger and develop strategies that positively influence the newly blended organizational culture, this research study seeks answers to the following questions:

I. What challenges do college administrators identify when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?

II. What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?

III. What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff who have recently experienced a merger identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?

IV. How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

Conceptual Framework

Although there are several ways to classify higher education mergers, this study focuses on the "involuntary merger" of public higher education institutions and the impact on the viability of the organizational culture post-merger. This research is grounded in existing studies of HEI mergers and is framed with an open systems theory through the lens of organizational

change with a distinct focus on the role of leadership, change management, and culture in higher education mergers.   In considering the objective of this research, the open systems theory best supports the argument that leadership influences the success, or failure, of a merger from the employee and student perspective. Open systems theory provides a framework for the analysis of the resistance to change that exists within the organization and assists in recognition of culture and subcultures of the organization (Bastedo, 2004). When institutions enter into a change of this magnitude, there are many psychological factors to address (Fullan, 2001). The open systems theory is designed to deal with complexity and attempts to do so with precision. It takes a holistic view or approach to how schools are viewed more like organizations outside of academia (Bastedo, 2004).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope

For all types of research, the researcher must recognize assumptions, benefits, and limitations in conducting this study. Some of the benefits include access to a large pool of possible participants at colleges under the umbrella of TCSG who have personal experience with higher education mergers. An additional benefit is that the researcher has the support of technical college presidents and access to technical college system office personnel, who can provide additional data and context for this study. For example, having access to presidents and college administrators who have led organizations through mergers for interviews and TCSG system office personnel in the data center provided supportive pre-and post-merger data. Lastly, administrators throughout the State of Georgia who have extensive experience in higher education mergers in both the technical college system and the university system were committed to participating. One limitation of conducting interviews within one's own system is that people may not feel they can be completely honest or they may choose not to respond in fear

that their supervisor will be made aware of their responses. A second limitation related to interviews was that an existing relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee could result in biased responses. To address these limitations, each participant was provided with a letter describing how their interviews would be used, how their anonymity would be protected, and how each would be provided the opportunity to review and approve their interview transcription prior to publishing.

Creswell (2014) said that when collecting research data, engage in five steps: "selecting participants, obtaining permissions, selecting types of data, identifying instruments, and administering data collection" (p. 139). Through purposeful sampling as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), college presidents, senior management, faculty, and entry to mid-level staff from within the 22 Technical Colleges under the umbrella of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), who have experienced a merger within the past 10 years, were asked to participate in this study. Data for this study was gathered through one-on-one, face to face interviews. Ultimately, using "interpretive analysis, common themes leading to representational generalizations were identified" to code interviews and identify themes (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).

In an effort to understand perspectives from multiple levels within the college, it was the researcher's assumption that this study's findings would assist future leaders of two-year, public higher education institutions who will inevitably be faced with a merger or consolidation. Additionally, this literature review has identified other areas of research needed under the umbrella of higher education mergers. For example; higher education mergers through the lens of faculty and staff satisfaction, and student success and satisfaction. Furthermore, by identifying factors that contribute to the successful blending of organizational culture, this

study's findings can assist future leaders in developing strategies that will guide cultural development and create productive learning environments.

Significance

As higher education institution leaders face increased scrutiny of financial practices, job placement, licensure pass rates, student retention, and graduation rates, it is crucial to stay diligent in providing a clear vision and modeling the way for faculty and staff. Schweiger and Ivancevich (1985) indicated that because stress develops more from the perceptions of the likely merger-related changes, rather than the effects of the changes themselves, employees are likely to be averse to changes that affect their daily routine and responsibility. The disappointing outcomes of many mergers have been increasingly attributed to the neglect and mismanagement of employee stress and the dysfunctional impact that such change events have on the employees involved (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996).

Continuing open communication and providing opportunities for faculty and staff involvement throughout a merger has proved beneficial (Harmon and Harmon, 2003). In particular, it is important for institutions to emphasize the potential benefits of the merger to both the individual employee and institution as a whole (Harmon & Harmon, 2003). The greatest leaders acknowledge the importance of understanding their followers (Kellerman, 2007). For a leader to minimize stress and fears over impending changes, they must first understand how the organization reacts to change. Mergers of higher education institutions bring with them a different set of obstacles (Harmon, 2002). Each college has deep-rooted traditions, procedures and processes, organizational culture, accreditation differences, and social dynamics, just to name a few. Identifying and learning the differences in organizational cultures is required by leaders to determine the methods needed to bring the institutions together.

First, pinpointing the ways in which leaders influence organizational culture during, and years after, a college merger assisted in the development of a best practices guide for postsecondary mergers. It is the researcher's belief that a greater understanding of a leader's impact on organizational change was gained from this study, further contributing to the existing literature. Second, through the exploration of how leaders influence change, links between leaders' influence and job satisfaction of faculty and staff were identified and led to development of strategies that will minimize conflict and fear while increasing performance and satisfaction college-wide. Furthermore, by identifying factors that contribute to a successful higher education institution merger, this study can assist future leaders in developing institutional cultures and learning environments that encourage positive educational experiences for employees and students alike.

Summary

This researcher sought to identify the influence leaders in higher education have and challenges they face blending organizational culture as the result of an involuntary, single-sector merger. Better understanding these influences will allow leaders to equip themselves with the strategies necessary to blend divergent cultures in higher education. As mergers in higher education continue to increase, the necessity for influential leadership strategies will grow (Harmon & Harmon, 2003).

Transformational leaders use effective communication strategies and focus their time to ensure that subordinates feel included, resulting in higher morale within the organization, increased production, and higher rates of job satisfaction. Research indicates that the most important area of concern during a merger is building a unified college culture. Research also suggests that leaders may underestimate the required amount of time, energy, and patience

necessary to blend organizational cultures (Harmon and Harmon, 2003). It is of the utmost importance that a leader develops a clear vision and communicates it to all followers, continuing to reinforce the work being done. Change is constant in higher education, making change management essential for positional leaders and staff to understand (Fullan, 2001).

When leaders disregard or underestimate the potential influence that they have on the success of a higher education merger, their institutions will likely experience increased conflict (Azziz et al, 2017). Ensuring that the vision, objectives, and anticipated outcomes are agreed upon and communicated prior to the implementation is vital to the level of turbulence the organization will feel during the process. Continuous communication is necessary to ease the stress, anxiety, and fear inherent when staff are trying to navigate a merger. Communication within the organization is multi-directional. It is equally important for there to be communication from employees to leadership and leadership to employees. When the lines of communication are open, followers are exposed to the vision and are likely to feel a sense of connection to the organization.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research study is to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face when blending the organizational culture of two or more institutions as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. Through this study, leadership characteristics most efficient as identified by participants, as characterized in the organizational change literature in change management and blending divergent cultures were identified. Inherently, merged institutions tout the positive aspects of a merger. Rarely discussed are the implications on the health of the organizational culture in the aftermath. There is a significant gap in the literature related to defining the influence leaders have on the success of a higher education consolidation, managing rapid amounts of change in a short time-period, and ultimately the impact on employee morale post-merger. This research was driven by the potential for gaining in-depth knowledge of how leadership influences organizational culture, and determining what leadership characteristics are most efficient in managing change as a result of a public two-year higher education merger.

Though several ways to classify mergers exist, this study focused on the involuntary merger of public higher education institutions and the impact on the viability of the organizational culture and job satisfaction post-merger. This study is grounded in existing research of public higher education mergers, concentrating on the relationship between leaders and the perceived success of the merger. This literature review is divided into two primary sections. First, this review provides a synthesis of the literature on the characteristics of a successful higher education merger, as determined by a historical analysis of public higher education mergers. Second, this study is theoretically framed through an open systems theory of

organizational change with a distinct focus on the role of leadership, change management, and organizational culture in higher education mergers.

Analysis of Public Higher Education Mergers

"The decision to consolidate or merge institutions is never easy, and the process is nearly always painful and costly" (Azziz et al, 2017, p. 5). As HEIs continue to face extraordinary financial and efficiency pressures, the environment for mergers is ripe (Seltzer, 2017). Changes to the formula funding model for public colleges and universities have created a national focus on enrollment and post-secondary completion rates, as evidenced by the creation of the Complete College America initiative, which states like Georgia have adopted. Mergers of higher education institutions are particularly challenging, but are likely to significantly increase in the future (Seltzer, 2017). Substantial literature concentrated in areas of change management, corporate restructuring, and mergers is readily available. However, mergers of higher education institutions have received less attention.

The federal demands for increased efficiency, higher job placement rates, and reductions in budgets have meant more state and local representatives are looking closely at the structure of higher education systems (Azziz, 2013). As higher education leaders face the scrutiny of financial practices, job placement, licensure pass rates, student retention, and graduation rates, it is crucial that they stay diligent in providing a clear vision and modeling behavior for faculty and staff (Azziz, 2013). Schweiger and Ivancevich (1985, in Newcomb 2011) indicate that because stress develops more from the perceptions of the likely merger-related changes which employees may have, rather than the effects of the changes themselves they are likely to be averse to changes that affect their daily routine and responsibility.

History of Rationale for Higher Education Mergers

Researchers have gone to great lengths to explain what a merger is and is not as it relates to both corporations and academia (Azziz et al, 2017; Harmon, 2012; Harmon and Harmon, 2003; Locke, 2007). From a corporate perspective, a merger is defined as two or more companies combining to form one large company (Gaughan, 2007). However, when specifically addressing mergers in higher education, there is less of a consensus on the definition of a merger. First, it must be acknowledged that mergers of institutions of higher education are fundamentally different from corporate mergers and should not be approached with these same strategies. However, many researchers agree that there are several different ways in which two institutions may work with together, from becoming one organization to simply sharing a few resources (Newcomb, 2011).

Harman (2012) recognized that a higher education collaboration can take many forms but ultimately define a higher education merger as a loss of control for one of the organizations. A merger can be defined as the blending of two or more separate organizations, with overall management control coming under a single governing body and one chief executive (Shevchenko, 2016). Many researchers agree there is a perceived degree of control or autonomy given up from one or more of the partners involved (Newcomb, 2011). Some of these changes might be procedural or "how we do things" and others might include restructuring entire departments or divisions of the college. Current research suggests that a merger is regarded as successful if the merged institution is still existing and are financially viable. However, little research explores the success of a higher education merger based on the health of the organizational culture post-merger.

