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## A Phenomenological Study Of Emotion Amid Significant Organizational Change

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EMOTION AMID SIGNIFICANT  
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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**ABSTRACT**

This study employed a phenomenological methodology to explore the experiences shared by leaders of a public university in the Northeast United States during an extraordinary period of organizational change. The university's organizational transformation was particularly noteworthy because it came in the face of circumstances entirely out of the university's control. These circumstances included its state's declining population as well as its state government's failure to invest heavily in higher education. These long-term challenges were exacerbated by the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and a near simultaneous proposal by its system's former executive to radically and negatively change the university's operations. Interviews with 11 leaders at the university revealed themes of higher education as a public service, crisis, change, and survival. The interpretation of these themes demonstrated that the leaders were moving forward and that they had reflected on their organizational circumstances. Data further demonstrated the importance of coalitions during a change initiative as well as the significance of leaders providing context for organizational change. The study's conclusions aligned with its research questions involving the organizational transition as well as the ways the leaders came to understand the period during the proposed change and the impact of Covid-19. The study found that perceptions play a significant role during an organizational change initiative and that there is value in building outside support for organizational change. Findings led to recommendations for

leadership development and encouraged further investigation of the recipients involved in the proposed change and the need for recognition and analysis of the emotional reactions to change initiatives by staff occupying non-leadership roles at the university.

Keywords: *organizational change, COVID-19, public higher education, emotion, colleges and universities, crisis*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Organizational change is ubiquitous and demanding. Researchers have asserted that organizations are consistently learning and adapting (Cyert & March, 2020) and that, in terms of human resources, organizational change may benefit employees (Pahkin et al., 2011). Substantial organizational change can also sadly have a deleterious impact on those affected by it (Bamberger et al., 2012). Given that employees presumably will experience restructuring at some point in their working lives (Pahkin et al., 2014), this study sought to examine the value in studying the human elements of organizational change.

The foundation of this work was existing literature on leadership (Burns, 2012), organizational change leadership (Kotter, 2012), and transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2008). This work was also grounded in understanding emotion (James, 1884) and the phases of change people go through (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) as they come to make sense of their organization's behavior (Weick, 1995). This study was not an analysis of the success or failure of a change initiative. This study instead rested on the idea that "nowhere is there greater potential for emotion-eliciting events than in conjunction with large-scale organizational transformations" (Mossholder et al., 2000, p. 221). It is true that this work took place at a public university and against the backdrop of the challenges higher education faced in 2020. The seeming inevitability of organizational change in professional life (Pahkin et al., 2014) however, as well as the likelihood of organizational change being an emotion-inducing event (Mossholder et al., 2000), presumably makes this study applicable across myriad settings and disciplines.

Literature has demonstrated that organizational change is a multi-stage (Lewin, 1947) and necessary (Wheatley, 2006) process. Organizational change, regardless of the reason it was initiated, is far from a simple undertaking. Zorn et al. (1999) illustrated the complexity of

organizational change in their definition of such change involving “any alteration or modification of organizational structures or processes” (p. 10). This complicated nature of organizational change coupled with the significance of change to business practice (Zhang et al., 2019), warranted a high-level examination of emotions leaders experienced as they implemented a substantial change initiative. This study sought to serve in such a capacity.

People experience various emotions as they undergo an organizational change initiative. Schneider and Goldwasser (1998) used the change curve as a means of demonstrating that change initiatives are associated with periods of high expectations, the risk of despair, and potentially enhanced performance. Schneider and Goldwasser’s (1998) model sets expectations for change initiatives (Nikula, 2010) and the model’s inclusion of change as potentially involving raw emotion made it significant in relation to this study.

The emotional effects of organizational change, including their capacity to be stressful (Smollan & Morrison, 2019), can be substantial. This is of course unsurprising, especially given that organizational change has been proven to provoke fears of job insecurity (Nikolova et al., 2019) while simultaneously making people feel vulnerable (Agote et al., 2016). The behavioral ramifications associated with organizational change, including organizational change’s capacity to inspire workplace bullying (Baillien et al., 2019), are far more remarkable. Leading in a changing environment, particularly when forced to come to terms with one’s own emotional response to change, is presumably challenging.

This study took place at a public university in the Northeast United States. The university was being forced to change significantly due to external forces over which it had little control (as identified on the university’s website). In addition to the external forces it faced, the university’s challenges were exacerbated by its being part of a consortium of state colleges (as identified on

the state college system's website). Local politicians and media have described this consortium as facing considerable financial challenges (as characterized by the State Governor, 2020; as reported by State News, 2020). The university was also coping with the blowback from an abruptly issued and then retracted proposal to close its main campus in the months shortly before the study took place (as described by State Senate Speaker & State House of Representatives Speaker, 2020; as described by a State Representative, 2020).