Mergers in higher education began as early as 1939, first in Europe then Asia. Throughout the 1960's and 70's, educational authorities in Australia and Great Britain used mergers to create two higher education systems with one focusing on advanced education and research while the other focused on higher education through technical and career training (Skodvin, 1999). Mergers of higher education institutions have been used to address varying concerns like the lack of financial and academic viability in many institutions (Shevchenko, 2016). Higher education institutions have also used mergers to address external threats, largely those related to decreasing enrollment and increasing competition. These external threats include competition from for-profit institutions aggressive in their recruitment efforts, economic changes, and shifts in employment opportunities.

The driving force behind most mergers is the assumption of some gain for the new organization whether financial or otherwise (Azziz, 2013). In 2008 the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), seeking to improve efficiencies in college administration and ensure student access to technical education during a downturn in the state and national economy, announced a series of administrative mergers within the system. The mergers involved integration of the college administrations and local boards of directors, with all campus locations remaining open. The designated main campus of the combined college within each merger was named the administrative campus, serving as the home of the president's office, to oversee daily operations at all campus locations and sites (Koon, 2007). Mergers have been used widely in the United States as restructuring efforts, but more commonly as strategies to build stronger and more sustainable institutions (Millett, 1976, as cited in Harman, 2012). Cost savings and increased efficiencies or access may motivate many higher education institutions to consider consolidations, but there may be other programmatic, enrollment, mission-based, and outreach

implications that outweigh the financial incentive (Martin & Samels, 1994, in Fullan, 2016). Today the access to post-secondary education is much less dependent on geographic proximity to a campus, thus changing the landscape of mergers in higher education (Azziz, 2013).

Higher Education Merger Trends

The current economic climate suggests that mergers may become more common in higher education (McBain, 2012). However, higher education mergers are becoming increasingly more involved. Institutions must not only meet educational and financial obligations, but also the needs of faculty, staff, students, donors, and the community. Wambach (2009) suggested that a "perfect storm" has formed in public higher education, characterized by increased demand, decreased resources, calls for greater accountability, and changes in the economy, which have led to increases in mergers of higher education institutions. It is unsurprising that post-secondary mergers are becoming more sophisticated given the complexities of course delivery, accreditation compliance, different types of property owned -- both brick and mortar and intellectual -- and the complex cultures and subcultures that exist at different campus locations.

Most institutions of higher education are corporations established under the provisions of state law, and may have legal responsibilities (holding title to real property, for example) that require the continued existence of the corporation after the educational activities of the institution have been terminated (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2009, in McBain, 2012, p. 4).

Mergers are a response to pressures from the environment, or to put it another way, mergers often stem from a market-driven rationale (Newcomb, 2011). Increased scrutiny by the

federal government of colleges and universities to increase job placement rates, reduce operational costs, increase efficiency, and simultaneously provide more services to students, parents, and employers, has certainly been motivated by for-profit colleges that are producing graduates with large amounts of debt who subsequently cannot find employment (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013). Due to the for-profit business model, mergers are increasingly likely in public and private higher education. Mergers in higher education are not new, and when the overall economic state of higher education is considered, certain trends may suggest that mergers could once again play a central role in the future in higher education (Hawks, 2015, p. 31).

In 2008, the United States entered a severe recession and higher education institutions across the nation were continually asked to do more with less (McBain, 2012). As evidenced by the State of Georgia Technical College System and University System, mergers are a response to severe budget cuts and slow-growing enrollment. In September 2008 the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) announced a comprehensive plan to merge fourteen of its technical colleges into seven as a cost-saving measure during a time of significant decreases in state budgets (Newcomb, 2011). In early 2011, the University System of Georgia (USG) announced its first merger (McBain, 2012). Since that time TCSG has consolidated a total of nineteen colleges into nine, bringing the system total to twenty-two colleges statewide. The consolidations throughout the state of Georgia were in response to policy makers' or Georgia's Legislators demands in early 2008 for increased efficiency of the two higher education systems.

The Cultural Impact of Higher Education Mergers

Cultural challenges, while intangible on a balance sheet, must be addressed during any merger process (McBain, 2012). Harman (2002) said the process of rapid organizational change causes those affected to often feel disoriented, anxious, frustrated, unprepared for change, and

overwhelmed with the stresses of the newly created institution. Schweiger and Ivancevich

(1985, in Newcomb, 2011) explain that a merger increases anxiety and fear, therefore increasing

the likelihood that employees are going to listen to the most pessimistic or negative information,

regardless of the validity of the source and further complicating the process of successfully

blending conflicting cultures. A common theme in research on higher education

mergers suggests that it is the job of leaders in higher education to be fully transparent, reduce

fears, and allow as many constituents as possible to be a part of the process. Scanlan (2005)

cautions that the single biggest challenge for executive leadership during a merger is blending

people.

According to Harman and Harman (2003), "Mergers appear to work better where there

exists a greater possibility of integration and articulation between the goals and visions of the

institutions in question, that is 'horizontal' mergers between institutions whose missions and

cultures are complementary" (p. 38). Although institutions with similar missions experience less

turbulence, there is still little focus on the impact the merger has on the sustainability of culture

and high job satisfaction. A particular challenge for higher education leaders is to manage the

merging of conflicting campus cultures into coherent educational communities that display high

levels of cultural integration and loyalty to the new institution (Harman and Harman, 2003). The

University System of Georgia board of regents acknowledged "blending of institutional cultures"

at South Georgia College and Waycross College as a challenge in its presentation on campus

consolidations. " 'The challenge is more cultural than the bricks and mortar and the technology,'

said Associate Vice Chancellor Shelley Nickel" (McBain, 2012, p. 2).

Harman (2012) explained that conflict is an inherent characteristic of all higher education

institutions with powerful cultures. The consolidation of organizational culture where all parties

agree on actions taken or decisions made is not realistic, nor healthy for the organization (Harman, 2012). If a healthy culture means that people can agree on the core values but tactfully disagree on some procedural issues, that is a good start (Kotter, 2012). Employees of merged institutions often struggle to find the "life and soul" of the newly formed institution (Drowley, Lewis, and Brooks, 2013). A merger, with a variety of required changes, is not an event but rather a process (Skodvin, 2010). Many researchers support the idea that well-planned and reasonable merger expectations appear to have been successful, even if the merger proposals were strongly contested at the time (Shevchenko, 2016). In many cases, mergers have resulted in larger and more comprehensive institutions, with stronger academic programs and support services, more choice for students, and increased capacity for organizational flexibility (Azziz, 2013).

Azziz (2013) suggests that merger success can consistently be linked to leaders who understand how to build organizational culture. Although the work necessary to complete a corporate merger and higher education merger are comprised of very different tasks, human behavior is predictable (McBain, 2012). Heidrich (2011) introduced the Stages of Acculturation as they inform to mergers in higher education, which include: contact, conflict, and adaptation. Contact is the initial pre-merger announcement and initially shared information. Heidrich (2011) further indicates that conflict occurs before and during the merger, and the presence or increases in conflict can be correlated to the amount of contact. Positive adaptation is achieved when there is an agreement on cultural synergy as an objective. Heidrich (2011) defines the Modes of Acculturation which explain the correlation between the levels of conflict and the amount of contact made through stages of a merger.

An Open Systems Theory Analysis of Public Higher Education Mergers

The Open Systems Theory is the recognition that the conditions within organizations had significant effects on organizational behavior and structure (and vice versa) in the study of physics and biology (Ludwig von Bertalanffy, 1950). The open systems theory has transformed how we understand academic institutions as organizations and the demands placed upon educational leaders (Bastedo, 2004). With a focus on understanding the influence of leadership on blending two divergent cultures into one cohesive newly merged college, then open systems theory supports the argument that leadership influences the success, or failure, of a merger, as determined by the satisfaction of employees and students.

Leadership

Kotter (2012) defines management as a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly. The most important aspects of management include "planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem-solving" (p. 25). Kotter (2012) defines leadership as a set of processes that create an organization or adapts an existing organization to significantly changing circumstances. "Leadership provides a vision for the future, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen, despite the obstacles" (p. 25). To understand the nature of leadership requires an understanding of the essence of power, for leadership is a unique form of strength (Burns, 2012).

Exemplary leaders commonly inspire and motivate followers through five practices; modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Leadership is about behavior—a visible set of skills and abilities exhibited by a leader that influence the operation of the institution. Dashborough, Lamb, and Suseno (2015) suggest that resistance to change can be reduced by successfully influencing employee emotions regarding changes forthcoming. "Whenever you

cannot describe the vision driving a change initiative in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are in for trouble" (Kotter, 2012, p. 8). As evidenced by Steelman (2009), leaders should take pre- and post-merger leadership issues concerns seriously if they hope to improve the post-merger health of the organization. Locke (2007) says leaders ought to be mindful of the existing cultures and subcultures at each institution, otherwise there may be negative consequences for the newly formed institution.

Leaders who create excitement through transparency and honest communication of the proposed changes are more likely to have employees who feel included in the decision-making process, as they are encouraged to implement changes with enthusiasm. This means that leaders have to become continuous learners (Michael, 1985, 1991; Kahane, 2010; Scharmer, 2007; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley, 2008, in Schein, 2010). The key to creating and sustaining the kind of successful twenty-first-century organization necessary to be successful in today's higher education environment is effective leadership (Kotter, 2012). Burns (2012) reminded us that "all leaders are actual or potential power holders, but not all power holders are leaders" (pp. 18-19). The bottom line for leaders is that if they are not conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them (Schein, 2010).

Conflict is to be expected when an organization goes through significant changes but when leaders are consistent, provide a clear and concise vision, effectively communicate merger rationale and decisions, conflict can be minimized. Ellis (2011) explains that effective leadership includes the following: "developing a clear vision, explaining the rationale of a merger with faculty and staff, being open and honest, maintaining structure while making fast-paced decisions, and matching your words to your actions" (p. 65). Related research suggests that a leader must display confidence. However, he/she must not exhibit too much

confidence. Often an overconfident leader can be perceived as egotistical which can quickly turn faculty and staff off, creating more of an obstacle to minimizing conflict. In a rapidly changing world, the leader must not only have a vision but also be able to both impose it and evolve it further as external circumstances change (Schein, 2010).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is to an institution what personality is to an individual. The culture of an organization drives the institution; it is the core values for which the organization stands.

> The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 2010, p. 17)

Organizational culture is regarded as a significant factor in the failure of numerous mergers in the corporate world (Stevens, 1996). Culture is both a "here and now" dynamic phenomenon and a coercive background structure that influences people in multiple ways (Schein, 2010). Culture is to a group what personality or character is to an individual (Kotter, 2012, p. 14). Culture is an idea, yet the forces that are generated by conflict and subcultures are quite powerful.

Cultural forces are powerful because they operate outside of one's awareness (Schein, 2010). If the culture breaks down as a result of organizational change, leaders have to speed up the natural evolution processes with forced managed culture change strategies that ease the fears of employees and stabilizes the organization. Schein (2010) stated that "these dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make you realize that

leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin" (p. 3). Understanding organizational culture enables members of organizations to understand that it is a living and breathing background structure that influences people within the organization in multiple ways.

> For over three decades, academics, managers, and consultants, realizing that transforming organizations is difficult, have dissected the subject of mergers in higher education. They've sung the praises of leaders who communicate the vision and walk the talk to make change efforts succeed. (Kotter, Kim, Mauborgne, 2011, Kindle Locations 2490-2492)

Culture is continually influenced by a leader's interactions with people and by their behavior. Essentially, a leader's words and actions should match. When they are influential in shaping the behavior and values of others, they think of that as "leadership" and are creating the conditions for new culture formation (Schein, 2010).

While the idea of building culture is, on one hand, fluid, it is also a constant that provides stability and rigidity in how individuals are supposed to perceive, feel, and act within the organization. The concept of culture implies structural stability, depth, breadth, and patterning or integration (Schein, 2010). Organizational culture supports the "social norms" within the institution. When the standards are changing, the natural reaction is a feeling of anxiety and fear of "doing it wrong." Culture change is a delicate process that a leader must fully commit to helping employees. Leaders should never underestimate the magnitude of the forces that reinforce complacency, and that maintains the status quo (Kotter, 2012).

Change Management

Transformation requires sacrifice, dedication, and creativity, none of which usually comes with coercion (Kotter, 2012). If leaders try to change the behavior of subordinates, they

often encounter "resistance to change" at a level that seems beyond reason (Schein, 2010). Kotter (2011) explains that resistance to change does not reflect opposition, nor is it merely a result of apathy. Change arouses intense emotions which can impact the implementation of procedural changes (Dasborough, Lamb, & Suseno, 2015). The rapid change that occurs during a merger often leaves employees feeling anxious and unable to meet expectations of new procedures. The resulting dynamic equilibrium stalls the change effort with behaviors that look like resistance but may be a kind of personal immunity to change (Kotter, Kim, and Mauborgne, 2011). Kotter (2011) explains that the general lesson to be learned is that the change process is a series of stages that, in total, require a considerable amount of time and attention to achieve (p. 42). When a leader rushes the series of steps or assigns insufficient time to the process, the result is often unsatisfying for both the employees and the organization as a whole.

Kotter (2012) identified eight steps to transforming an organization, which are: (1) Establish a sense of urgency, (2) Form a powerful coalition, (3) Create a vision, (4) Communicate the vision, (5) Empower others to act on the vision, (6) Plan for and create short-term wins, (7) Consolidate improvements and produce more change, (8) Institutionalize the new approaches. These eight steps will guide the development of the interview questions which will be distributed to identified faculty and staff within the Technical College System of Georgia who have recently experienced a merger. Often there is a very short timeline to complete tasks related to a merger. These tasks vary by division but hold equal importance in successfully completing all merger-related tasks (Shevchenko, 2016). As noted throughout this study, creating a clear vision and communicating it often is vital to the degree of enthusiasm employees feel regarding the direction of change. A leader's vision plays a critical role in producing useful

change by helping to direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of a vast number of people (Kotter, 2012).

The first step to enacting change is for the leader to take the opportunity to identify faculty and staff members that would be an asset to the designated consolidation team (Shevchenko, 2016). It is easy to allow for short-term wins to pass one by when leading change at such a rapid pace, but it is important to celebrate small victories throughout the process (Fullan, 2016). Leaders must recognize followers throughout the process of change in order for them to feel appreciated for their efforts (Fullan, 2016). Kotter's (2012) seventh step is to consolidate and produce; in this step, the leader revisits goals and objectives throughout the process; it is this step that has the potential for having the greatest impact on sustainability of change. A successful change agent guides policies and procedures then removes those that do not fit the vision set for the new organization (Fullan, 2016). The second factor is taking sufficient time to make sure that the next generation of top management personifies the new approach (Kotter, Kim, Mauborgne, 2011, Kindle Locations 255-256). The only way to develop the kind of leaders a changing organization needs is to make leadership a priority in choosing employees for promotions and then guide these individuals' careers to develop their skills further (Fullan, 2016).

Communication

Paul and Barry (2013) suggest that there is a deficiency in the number of studies dedicated to exploring the planning and communication of strategies that support the post-merged organizational culture development and growth process. As a leader, interpersonal communication is imperative. Mindful communication enhances relationships and is key to successful collaboration. "When individuals pursue goals in social situations, fellow interactants

expect them to speak and act in a certain ways and not others" (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000, p 111). Leaders must be persistent in communication of the vision, strategy, and core values through honest and meaningful conversations with all employees to initiate meaningful change (Fullan, 2016). The way in which employees handle and react to a merger has a direct impact on the organization's performance in the short and long term (Paul and Berry, 2013). Leaders have power in their words and actions. Communication comes in both words and deeds. The latter is the most dominant form. Nothing undermines change more than behavior by prominent individuals that is inconsistent with the verbal communication (Kotter, 2012).

As important as communication to the organization is, it is equally as important for there to be communication from employees to leadership (Fullan, 2016). When people feel like the lines of communication are open and they are aware of what is going on, they are more likely to feel a sense of connection to the organization (Northouse, 2016). Designing and implementing an effective communication strategy are key activities that leaders must dedicate time to if they want to ensure that staff feels connected to the decision-making process and are being listened to (Fullan, 2016).

Habeck, Kroger, and Tram (2000, in Shevchenko, 2016) suggest seven rules for successful post-merger integration: (a) vision; (b) leadership; (c) growth; (d) early wins without exaggeration; (e) accurately addressing cultural differences; (f) honest communication; and (g) proper risk management - embracing it, rather than avoiding it. "Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured" (Kotter, Kim, Mauborgne, 2011, Kindle Locations 162-163). Over time, open and honest leaders will help to accomplish a successful merger and culture change (Ohman, 2011).

The literature points to communication as the key to successful integration of merging cultures (Balmer & Dinnie, 1999; DeVoge & Sprier, 1999, in Shevchenko, 2016). At the time decisions are made, promptly communicating these decisions is of utmost importance, and the method through which these decisions will be disclosed to all employees must be consistent (Fullan, 2016). Individuals look for cues from leaders on how to handle a variety of situations (Northouse, 2016). It can be expected that leaders in higher education listen, reflect, and provide guidance in the form of communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication channels can provide a wealth of information (Northouse, 2016). It is necessary for body language to be consistent with the words spoken (Fullan, 2016). Leaders' actions must match and reinforce the vision they have communicated to the organization.

Conceptual Framework

Although there are several ways to classify higher education mergers, this study focuses on the "involuntary merger" of public higher education institutions and the impact on the viability of the organizational culture post-merger. This research is grounded in existing studies of HEI mergers and is framed with an open systems theory through the lens of organizational change with a distinct focus on the role of leadership, change management, and culture in higher education mergers. Understanding interpersonal relationships and culture is not only about the moving parts and processes of the organization but also to the system and its environment (Fullan, 2001). The open systems theory recognizes the interdependence of personnel, the impact of environment on organizational structure and function, and the effect of outside stakeholders on the organization (Bastedo, 2004). The open systems theory focuses on the environment and how changes can influence the organization's behavior and seeks to explain both synergy and interdependence. Lastly, the open systems approach broadens the theoretical

lens for viewing organizational behavior. Open systems theory articulates the impact that the organization has on its human resources and also the influence that leaders have on the culture of the organization.

According to Harmon's (2002) research, the two most common two drivers of higher education mergers are cost-savings or to increase access and program offerings to students. Although some existing studies evaluate the impact that a merger has on the organizational culture, there is little research that explores how leadership behaviors and styles influence organizational culture as it relates to a merger. This study applies an open systems approach to examine organizational change and how leadership influences the environment, and vice versa.

The open systems theory originated in the study of physics and biology through the recognition that surrounding conditions had significant effects on organizational behavior and structure and vice versa (Ludwig von Bertalanffy, 1950). However, this theory was eventually applied to the study of organizations (Bastedo, 2004). The open systems theory suggests that changes in the environment directly affect the structure and function of the institution. The open systems approach has transformed how researchers understand academic institutions as organizations and the demands placed upon educational leaders (Bastedo, 2004).

An open systems approach provides analysis of the resistance to change that exists within the organization and assists in recognition of culture and subcultures of the organization. Essentially, the environment is affected by leadership which in return creates the culture of the organization. When institutions experience a change of this magnitude, there are many psychological factors to address as well. Kotter (2012) said nothing undermines change more than behavior by prominent individuals that is inconsistent with verbal communication. If the

employees of the organization are involved in the decision-making process and are comfortable with the level of communication, they are less likely to resist the change and more likely to encourage others to do the same. Thus, an open systems theory is an appropriate framework to guide this study.

Although there is a great variety of researcher perspectives provided by open systems theories, they share the standpoint that an organization's survival is dependent upon its relationship with the environment (Bastedo, 2004). Some identifiable weaknesses of the open systems approach are as follows: it does not focus on particular task functions, does not directly examine the impact of interpersonal relationships and loyalty on productivity, and does not provide for specific focus (Bastedo, 2004). To ensure that the aforementioned weaknesses do not negatively affect the research, additional interviews will be conducted and institutional survey data collected to guarantee a focus on tasks, relationships, and job satisfaction that will provide support for these areas and provide additional context for findings.

Summary

The first section of this literature review defined merger as the consolidation of one institution with another, but there are various rationales behind the purpose of mergers in higher education. According to research the most common driver of higher education mergers is cost-savings or to increase access and program offerings to students (Shevchenko, 2016). Although there are a few studies that explore the influence that a higher education merger has on the organizational culture, there is minimal research that looks specifically at how leadership influences organizational culture and job satisfaction as it relates to a merger. The responsibility

of leaders in higher education is to be fully transparent, reduce fears, and allow as many

constituents as possible to be a part of the process (Azziz, 2013).