Addressing these challenges was clearly a difficult undertaking. The publicly available data on the university's website concerning its plans for moving forward was vague. The public-facing information on the university's website did however include a lengthy list of frequently asked questions, information on potential considerations for moving forward, as well as a list of the work of the university's internal change coalition. This coalition was given the pseudonym the Change Group for the purposes of this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study sought to explore the problem of the lack of phenomenological research on how an organization's leaders emotionally experience significant organizational change. This problem rested on the idea that a leader's ability to adapt to their organization's shifting circumstances is an important element of their success (Healey & Hodgkinson, 2017). Developing a phenomenological understanding of the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) of that adaptation was, as a result, significant. The ways leaders emotionally react to the various difficulties organizational change presents remain unclear, especially when they recognize that business is competitive (Pereira et al., 2019) and that failing to change jeopardizes the likelihood of their organization's success (Kotter, 2014). Non-profit colleges and universities were identified in the context of this study as being no different than their private sector counterparts,

particularly given that the need to change is even greater when organizations face turbulent environments (Uotila, 2018). State Industrial University (SIU), the pseudonym for the organization researched in this study, recognized the importance of such evolution and was changing to meet the realities it faced (as illustrated on the university's website). These changes were shown to involve a substantial emotional response from those tasked with implementing them.

There were various examples of the volatile circumstances SIU faced. SIU's state's governor (2020) called his state college system financially unsustainable. Three campuses within the state's higher education system including SIU's main campus were shortly before this study began proposed to be closed (as described by the State Senate Speaker & State House of Representatives Speaker, 2020; as described by a State Representative, 2020). The vote on the measure to close the campuses was almost immediately postponed after it was announced (as announced by the State College System, 2020). The state college system's executive resigned shortly after this postponement (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020).

SIU was tasked with considering and implementing difficult operational changes despite being financially solvent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (as identified on the university's website). There were various iterations of these proposed changes. The university was for example investigating a new and close collaboration with an in-state community college (as identified on the university's website). The Change Group had additionally proposed several challenging goals, including meeting positive operating margins, increasing the return on educational investment for students, changing delivery structure for coursework, and improving educational outcomes (as identified on the university's website). The university had also cut salaries and benefits and had decreased funds set aside for supplies, travel expenses, and



additional costs (as noted in a State Treasurer's Report, 2020). The turbulence Uotila (2018) described clearly existed for SIU as the study took place.

This study proposed that SIU's organizational changes warranted phenomenological inquiry. This study was rooted in seminal literature (Lewin, 1947; Bridges & Bridges, 2009; Schneider & Goldwasser, 1998; Weick, 1995) and derived from qualitative data gathered from middle- and senior-level leaders currently employed by SIU and who were employed at SIU when the executive proposed to close SIU's main campus (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020) and then resigned his position (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020). The importance of this study stems from the interconnected nature of research on organizational change and leadership (Hughes, 2018). Given that organizational change is ultimately facilitated by top and middle managers (Heyden et al., 2017), their emotional reactions to a change initiative were deemed to be important to explore. It was anticipated that phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience (van Manen, 2017) would play a key role in such an exploration.

Organizational change provokes an emotional response from those involved (Smollan et al., 2010). SIU was considering restructuring and had cut salaries (as identified on the university's website), both of which were actions that may have inevitably involved feelings of loss akin to the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The need for organizations to change is universal and organizations that remain indelibly tied to the past inevitably fail (Wheatley, 2006). There was consequently value in thoroughly considering the emotions associated with leading an organizational change initiative, particularly when that change derived from difficult circumstances.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotions leaders of a state university experienced during a period of organizational transformation. This work sought to be valuable to SIU and transferable to any organization facing the need to change significantly. This researcher did not seek to understand SIU as a standalone instance of organizational change. Similarly, the researcher was not qualified to provide an in-depth psychological analysis of the changes taking place at SIU and believed any attempt to undertake such an analysis would at best be counterproductive and at worst be harmful. Such a study would also almost certainly be of little value elsewhere. This work instead sought to be useful both to SIU and other organizations facing the need to change significantly.

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological research sought answers to two questions. These research questions derived from literature associated with this study and addressed the past and present experiences of the leaders involved in this work. The literature associated with each question and the study's research questions are defined in the following paragraphs.

The first research question was based on Weick's (2010) writing on sensemaking. Weick (2010) wrote that "enacted sensemaking gathers data into interruptions, actions, and recoveries, but it also gathers it into the activity of thinking" (p. 542). The resulting first question utilized this conceptualization of sensemaking to focus on the period immediately following the proposed closure of SIU's main campus and sought to understand how SIU's leaders experienced the measure's proposal (as described by the State Senate Speaker & State House of Representatives Speaker, 2020; as described by a State Representative, 2020) and the resignation of the executive (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020).