The second section of this review examined an Open Systems Theory approach to

organizational change and how leadership influences the environment and vice versa. An open

systems approach provides analysis of the resistance to change that exists within the organization

and assists in recognition of culture and subcultures of the organization. When institutions enter

into a change of this magnitude, there are many psychological factors to address as well. When

considering an open systems theory, it articulates the impact that the organization has on its

human resources and also the influence that employees have on the culture of the

organization. If the employees of the organization feel involved in the decision-making process

and are comfortable with the level of communication they are less likely to resist the change and

more likely to encourage others to do the same.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face when blending the organizational culture of two or more institutions as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. The intent of this phenomenological qualitative study was to document in detail the experiences of two-year college administrators leading organizational change. The outcome of the study was to identify key strategies used to influence a sustainable and healthy organizational culture as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. Using Moustakas's (1994) model of *transcendental* phenomenology, the researcher sought to uncover the human experience of a higher education merger.

> Moustakas (1994) explains that transcendental phenomenology "attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, unfettered from everyday experiences" (pg. 41). It requires to look at things openly, undisturbed by the habits of the natural world. The challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection. The process involves a blending of what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings; thus, a unity of the real and the ideal. (p. 27)

In this example of phenomenology, the researcher puts aside personal experiences, and focuses solely on the experiences of the participants. As a college administrator who has experienced two mergers, the transcendental phenomenology method assisted the researcher in

mitigating personal bias in order to gain perspective on how leadership influences organizational culture post-merger.

Anfara and Mertz (2014) describe a theoretical framework as "the structure, the scaffolding, or frame of your study" (p. 66). The theoretical framework is a logically organized summary of all the concepts, variables, and relationships involved in the endeavored research with the purpose of clearly identifying what will be explored, examined, measured, or described (Anfara & Mertz, 2014). This study is grounded in existing research of public higher education mergers, change management, leadership, communication, and organizational culture.

This study is divided into two distinct sections. First, the researcher provided a synthesis of the literature on the characteristics of a successful higher education merger, as determined by a historical analysis of public higher education mergers. Second, this research uses an open systems theory of organizational change with a distinct focus on how leaders positively influence blending organizational culture as a result of higher education mergers (Bastedo, 2004). In the previous chapters the open systems theory was introduced as the framework guiding this study and a review of existing literature was provided. Framed with an open systems theory of organizational change, this study has a distinct focus on the influence of leadership on organizational culture as the organization undergoes a merger. The open systems theory supports the argument that leadership influences the success or failure of a merger. The primary research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- What challenges do college administrators identify when striving to blend human behavior when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?
- What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?

- What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff, who have recently experienced a merger, identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?

- How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

The above research questions were developed to document in-depth perspectives of participants, in order to distinguish commonalities and themes from all levels within the organization. The interview questions were designed to produce qualitative data regarding the individual experiences of faculty, staff, and college administrators who have experienced a merger at their respective institutions. The subsequent text addresses the setting, participants, data, process of analysis, participant's rights, and description of the initial pilot study.

Setting

In September 2008 the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) announced a comprehensive plan to merge fourteen of its technical colleges into seven as a cost-saving measure during a time of significant decreases in state budgets (Newcomb, 2011). In early 2011, the University System of Georgia (USG) announced its first merger (McBain, 2012). Since that time TCSG has consolidated a total of nineteen colleges into nine, bringing the system total to twenty-two colleges statewide. The setting for this study includes the 22 colleges that make up the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). TCSG is Georgia's unified technical college system which offers technical education, adult education, and customized business and industry training throughout the state (TCSG, 2018).

TCSG's educational and training programs are available across Georgia through our 22 Technical Colleges and 85 campus locations. In addition, last year, over 63,000 students took an online course. TCSG offers students a choice of over 600 individual

majors. These majors range from one semester Certificates to Diplomas and Associate

Degrees that can take over two years to complete. In 2016, TCSG enrolled over 130,000

students and produced over 34,000 graduates (TCSG Strategic Plan, 2018, p. 1).

The researcher was granted access to faculty, staff, college administrators, and presidents

by the researcher's college president and the Commissioner of TCSG. In addition, the college

president at the researcher's institution agreed to help facilitate the participation from other

college presidents within the system. While it was not the researcher's intention to place undue

pressure on participants, it was the researcher's belief that presidents will feel more comfortable

speaking freely about experiences if they had the backing of their colleague prior to the

interview; therefore the president at the researcher's institution agreed to assist in scheduling

interviews with other presidents within the system.

Participants/Sample

A purposeful sampling as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) of three presidents,

three senior management staff members, five faculty members, and five entry-to mid-level staff

members for a total of 16 interviews within the 22 colleges of TCSG, who have experienced a

merger, were invited to participate.   Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that "purposeful

sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain

insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Lincoln

and Guba (1985) recommend sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached.

In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational

considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated

when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus, *redundancy* is

the primary criterion. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202)

Therefore, the select number of participants was limited to reduce redundancy. Each participant was asked to take part in one-on-one, face to face interviews. Through select interviews with presidents, members of the senior management team, faculty, and entry- to mid-level staff were identified. All have experienced organizational change through mergers, and could address common themes and challenges. It was the researcher's goal to gain perspectives from individuals at all levels within the organization. These perspectives were collected, analyzed, and protected to determine conclusions for this study. The researcher is an employee of TCSG, which made access to individuals at all levels of college and system personnel attainable and made the protection of identity a priority.

There are a few ethical concerns to be aware of and address. The researcher is an employee of a TCSG system college where interviews were conducted and data were collected. Therefore, it was vital to the integrity of the study that participants feel comfortable providing honest feedback. Thus, face to face interviews were conducted when appropriate at a location of the participant's choice. Virtual face to face interviews were conducted via telepresence video conferencing equipment which were made available through the researcher's employer and were conducted in a private location. These interviews were recorded and stored on a password protected laptop, to which only the interviewer had access. Participants' identifying information was changed on all print materials and their names were not linked to their respective institution. All institutions were de-identified.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through one-on-one, face to face interviews. Interviews consisted of 15 questions and developed using Northouse's (2013) eight leadership theories as a guide. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored on a password

protected laptop.   Interviews were held at a location of the participant's choice and lasted

between 30-60 minutes. If a virtual face-to-face interview was appropriate it was conducted in a

locked classroom with access granted only to the interviewer.   Once the participant reviewed

and approved the transcription, the recording was permanently deleted.   These interviews were

semi-structured, asking all participants the same demographic information. Open-ended

questions assisted in gaining further insight into personal experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe,

2012).

Analysis

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) said the process of data analysis starts with developing a

plan to manage the volume of data the researcher would collect and organize in a meaningful

way (p. 110). Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) said that the methodology section is when the

conceptual framework becomes the focus by using categories laid out as repositories for data. In

an effort to maintain the integrity of this study and complete research in a timely manner the

researcher simultaneously collected and analyzed data using computer software, while at the

same time watching for themes, as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015).

> Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of
>
> data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what
>
> the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. Data analysis is a
>
> complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data
>
> and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description
>
> and interpretation. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 202)
>
> Computer software enabled researchers to store, categorize, retrieve, and compare data

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).   Due to the unstructured nature of this study the researcher decided

to use computer software. In the interest of participant protection, the researcher used a password protected laptop to record interviews and used NVivo, qualitative research data analysis software, to manage and analyze data simultaneously.

Participant Rights

It was vital to the integrity of this study that participants' anonymity was protected to ensure truthful answers and experiences would be shared. To ensure that participants experienced no harm, protection of their identity was of the utmost concern. Each participant was provided with a letter explaining how their identity would be protected and how the data collected would be used. Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) explained that certain safeguards should be developed to protect the rights of the participants (p. 112). Therefore, the researcher established the following safeguards to protect the right of the participants and ensure anonymity. These safeguards were also provided to participants; (1) participants were not be asked to provide personal information; they were coded by a pseudonym based on position within the institution and further coded by institution, (2) focus group members had the same coding system applied so that identity was protected, (3) interviews were recorded and transcribed, but the participant had final approval prior to publication, and, once transcripts were approved, all recordings were permanently deleted.

Potential Limitations

In any type research study, limitations exist. Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) explain that in most cases, by identifying limitations, they can be controlled. Limitations of a study expose and acknowledge the conditions that may weaken the study so that they might be avoided (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 114). One limitation of this study is interviewees from the

researcher's institution may not feel comfortable sharing authentic experiences. A second limitation related to interviews was the existing relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such relationships could result in biased responses. To overcome these limitations each participant was provided with a letter describing how their interviews will be used, how their anonymity will be protected, and how they would be provided the opportunity to review and approve their interview transcription prior to publishing.

Summary

The intent of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and identify the challenges two-year college administrators face, and identify key strategies used to influence a sustainable and healthy organizational culture as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. Using Moustakas's (1994) model of *transcendental* phenomenology, the researcher sought to uncover the human experience of a higher education merger. Using Creswell's (2015) maximum variation method, a purposeful sampling of college administrators, faculty members, and support staff from the 22 technical colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia was selected. Participants received notice of their rights and an explanation of confidentiality measures before they chose to participate in this study. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and data were collected and analyzed simultaneously with the assistance of computer analysis software. Once data was collected and analyzed, themes, commonalities, and strategies were identified. One of the limitations of this study was that interviewees from researcher's institution might not feel comfortable fully sharing authentic experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data collected during this study to include the results from the thematic analysis of the 12 interviews conducted. This phenomenological study used qualitative data collected through face-to-face and over the phone interviews with three presidents, three vice presidents, three faculty members, and three directors of colleges and programs within the Technical College System of Georgia. The participants had all experienced a merger. The interviews consisted of 15 questions and were recorded, transcribed, coded using pre-set codes, and analyzed to determine common themes and sub-themes. Participants' perceptions of their merger experiences were documented and analyzed to identify the challenges faced and the influence of leadership throughout the process. The interview protocol and questions can be found in Appendix C.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What challenges do college administrators identify when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?

2. What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?

3. What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff who have recently experienced a merger identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?

4. How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

This chapter will outline the participants' experiences and perspectives, reasons for inclusion of selected participants, summarize findings and themes in response to each of the

guiding research questions, and provide an overall understanding of the challenges that leaders

face throughout a merger in higher education from the perspective of individuals at various

levels of responsibility and involvement in their respective merger. A list of participants, their

roles in the merger, and the reasons for including them in the study are found in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Chart of Participants

Pseudonym	Role in Merger	Reasons for Inclusion
President 1	Lead	31 years in higher education, current President, co-lead merger, lead recent acquisition
President 2	Lead	30+ years higher education experience, well respected as a leader within TCSG, often is called upon to lead colleges during transition periods, lead mergers
President 3	Lead	30+ years' experience, worked in higher education from faculty member up the ranks to become a President, well respected as a leader within TCSG, and led the largest merger in the state.
Vice President 1	Student Affairs Lead, Consolidation committee member	20+ years' experience, vast knowledge of the student affairs process and procedures which play a large role in a merger, lead teams on multiple campus locations to become one cohesive student affairs department.
Vice President 3	Student Affairs and Marketing Lead, Consolidation committee member	VP 3 is a well-respected leader within the system and played a large role in a merger in 2010.
Vice President 2	Economic Development Lead, Consolidation committee member	VP 2 has experience leading almost every single area within the college. VP 2 has served as VP for Economic Development, Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and currently as VP for Institutional Effectiveness. The vast knowledge and merger experience provided rich content in the interview.
Faculty 1	Faculty Senate Chair, Program Chair, Consolidation committee member, GA Master Teacher	Faculty 1 is one of the most well-respected faculty members at their college. Faculty 1 is often called on to serve on many committees and always provides valuable input. This individual's leadership skill is evident in bringing faculty together from multiple campuses through the merger process and helping to bring necessary issues to the administrators while assisting faculty overcome smaller barriers.
Faculty 2	Program Chair, Faculty of the Year, GA Master Teacher	Faculty 2 is not only a graduate of technical education, but has worked their way up to Program Chair. Faculty 2's

		leadership and ability to adapt to change provided a different perspective.
Faculty 3	Consolidation committee member, Institutional Effectiveness committee chair, GA Master Teacher	Faculty 3 is well respected among peers, brings with them many years of healthcare management and healthcare accreditation experience, and was a faculty representative on the consolidation committee for their respective intuitional merger. Their leadership and poise added incredible value to this study.
Director 3	Student data lead, Consolidation committee member	Director 3's job was difficult through the merger, as they were responsible for all of the student data at two existing colleges and had to make sure that each and every student's information and data was correctly migrated into one system. Director 3 also had to compete for this position during that time. Director 3's experience highlighted some of the challenges from the support staff perspective.
Director 1	Student Admissions co-lead, Consolidation committee member	During the merger Director 1 was exposed to a great deal of change very rapidly. While they have more than 18 years' experience in higher education, specifically admissions, they now had to deal with a complete shake up of their department. This merger experience added valuable to this study.
Director 3	Financial Aid lead, Consolidation committee member	Director 3 also had to compete for their position during the transition and merger. To add to the challenge, the other individual competing for the position then became a member of this individual's staff. These experiences were very beneficial to the study.

Findings

This section provides a summary of the findings broken down by guiding research questions. Each question will be followed by a summary of findings, a table displaying the themes, sub-themes, and key words or phrases identified as a result of the data collection and analyzation process.

Research Question 1: What challenges do college administrators identify when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?

To investigate the first question a thematic analysis was conducted based on the responses provided regarding perceptions of the greatest challenges leaders face during a merger in higher education. Three major themes emerged: (a) the importance of focusing on the people

within the organization, (b) the importance of focusing on the community and your external

stakeholders, and (c) effective communication to constituents both internally and externally.

Table 2 provides a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews

with the selected participants. The table below also includes key words or phrases that were

common among participants' experiences, perspectives, and recollections of events that occurred

during their respective merger and post-merger.

Table 2

Interview Thematic Analysis: Perceptions of Greatest Challenges of a Higher Education Merger

Theme	f	Sub-Theme	Key Terms
Culture	8	Employees	The people, students, attention, perception, awareness, fear, anxiety, rumors
Community Resistance	7	Community Leaders, Local and State influencers	Legislators, chamber members, business and industry, city and county council members, school boards and superintendents
Communication	12	Transparency	Communication with intent, effective communication, purpose, honesty, timeliness

Theme 1: Culture. Of the 12 participants interviewed (*n*=12), 8 explained that one of

the most challenging aspects of the merger process both during and post-merger was blending

the cultures of the existing organizations and explained that one of the most challenging aspects

of the merger process both during and post-merger was blending the cultures of the existing

organizations. They described the difficulties associated with bringing together two groups of

employees, each with their own sense of loyalty and tradition and both resistant to change.

Director 1 explained,

> There are a lot of different personalities, mindsets, and a lot of different programs that
> require different consideration. It is difficult to get so many individuals who feel like they
> know how to do their job efficiently to change or recognize that there might be another
> way to perform the same operations.

From a leadership standpoint, each president expressed the importance of blending the

senior leadership team and the importance of gaining buy-in from the top down early in the

process. One president explained, "Working together is not just faculty and support staff, but it

has to start at the top on the president's leadership cabinet on the leadership team, so that's a

challenge." Faculty member 1 explained that blending culture is the most challenging process of

a merger noting, "It's people, because everybody's different and responds to change differently."

Vice President 2 said, "Creating a new department that not only faces geographical challenges,

but also has strong personalities competing for their operational practices to be recognized

presented challenges in bringing departments together and getting on the same page." This

theme carried a strong presence in the data collected. It seemed that in all participants'

experiences, organizational culture presented itself as a significant challenge regardless of these

organizations' similarities in operation.

Theme 2: Community Resistance. Of the participants interviewed, 7 of 12 discussed

the challenges responding to the external stakeholders. While much of the community resistance

was felt by Vice Presidents and Presidents, it is interesting to note that some faculty and staff

also recognized this theme as a challenge. Faculty 1 said,

> It was very important to communicate to the community what was happening to their

local technical college. Not only from the leadership, but maintaining a constant presence in the form of marketing the newly formed college and what is to be expected.

President 2, in particular, had very different political settings in both counties that were home to the technical colleges identified in that merger. President 2 said, "Bringing all of those political interests together to recognize the importance of this new institution to all of the communities was the greatest challenge." This participant went on to say, "It is trying to get external community members to recognize the value of the institution as it is newly formed and to continue to support that institution even though they may feel like they lost something." Vice President 3, described a similar experience when attending meetings on behalf of the college after the merger was announced saying, "Externally, the community of the smaller college was very upset and felt they were losing their identity." The challenge that community stakeholders presented which emerged through the data collection process was not initially considered in the literature review. However, many of the communities where mergers took place across the state of Georgia, there were influencers within the communities who were adamant about maintaining the traditions of their local technical college which had become a pillar of education in their rural communities.

Theme 3: Communication. All participants interviewed highlighted the importance of intentional communication throughout the process of a merger. Analysis of the transcripts indicated that every single participant said a challenge was communication when it wasn't made a priority. Director 1 explained,

> It was often perceived that changes were made and those of us in positions to perform those operational changes had no voice and there was no avenue to send information back to the top. Often this created frustration among departments expected to implement

changes.

The lack of intentional, efficient communication often increased fear, anxiety, and rumors within departments and throughout the organization. The following quotes exemplified participants' perceptions of not prioritizing communication: "…we needed to communicate better and more often because the less that was communicated the more rumors started both internally and externally" (Vice President 2; Vice President 3). "I'll go back to communication, not everybody would have to agree, but at least they would know what we did and why we did it" (President 3).

The themes identified in response to the first research question are culture, community resistance, and communication. These themes emerged as a result of interview questions focused on identifying the challenges leaders face from the perspective of individuals with various levels of responsibility and involvement in mergers. Interestingly, while participants serving as a President or Vice President strongly identified community resistance as one of the largest challenges, all participants agreed that organizational culture and communication were significant challenges and should be at the forefront of a leader's mind when faced with the level of change that a merger presents.

Research Question 2: What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?

To investigate the second question a thematic analysis was conducted. Grounded in the responses provided and based on strategies used as identified within responses to the interview questions three major themes emerged: (a) the importance of open, honest, transparent communication, (b) the importance of focusing on first blending a leadership team, and (c) the importance of a leader to be seen and to listen to those in the organization. Table 3 provides a

summary of the themes and sub-themes that appeared as the most significant strategies that made

a positive impact on the faculty and staff of the merging institutions.

Table 3

Interview Thematic Analysis: Influential Strategies Leaders Used

Theme	*f*	Sub-Theme	Key Terms
Transparency	8	Communication	Open, honest, transparent, intentional, effective, efficient, timeliness
Relationship-building	10	Culture, Sub-cultures	Leadership team, buy-in, listen, influencers, vision, communication, listen, trust, face-time
Model Behavior	8	Leadership	Listen, be seen, transparency, build trust, empathy, patience, consistency

Theme 1: Transparency. Of the 12 participants interviewed, 8 illustrated how critical it

is for leaders to be transparent with faculty and staff from the beginning. Most faculty and

director level staff equated timely communication of merger related decisions; including

programmatic changes, policy and procedural decisions, changes in student affairs/admissions or

academic practices, and reporting structures as transparency in the process. Faculty 2 explained,

Transparency during a merger is critical for everyone to feel part of the process. It was

very difficult to stay positive for those of us not intimately involved in the day to day

merger communication. Often we didn't feel we had a voice and many employees felt

like they were not receiving information in its entirety.

This level of transparency led to less anxiety and fear, decreases in rumors, and allowed

individuals from each college to begin working together much faster with less resistance to

compromise. The following quotes exemplified faculty and directors' perceptions of the importance of transparency: 1) "Be transparent about the finish line, whatever that is. Always focus on what is the mission of the institution and have clearly articulated goals related to that mission" (President 2). "I think that transparency is the most important part of the merger, that put everybody at ease again and that made fewer people question why we were doing things the way that we were doing them" (President 3).

Transparency was a constant theme throughout the data analysis. However, those in lower level positions expressed the need for transparency more often than those in leadership positions. The researcher found that those more intimately involved in the consolidation process day-to-day felt less disconnected. Of the participants those in faculty or director roles often found themselves searching for information or answers which contributed to confusion and anxiety about the future of their jobs.