The second research question derived from Bridges and Bridges (2009) and the Bridges transition model. The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) included three stages people experience as they adjust to change. This study's second question correspondingly sought to understand the stage each leader believed they were in as they adjusted to the changes being considered or implemented by the university. Examples of these changes included the collaboration with the community college (as identified on the university's website) and the changes already implemented by the university, such as budget cuts (as noted in a State Treasurer's Report, 2020).

This study's research questions, in accordance with Weick (2010) and Bridges and Bridges (2009) respectively, asked:

- How did leaders of a non-profit state university experience and come to understand a period of significant organizational transition and change?
- How did the leaders experience the stages of transition through the organizational change process as they adjusted following the aftermath of the proposed change and the ramifications of Covid-19 (as identified on the university's website)?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study derived from the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009). This behavioral model emphasizes that transition involves several stages (Bridges & Bridges, 2009). The three phases of the model include an ending stage involving letting go of the past, a second stage of processing and adjusting to the present, and a final stage entailing how those impacted by the change move forward (Bridges & Bridges, 2009).

Assessing the emotions being experienced by those making significant organizational changes against the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) illustrated the need to

focus on behavior as being an important component of a successful change effort (Garden, 2017). Bridges (2010) wrote of the need for leaders to “bring issues out on the table, build trust and understanding, and give people the tools they need to move forward through a difficult time” (p. 15). The emotions underlying successful organizational change initiatives clearly matter because “the focus of positive change should be the employee [being] capable of generating emotionally excited realities that drive change forward” (Talat, 2016, p. 35). The stages of the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009), based on Talat’s (2016) description of the importance of emotion to organizational change, provided a critical conceptual framework for this study.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Four assumptions guided this study. The first assumption was that the organizational change in question would follow Grant and Marshak’s (2011) definition of organizational change as “some alteration (something is stopped, started, modified, etc.) in the existing organizational arrangements (strategies, structures, systems, cultures, etc.) and/or processes (planning, coordination, decision making, etc.)” (p. 205). Grant and Marshak’s (2011) definition of organizational change was applicable to this study for the following reasons:

- The university was part of what was described as a financially unsustainable state college system (as characterized by the State Governor’s Office, 2020).
- The university was financially solvent, but that solvency has been both stopped and is now being modified by circumstances out of its control (as identified on the university’s website).

- The university was being forced to modify its organizational structure and business processes through careful internal planning (as identified on the university's website; as noted in a State Treasurer's Report, 2020).

The second assumption was that, based on their rank, the individuals involved in the study were believed to have some degree of influence within the process of SIU's transformation (Heyden et al., 2017). The third assumption guiding this study was that SIU's leaders were adhering to a conceptualization of change management as one being focused on generating a positive response to the initiative (van der Voet, 2016). Finally, the fourth assumption was that SIU's leaders were acting in good faith. This latter point was assumed to be the case based both on the researcher's long-time awareness of the university's operations as well as that the university was both actively investigating and then publicly disclosing on its website information related to its transformation (as identified on the university's website). The researcher was confident that based on these four assumptions the emotions displayed by SIU's leaders were sincerely felt.

The potential lack of transferability and limited scope of the study were its greatest limitations. There were several reasons this study may not be transferable to another organization. SIU is a public, non-profit, university, meaning that the study may not be as clearly applicable in another sector. SIU was also operating under a consortium whose mission was focused on benefiting its home state (as identified by the State College System, 2020). SIU consequently had a primary operational obligation to serve its state rather than a broader constituency and was responsible for meeting expectations not imposed on other organizations. The scope of the study was also inherently limited, even in relation to public universities in SIU's home state. Enrollment data from 2018 for example demonstrated that SIU's state's

flagship university was vastly different than SIU, particularly in terms of size and Carnegie Classification (as defined by NCES, 2020; The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020).

### **Rationale and Significance**

The need for organizations to change may be universal but attempts at organizational transformation often fail because they neglect the human elements of change (Bolman & Deal, 2006). Organizational change and leadership also share a symbiotic relationship (Burnes et al., 2018). The rationale for this study derived from both principles as well as the concept that, as is the case in all educational institutions, there are a variety of parties with competing interests within a college or university (Kezar, 2009). SIU was presumably no exception, and this may have guided the way people reacted to the university's change. This study proposed that there was therefore value in studying the emotional reaction to SIU's organizational change by its leaders. The ambiguity and intricacies inherent to the leadership process (ASHE, 2006) and to navigating the constituencies within the university were best understood within the context of the underlying emotional responses SIU's leaders had to its transformation.

This study is significant for several reasons. The first reason is that it documented an organization's transformation as it was taking place. The second reason is that it helped identify the stages of transition (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) those being interviewed were experiencing at a specific time in SIU's history. Miller and Friesen (1984) noted the importance of analyzing patterns of behavior within an organization rather than an organization's specific characteristics (as cited in Greenwood & Hinings, 1993). SIU provided an important illustration of such patterns as the university evolved to meet the demands it faced.