Theme 2: Relationship-building. After a thematic analysis of all participants' responses, 10 of those interviewed determined that a key strategy that was used or should be used by leaders is relationship-building. From the time the mergers were announced, relationship-building was a key strategy both internally and externally. In those mergers were leaders worked to build this trust early, it was apparent throughout the interview. In mergers where leaders did not take this approach the organizational culture seemed to remain a challenge for many years beyond the timeframe expected. Vice President 3 said, "The system office staff told us to expect us to feel the effects of the merger for at least five years, we felt the effects for closer to ten years based on leadership decisions early in the process." President 1 explained,

> Building relationships, both internal with the internal customer so to speak, meaning the
>
> faculty, staff, and students on those additional campuses, and the communities and the

influential community members in those additional counties and additional communities is critical not only in building trust, but also for me to learn from and understand how the organization is functioning from one campus to another.

All respondents expressed the need for a leader to build relationships to some degree, identifying that individuals in leadership roles needed to be more focused in this area. Of those participants, individuals who led a merger as a president of an institution each established relationship-building as a key strategy used. Additionally, each faculty member interviewed identified relationship-building as a strategy critical for the success of the merger, explaining that leaders who used this as a key strategy helped to decrease confusion, fear, and conflict throughout the process.

Theme 3: Model Behavior. Of the 12 participants, 9 explained that leading by example or modeling the behavior expected was vital to the perceived success of the merger. Most respondents linked the importance of modeling behaviors expected to decreased negativity throughout the organization throughout the process of the merger. The following quotes articulate the importance of modeling the way: President 3 said, "Modeling the behavior you expect from your employees is vital not only during a time change of this magnitude, but every day." Faculty 2 confirmed this by saying, "If you expect certain behavior from your employees, then you better be modeling that same behavior." Director 3 explained, "It was vital for me to model the behavior expected because myself and the other existing director had to compete for our position, so it became apparent that I would have to earn the trust of those individuals." Overall participants linked modeling behavior to leaderships' ability to be transparent, honest, to listen and learn from each former college culture, have patience, and lastly, be seen as someone who will work alongside of them and not just as a manager.

As a result of the data analysis the common themes identified to answer the second guiding question were transparency, relationship-building, and modeling behavior. These three themes quickly emerged as the most common strategies that should be implemented from the very beginning. Those in faculty and director positions often mentioned the necessity for leaders to be transparent with information regarding the merger and upcoming changes. These individuals also indicated that building relationships and modeling the behavior expected was critical, especially for those from the college that was less familiar with the leadership style of the named president for the newly formed college.

Research Question 3: What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff who have recently experienced a merger identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?

Based on participants' responses, it was overtly apparent that leadership gaps were easily identified as faculty and directors were interviewed. From the leadership standpoint they were always acutely involved in every detail of the process which made it difficult to identify specific reasons resistance to change occurred. For those employees removed from that consolidation process, the gaps that may have led to resistance became much more apparent. Overall three major themes emerged: (a) lack of intentional communication, (b) the perceived lack of concern for the people, and (c) the importance of providing a clear vision. Table 4 provides a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Table 4

Interview Thematic Analysis: Gaps Leading to Resistance to Change

Theme	*f*	Sub-Theme	Key Terms
Trickledown Effect	12	Communication	Timeliness of information, decision-makers communication styles, transparency of information from top down
Change Management	8	Culture, Sub-cultures	People focused, Good listener, deliberate actions, open, honest, communication
Decisive Leadership	12	Relationship-building, financial sense	Trustworthiness, communicator, outgoing, charismatic, focus on budget, focused on people

Theme 1: Trickledown Effect. All participants (*n*=12) indicated various levels of communication gaps during a merger process. In some cases, leadership made the decision to limit communication which created additional challenges. In other cases, it became apparent that the further away from leadership the person was, the more identifiable the gap in communication was. Therefore, a trickledown effect was identified as a gap leading to resistance to change. For those members of the organization who were not privy to consolidation meetings and leadership meetings, they were dependent on their immediate supervisors to provide the necessary information in a timely matter. Faculty 3 said, "From a faculty standpoint...or observing other faculty, my perception, there was a lot of frustration, a lot of feeling that there was a lack of communication." Director 2 said, "Communication probably still was a little sparse. When you're not on the committee or in that room, the boardroom or whatever room the meeting was taking place, you have no idea what decision or what is even being talked about." While this method of communication was not specifically identified in the literature review, it holds

significance as a result the data collection. All participants interviewed identified a need for communication from the consolidation committee meetings to be readily shared and distributed more efficiently throughout the organization.

Theme 2: Change Management. Overwhelmingly, participants outside of the president role identified change management or mismanagement in some areas as a gap leading to resistance to change. It is expected that during extreme change, a leader must take intentional approaches to providing support for individuals and teams within the organization. Respondents equated leadership with taking deliberate actions to remain people focused throughout the process. Others would generally experience decreases in fear and anxiety, particularly faculty and staff, as well as experiencing a significant reduction in rumors during that time. Those leaders who chose a less transparent approach found themselves faced with increased resistance to change not only from individuals within the organization, but community stakeholders as well. Director 1 said,

> Any time that somebody wants to move your cheese, you want it right back. And that is all that kept coming to my head every time something would change, but we have to be open to change. And I think that it helped me to grow probably as a leader, because if I could stay focused and positive, then hopefully it would continue on into the staff that there are other ways of doing things that are right, they are just different.

While change management practices have evolved over the decades, it was perceived that standard practices of change management would not be an effective solution during the merger process. Many participants identified the significance for a leader to not only understand best practices for change management, but also be innovative in ways to manage the difficult task of merging higher education intuitions and their ability to remain diligent, yet flexible.

Theme 3: Decisive Leadership. All participants (*n*=12) recalled the influence of leadership from the time a merger was announced in their responses to the interview questions. The reaction of the leader quickly set the tone for the entire merger in many cases. Without question, respondents explained that a leader must possess a certain set of characteristics to lead a merger. These characteristics included trustworthiness, a good communicator, a great listener, someone who has financial sense, a people-focused individual who is charismatic and relatable. Faculty 1 said, "A leader must come in and clearly communicate their vision...This is where I want this school to be in five years, 10 years, 15 years. Have that vision. And get people to see that vision with you." Vice President 3 articulated, "I think you need somebody that does have a clear vision of what it should look like, or what is it they want the outcome to be. I think you need someone that is pretty dynamic that can communicate this vision internally and externally."

The three themes that emerged from the analysis of those questions answering research question three were trickledown effect, change management, and decisive leadership. This thematic review yielded some of the most interesting results. Those individuals in faculty and director level positions were most intentional about identifying gaps in leadership that had the most impact on them. Often communication about changes or procedures did not trickle down from the top in an efficient or timely manner ,creating additional challenges, increasing fear, and allowed for misinformation to quickly spread. Interestingly, these individuals also craved a leader who was decisive in nature during this time. Faculty and staff often felt that decisions would be made and changed so quickly that it created a great deal of operational confusion. Participants explained that those holding supervisory responsibility within the organization should have knowledge of change management and how to intentionally communicate often.

Research Question 4: How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

To answer the fourth question, a thematic analysis was conducted and through the perspectives of respondents, the following three major themes emerged: (a) The importance of a leader's visibility and what that looks like to faculty and staff of the merging institutions, (b) Delegation of decision-making rights to include all members of the senior leadership team providing clear direction on decisions they can make without the president's input and (c) Integration of programs and leadership from the early stages. Table 4 provides a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged along with key words or phrases noted during the coding and analyzation of the data collected.

Table 5

Interview Thematic Analysis: Influence a Sustainable Organizational Culture Post-Merger

Theme	*f*	Sub-Theme	Key Terms
Visibility	8	Leadership	Open, honest, transparent, intentional, effective, efficient, timeliness
Decision-Making	10	Communication	Leadership team, buy-in, listen, influencers, vision, communication, listen, trust, face-time
Integration	10	Relationship-building	Listen, be seen, transparency, build trust, empathy, patience, consistency

Theme 1: Visibility. Of the 12 participants, 8 interviewed at all levels validated the importance of leadership's visibility throughout a merger. While it can be difficult for a leader to be everywhere, respondents equated a leader's visibility with transparency and an intentional

effort to build relationships during this time. Participants considered it imperative for a leader to be consistency visible not only during the process of merging, but in the aftermath. It was also regularly noted that leaders should not only be highly visible within the organization, but also within the communities served which can be a challenge as many of the presidents stated. The following quotes exemplify the challenges of being visible as a leader: "I walk each campus, it's true, it is time-consuming because when you start asking the opinions of faculty and staff, they really do open up and you're going to be standing there for 30 minutes to an hour sometimes, but it's well-worth the time investment" (President 1). "We had to get focused pretty quickly and get out in the community and assure the community members that just because one of the colleges had a particular focus, and would continue to have this focus, that other business and industry would not miss out" (President 2). "The first thing I think a leader has to do is to get out in the community right away, all the communities that the college serves, and make sure they are projecting a positive image related to the merger and that you're telling the communities how this is going to help them" (President 3). Participants described what a visible leader looks like to them and their perception of a leader who takes time to walk campuses, and speak with faculty and staff, decreased fear and anxiety for those who experienced this type of leader during their merger experience.

Theme 2: Decision-Making. Decision-making challenges from two perspectives were identified within participants' responses. Of the participants interviewed, ten respondents identified two areas of decision-making that are crucial to the success of a merger. The first area identified the necessity of a decisive leader who will remain committed to the decision made until the merger is complete. If later a decision is found unsatisfactory a modification should be considered later. Director 2 explained, "When a leader flip flops on decisions the rest of us think

are final, it creates challenges beyond our control and complicates the process of the merger further, as well as creates additional confusion." The second area of decision-making identified was the delegation of decision-making responsibilities to eliminate bottlenecking at the president's office. Often decisions during a merger in higher education are elevated to the president's office which can create a delay due to the number of decisions that are required to be made during this time. Therefore, it was identified that delegation of decision-making responsibilities should be decided early in the process so that members of the leadership team are comfortable making decisions and moving forward. President 2 said, "Build trusting relationships within your organization with your leadership staff and let them do the jobs that you've hired them to do." It became evident during the data collection process that individuals in the role of Vice President often needed guidance on they were able to make without the president's input. Many participants felt that often too many issues were brought to the president's attention creating a bottleneck for decisions that needed to be made quickly.

Theme 3: Integration. Of the 12 participants, 10 interviewed felt integration of programs and services was paramount in helping cultivate togetherness of the newly formed college. In every participant's experience, expansion of programs and services was seen as a benefit to the students and communities served. Director 1 said, "It was imperative for me to bring my departments from various campus locations together as quickly as possible so that we could learn to work together and get to know each other personally to reduce the perception that one group was doing more than another." An underlying benefit gone unnoticed at the time was how these expansions and integrations of services fostered a sense of togetherness from the early stages of the merger and forced individuals from various campus locations to visit locations they might not have visited otherwise or helped to build comradery among faculty and staff that had

to work together to make these services available to students. Faculty 1 explained,

> College B did not have a faculty senate so as the chair of the existing committee I had the opportunity to visit and work with new faculty members interested in serving in this capacity. Because of this I had the opportunity to develop relationships early, helping me be more positive about the change. It was refreshing!

Faculty 2 said,

> While I was a member of the consolidation committee, my specific program did not have additional merger work. However, we knew we would be expanding our program as soon as possible to the two additional campus locations so we got to work right away. Through this expansion we had the opportunity to work with so many other faculty and staff from different departments within the college which was an exciting process to be a part of.

Each participant from faculty through those individuals in the role of Vice President noted that integration from the early stages of the merger was not only crucial, but particularly significant in the perceived ease of the transition.

The themes identified in response to the last research question are visibility, decision-making, and integration. These themes emerged as a result of the interview questions geared to identify how leaders can minimize conflict to influence organizational culture. Interestingly, all participants strongly recognized that visibility of the leader was critical, meaning that the leader was often found on each campus, building relationships, and speaking with individuals at all levels of the organization. Secondly, decision-making was identified as critical to the success of a merger, in that once a decision was made, to stick with it until the merger was complete so that operational confusion was minimized. Lastly, participants at all levels of responsibility recognized that integration of people within departments across the organization as early in the

process as possible was vital to the future of the organizational culture.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 presented data collected from interviews conducted with 12 participants. The results of the data analysis were used to answer the four research questions. The following are the findings of the study:

1. In response to what challenges college administrators face, the majority of respondents holding senior leadership positions and above consistently reported the challenges faced in each merger consisted primarily in three areas: organizational culture, community resistance, and communication.

2. Research question two sought to identify key strategies leaders should implement to influence positive cultural change. Overwhelmingly respondents at all levels indicated that three strategies should be implemented upon the announcement of a merger: transparency in decision-making and communication, relationship-building should be a focus between institutions, and those in supervisory roles should lead by example or model behavior.

3. In response to gaps in leadership that resulted in resistance to change, respondents identified three areas of weakness that when lacking the impact is felt throughout the entire organization. The three areas are: trickle down communication, change management, and lack of decisive leadership.

4. Those respondents in all positions recognized the importance of minimizing conflict during a merger in response to the fourth research question. The majority of participants indicated that conflict can be a challenge and a barrier moving forward if expectations are not provided from the onset. The data suggests three main areas of focus to minimize

conflict: a leader should be visible, a leader should be decisive remain firm once a

decision is agreed upon, and lastly integration or cross institutional work should be

encouraged across all levels of the organization.

As indicated by the interview data, there are several significant findings that suggest that

leadership has great influence on blending the cultures of two higher education institutions as the

result of a merger. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings and provide implications for the

conclusions as well as recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. The study set out to investigate four questions:

1. What challenges do college administrators identify when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?

2. What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?

3. What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff who have recently experienced a merger identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?

4. How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

A current literature review assisted in providing the focus for the research design and methodology used in the study. Twelve individuals in supervisory roles as Presidents, Vice Presidents, Faculty, and Directors within the Technical College System of Georgia who have previously experienced a merger were invited to participate in the interviews. They were each asked 15 questions based on Northouse's (2013) eight leadership theories.

Interpretation of Findings

The following section provides a brief statement explaining what each guiding research question sought to identify accompanied by a summary of the themes that emerged as a result of the participant interviews and data analyzation process. These findings include a summary of themes, sub-themes, and challenges, and are linked to existing literature.

Research Question One

Research question one sought to identify the perceived key challenges a college president faces merging two or more higher education institutions. The interview data revealed that the majority of respondents felt that organizational culture, community resistance, and communication were the three critical areas requiring the most attention by the president throughout the merger and in the following months and in many cases years' post-merger.

The first of the three major themes that emerged was the importance of focusing on the people within the organization over the process and paperwork. The second major theme was the importance of focusing on the community and your external stakeholders. In many of the mergers college presidents experienced significant pushback from influential community members who did not want to lose their local technical college's identity as the result of the merger which created another barrier for leaders to overcome at the time. In these instances, community members needed much more attention and time devoted to them from not only the president but the entire leadership team in many cases. While these challenges can be overcome through effective communication, and, according to President 2, "patience," passionate and influential community stakeholders certainly create an additional challenge for leaders. Lastly, the critical need for effective communication to constituents both internally and externally was mentioned by all 12 participants. Communication, or lack thereof, is one of the most important challenges to recognize as a leader. President 3 said,

> I told my faculty and staff at one point that I would rather over communicate than not
>
> communicate information enough. I would verbally tell employees information at

meetings, provide a handout, and follow-up with an email for those who might have missed the meeting to ensure all received the message and correct information.

Respondents indicated that the key challenges faced in many mergers are related to organizational culture, communication, and community with all three areas being directly influenced by a leader's responses, reactions, and ability to communicate with various constituents. The leader of a higher education institution has a great deal of influence on how successful a merger is or will be from an internal and external perspective.

Azziz (2013) suggests that merger success can consistently be linked to leaders who understand how to build organizational culture. Harmon and Harmon (2003) explained that a specific challenge for higher education leaders is managing the merger of conflicting campus cultures into coherent educational communities that display high levels of cultural integration and loyalty to the new institution. Faculty 1 stated, "The greatest challenge is the culture. It's people, because everybody's different and responds to change differently." Many respondents reiterated similar responses identifying cultures that were very different at each institution even though they were part of the same system of colleges. Vice President 1 said, "You think because we all belong to the same system that we operate the same, but each college actually operates very differently and that was a real challenge."

Harman (2002) said the process of rapid organizational change causes those affected to often feel disoriented, anxious, frustrated, unprepared for change, and overwhelmed with the stresses of the newly created institution. Director 2 said "often the people on the front lines felt nervous and frustrated with how changes or decisions were communicated." Schweiger and Ivancevich (1985, in Newcomb, 2011) explain that a merger increases anxiety and fear, therefore increasing the likelihood that employees are going to listen to the most pessimistic or negative

information, regardless of the validity of the source and further complicating the process of successfully blending conflicting cultures. Respondents explained that during a time of significant change the unknown is what employees begin to fear. However, through consistent and transparent communication a leader can decrease fear and encourage employees to work together.

One challenge that emerged through the data analysis process that was not considered in the literature review, was the challenge that community stakeholders presented. President 2 explained, "My greatest challenge throughout the merger was working with community stakeholders, influencers, and local legislators." Several other participants echoed similar responses stating that many of the community influencers were very vocal with concerns of losing the identities of their local technical college. Vice President 3 stated, "Many community members called the system office to try to stop the merger in fear of losing their local technical college." Several respondents in senior leadership positions explained that intentional communication to community constituents is critical. It also created a significant challenge because it is impossible to dedicate equal amounts of time at each location, many counties differ politically, and many feared their local campus would not receive adequate attention once merged.

Research Question Two

Research question two sought to identify respondents' perceptions of key strategies that leaders implemented that influenced positive cultural change post-merger. The interview data collected indicated that the majority of respondents felt that the most important key strategies were transparency, relationship-building, and modeling behavior. The first of these three key strategies identified was the importance of open, honest, transparent communication. Participants

described the critical need for transparency during this time to reduce fear, anxiety, and conflict among faculty and staff. The second strategy identified was the significance of focusing on first blending a leadership team. President 1 said, "The leadership team must work together and have a sense of synergy early on so that followers will follow their lead." Lastly, the leader should be seen often, should be a great listener, and have the ability to lead by example. Vice President 2 said, "Don't expect your team to be there at 7:30 am and you come strolling in at 8 or 8:30 in the morning."

Key strategies leaders used were identified through the data collection and analyzation process include a leader's ability to be transparent, model behavior, and build meaningful relationships with internal and external constituents. Leaders who create excitement through transparency and honest communication of the proposed changes are more likely to have employees who feel included in the decision-making process and are encouraged to implement changes with enthusiasm. Exemplary leaders commonly inspire and motivate followers through five practices: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). President 3 said, "Modeling the behavior you expect from your employees is vital not only during a time change of this magnitude, but every day." Leadership is about behavior—a visible set of skills and abilities exhibited by a leader that influence the operation of the institution. Leaders must be persistent in communication of the vision, strategy, and core values through honest and meaningful conversations with all employees to initiate meaningful change (Fullan, 2016).

Respondents in this study identified relationship-building through interpersonal communication as an imperative strategy for a leader to implement. Intentional communication enhances relationships and is key to successful collaboration. President 1 explained,

Building relationships, both internal with the internal customer so to speak, meaning the

faculty, staff, and students on those additional campuses, and the communities and the

influential community members in those additional counties and additional communities

is critical not only in building trust, but also for me to learn from and understand how the

organization is functioning from one campus to another.

Research Question Three

Research question three sought to identify the weaknesses in leadership that may have

contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture. Three glaring areas of

weakness were identified as a result of the interview data analysis. The first of the three critical

areas of weakness was lack of intentional communication. The word *intentional* was important

to highlight as many of the participants noted that communication was ok, but lack of intentional

communication was particularly noted by several respondents. The second significant area of

weakness was the perceived lack of concern for the people by a leader. When a leader is not

transparent with information and does not communicate information and decisions on a regular

basis during this time, many participants viewed this as a lack of empathy for the employees not

intimately involved in the merger process. Lastly, the importance of providing a clear vision on

a consistent basis. A leader's vision for the future is vital information for those working within

an organization. Faculty 3 said, "A clear vision provides purpose and guidance for the work that

is being done each day to each the ultimate goal and during a time of such significant change, a

clear and well communicated vision is critical."

Respondents at all levels of involvement in the merger process perceived gaps in

leadership throughout their merger experience. Through the process of coding and theming the

data, clear weaknesses emerged including: intentional communication, lack of concern for

employees, and lack of a well communicated and clear vision. Kotter (2012) defines leadership as a set of processes that create an organization or adapts an existing organization to significantly changing circumstances. "Leadership provides a vision for the future, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen, despite the obstacles" (p. 25). Communication within an organization is multi-directional. It is equally important for there to be communication from employees to leadership and leadership to employees. When the lines of communication are open, followers are exposed to the vision and are likely to feel a sense of connection to the organization.

Research Question Four

Research question four sought identify how leaders can minimize conflict in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger. Through the data analysis three major themes emerged: visibility, decision-making, and integration. The first of the themes to emerge was the importance of a leader's visibility. The majority of respondents felt that in order for a leader to reduce fear, anxiety, and ultimately conflict they needed to be visible as much as possible at all locations. Director 2 said,

> When rumors are flying and you are unsure of what is going on seeing leadership around reassuring employees that things will be ok just helps reduce fear. However, when the leader is not visible or does not come around much, people tend to think the worst which was felt from campus to campus during the merger.

A second theme was the importance of delegating decision-making rights. While decision-making was part of the initial literature review, delegation of these rights was not considered. Vice President 2 said, "It is critical to know from the beginning what decisions can be made without the president's approval so that things don't bottleneck in their office and

provides clear structure to the leadership team of what decisions are acceptable to be made and what needs the president's input." Lastly, many respondents noted that integration of programs and leadership from the early stages of the merger is critical to the success of the organization post-merger. Faculty 1 said, "Allowing people to work together as early as possible from various locations helps to build comradery and helps smooth the transition from two colleges to one newly formed institution."

Ellis (2011) explains that effective leadership includes the following: "developing a clear vision, explaining the rationale of a merger with faculty and staff, being open and honest, maintaining structure while making fast-paced decisions, and matching your words to your actions" (p. 65). Respondents often perceived a lack of intentional, efficient communication increased fear, anxiety, and rumors within departments and throughout the organization. Many members of the faculty and staff with little to no involvement in the merger process felt disconnected from leadership and the vision for the new institution which left them feeling disoriented in a job they once felt secure performing.

Implications

Mergers in higher education have become increasingly common within the State of Georgia and throughout the nation. As this trend continues, leaders are faced with a plethora of challenges both internally and externally. It is the researcher's belief that emerging leaders in higher education are going to require an in-depth understanding of organizational culture as they will be inevitably faced with leading organizations through significant change during their career. It can be understood from this research that those individuals seeking college president positions will be faced with a multitude of challenges that leaders before them did not experience.

Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs, and Ladd (2017) explained that, as funding for public institutions of higher education continues to decrease, the need for greater efficiency becomes critical. As the landscape of higher education operations continues to change, it will be the developing leaders in higher education who must improve change management strategies to meet the needs of individuals within their organizations and continue to help evolve the practices of managing change.

Those leaders with an adequate understanding of organizational culture, intentional communication, and the ability to build meaningful relationships with both internal and external constituents will experience success when faced with a merger. As mergers in higher education continue to be announced, it will be emergent leaders who must work to evolve organizational structure and best practices for operational efficiencies to meet the ever-changing needs of students, faculty, and staff and those federal reporting agencies who continue to require more from these institutions. Azziz (2013) suggests that merger success can consistently be linked to leaders who understand how to build organizational culture. Leaders have significant influence on organizational culture and can provide positive modeling for all stakeholders to embrace the change, change is part of the current higher education environment and cannot be ignored.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following recommendations for action were derived from the data collected in this qualitative study, based on participants' experiences, perceptions, and responses:

1. This study should be replicated sampling participants from technical, community, and university system institutions.

2. This study could be replicated using a mixed methods approach to measure the perceptions of faculty and staff on a larger scale.

3. Future research should be conducted on the impact higher education mergers have on student achievement and enrollment.

4. Future research should be conducted to identify the impact on employee turnover, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction after a merger has occurred.

Conclusion

The intent of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and identify the challenges two-year college administrators face, and identify key strategies used to influence a sustainable and healthy organizational culture as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. This research identified how leaders influence organizational culture as the result of a merger in higher education. As higher education institution leaders face increased scrutiny of financial practices, job placement, licensure pass rates, student retention, and graduation rates, this information will contribute to the body of knowledge focused on understanding the magnitude in which leaders influence the future success of an organization. It will also hopefully equipped future leaders in higher education with the necessary tools needed to successfully overcome challenges in the ever-changing environment of post-secondary education.

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APPENDIX A

Study Invitation

July 2018

Dear colleague (or potential participant)

As a doctoral student completing her dissertation through the University of New England, I am inviting you to participate in a ***one-on-one interview to share your higher education merger experience.*** As an experienced higher education employee you have significant knowledge of how your college operated pre-and post-merger. This study focuses on higher education mergers, the challenges of blending organizational culture, and the influence of leaders. Through sharing your experiences and insight, you are providing valuable input to help leaders understand the challenges they face when beginning the process of a merger in higher education.

The purpose of this interview and data collection is to collect information on higher education mergers, the challenges of blending organizational culture, and the influence of leaders. These interviews will then be transcribed, analyzed and coded to understand consistent themes that occur that will identify how leaders influence organizational culture post-merger.

Through selective sampling, I will interview individuals with various levels of responsibility throughout colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia including three presidents, three senior staff members, three faculty members, and three entry-level staff members. Interviews should take 30 – 60 minutes each and will be conducted face-to-face. In some instances, where distance is an issue, interviews will be conducted via WebEx where only the investigator will have access to the recording. If you would like a copy of your interview transcription once completed it will be available upon request.

Thank you!

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

July 2018

Dear Study Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Sharing your experiences will contribute greatly to this study and help leaders further understand how mergers in higher education impact organizational culture. Together we can help shape future leaders as they face challenges in the ever changing landscape of higher education.

Research Questions: In an effort to identify the challenges higher education leaders face during a merger and develop strategies that positively influence the newly blended organizational culture, this research study seeks answers to the following questions:
1. What challenges do college administrators identify when merging two or more higher education organizational cultures?
2. What key strategies did administrators implement to influence positive cultural change in creating a sustainable blended culture post-merger?
3. What gaps in leadership can faculty and staff who have recently experienced a merger identify that contributed to the resistance to change of organizational culture?
4. How can leaders minimize conflict related to a merger in an effort to influence a sustainable organizational culture post-merger?

Study's Purpose: The purpose of this research is to explore, identify, and describe the challenges two-year college administrators face when blending the organizational culture of two or more institutions as a result of an involuntary, single sector merger. This study will identify leadership behaviors and styles that are most likely to positively impact cultural change of a newly consolidated two-year college in the State of Georgia. As postsecondary institutions across the nation consider mergers, this research study will assist leaders who will face the uncertainties created for faculty and staff. Participants will include college administrators, faculty, and staff from colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) who have experienced a merger at their respective institutions. Through a series of interviews, participants' perceptions of their respective merger will be documented and analyzed to identify the challenges faced and the influence of leadership throughout the process of a higher education merger.

Procedures: Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The study includes a one-on-one interview consisting of 15 questions. This study will run from July 2018 – August 2018 with results published in December 2018. Upon request, I can send you a copy of your individual transcribed interview, as well as a copy of the completed dissertation. I do not foresee this study presenting any risks or hardship on you, other than the time it takes to conduct the interview. However, sharing your experiences can help build strategies for future leaders facing mergers in higher education. Together, we can help ease the transition for faculty and staff experiencing mergers and acquisitions in the ever-changing landscape of higher education.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be protected throughout the study and thereafter. Only I, the researcher, will have access to your information. All written/transcribed reports will identify you only as a number (i.e. Title #1). Your name, college, and location will not be shared. Your confidentiality will be protected in compliance with the University of New England's research with human participants' policies and procedures.

Compensation: No monetary or non-monetary compensation will be provided for your input or time.

Questions: If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via email at amyamaison@gmail.com or amaison@une.edu, or via my personal cell phone number at 229-516-2293. You may also contact Dr. Michelle Collay at the University of New England at mcollay@une.edu or by phone at 207-602-2010.

Once you agree to the consent form, I will be in touch to schedule the interview. Thank you for your valued input and willingness to participate in this research study. Your contribution not only supports my dissertation study, but also future leaders in higher education.

Please sign/agree to this consent form with full knowledge of the purpose and procedures of this study, its interview process, and data collection. A copy of the consent form will be emailed/given to you.

I, (participant's name)_____, agree to participate in this study, titled

Higher Education Mergers: Challenges Blending Organizational Culture and the Influence of Leaders.

Electronic Signature: _____
Date: _____

Amy A. Maison, Doctoral Student
University of New England's Educational Leadership Program

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Introduction: I am a doctoral student through the University of New England. I am studying higher education mergers, the challenges of blending organizational culture, and the influence of leaders. Your input will be valuable in identifying practices and leadership styles that both positively and negatively affect the blending of organizational cultural as the result of a merger of two higher education institutions. Through this discovery, future leaders will be able to identify strategies to help ease the transitions of mergers and acquisitions in higher education.

Demographic information:

First and Last Name _____ (will be kept confidential)

College _____ (will be kept confidential)

Phone Number _____

Email _____

Job Title _____

How many colleges were involved in your merger? _____

What was the enrollment at each college pre-merger? _____

Gender _____ Female _____ Male

Number of Years in Higher Education _____

Interview:

Given your position within your organization provide ***answers based on your involvement and experience at your college throughout the merger and any existing issues still lingering today as a result.***

1. Describe your higher education merger experience.

2. What was your level of involvement in the merger process?

3. Describe a decision or discussion during the merger that made an impression on you.

4. Did this merger change how you work? If so, where there any benefits? Where there any disadvantages?

5. How did you feel when changes or decisions were made? How did others around you

   respond? Did that have any influence on you?

6. Did you feel there were positive affects throughout the merger? Negative? If so, what were they and why?

7. What challenges is the college still faced with related to the merger?

8. How do you feel leadership communicated leading up to, during, and after the merger?

9. How do you feel the college culture has changed since the merger? Has there been any change? Have there been positive changes? If so, why? Negative? If so, why?

10. What do you believe is the biggest challenge of a merger for a leader in higher education?

11. If you were the leader what steps or strategies would you employ to merge the institution?

12. What characteristics or leadership styles do you believe are critical for a leader to possess

    to lead a merger in higher ed?

13. What do you believe is the most important action for a leader to take when leading a merger?

14. Is there anything else I should ask you to build a better picture of your experience?

Thank you for your time and for sharing with me about your experiences. This information contributes not only to this study, but also future leadership practices in higher education. Feel free to contact me at any time with questions or comments. You are welcome to review the dissertation before and after its completed submission.

APPENDIX D

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arising hereunder shall be resolved in the state or federal courts located in Cumberland County, Maine.

Reviewed and agreed to via email as indicated above.