Finally, the significance of this research also stems from its phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology, according to Flynn and Korcuska (2018), involves requiring researchers “to discern the essence of participants’ lived experiences and to lay aside their prevailing understandings of a phenomenon to authentically explore the participants’ experiences” (p. 35). Phenomenology’s emphasis on the authentic exploration of experience (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018) made this study a meaningful investigation into emotions leaders shared as they implemented a substantial change initiative. This study’s use of both the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) as a conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995), as a theoretical framework (Anfara & Mertz, 2015) underscored that there was a great deal to be learned from substantively researching the emotional elements of organizational change. There is little question that organizations change for various reasons (Oreg, 2018) and must evolve to exist (Cavanaugh, 2017). The emotions stemming from an instance of substantial organizational transformation were consequently deemed to be important to both document and understand within the broader context of literature on organizational change and leadership.

### **Definition of Terms**

Three terms were critical to this study. These terms were organizational change, emotion, and empathy. *Organizational change* followed the previously cited definition by Grant and Marshak (2011) as being change involving the alteration of organizational arrangements and processes. *Emotion* was defined as being a process (Klarner et al., 2011) of an individual “undergoing constant modification allowing rapid readjustment to changing circumstances or evaluations” (Scherer, 2005, p. 702). *Empathy* was understood as “the natural capacity to share,

understand, and respond with care to the affective states of others” (Decety, 2012, p. vii). These terms are referenced throughout this study in accordance with these definitions.

### **Conclusion**

This was a phenomenological study of emotions leaders felt as they implemented significant organizational change. The organization studied was a public university in the Northeast United States. The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) provided the conceptual framework for this study as well as the basis for one of its research questions. The work of Weick (2010) established the foundation for this study’s second research question. Finally, three terms, organizational change, emotion, and empathy were vital throughout this study. These terms supported this study’s phenomenological focus on emotions leaders experienced during a specific instance of significant organizational change.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Crisis places varied and daunting expectations on leaders. Literature has demonstrated that leaders facing crisis must promote the ideas surrounding a related change initiative (Stam et al., 2018). They are required to do so while simultaneously managing a circumstance fraught with risk, including possible damage to “an organization’s face, image or reputation” (Ayoko et al., 2017, p. 622). The demands of being mindful of the perilous nature of organizational change are profound.

Higher education has been described as an industry where leaders can emerge from all levels of an organization (Kezar et al., 2011). McDonald and Hartel (2000) wrote that the level of an individual’s involvement in a potentially difficult circumstance has a direct correlation with the negative emotions they may undergo as a result (as cited in Ayoko et al., 2017). Top and middle managers ultimately drive change (Heyden et al., 2017), and their proximity to change initiatives stemming from difficult organizational situations may correlate with the ways in which they emotionally experience those events. In short, individuals in such positions are in the conversation about the change taking place. That conversation may not be an easy one.

The difficulty of the conversation about an organizational change initiative stems from the complex relationship between emotion, leadership, and organizational change. The human dynamics of organizational change (Ribando et al., 2017) share a corresponding focus on the relationship between the behavioral and experiential channels of emotion (Lieberman, 2019). Leadership presumably adheres in this context to Beckhard’s (2006) description of organizational development as management both being invested in a change initiative as well as directing the initiative actively. Avolio (2018) similarly wrote that “profound radical change occurs when organizational members understand why they should or need to change and what

this means in the context of defining themselves and their individual identities” (p. 14). Change may be necessary for an organization’s survival (Jeong & Shin, 2019), but coming to terms with that evolution will likely involve a significant emotional investment by those closely connected with the initiative. Such an emotional investment in a change event is only possible if the emotions shared by the leaders involved are sincere.

Sincerity’s importance to adjusting to an organizational change event is evident in Frijda’s (1988) description of emotion as having numerous characteristics. One such characteristic includes an individual’s ability to come to understand a situation’s meaning (as cited in Van Dam, 2018). The significant emotional ramifications of organizational change for those involved (Vakola & Petrou, 2018) may be further pronounced given that organizations do not change all the time and employees may experience stable work environments throughout their lives (Oreg, 2018). Organizational change involves some degree of upheaval, meaning that the stability which may have otherwise existed is at least temporarily disturbed. A leader’s ability to understand the meaning behind that disturbance may, in the end, closely correlate with the organizational position they occupy.

A leader’s position derives from their characteristics as well as the circumstances they face (Stogdill, 1974). Characteristics and circumstances are critical to a leader’s success, particularly when the leader wishes to serve in what Burns (2012) described as being a transformational capacity. Behavior in any circumstance rests largely on context (Ybema et al., 2019), and a change initiative invariably exists within the context of an institution being forced to shift between its past and present (Kump, 2019). The ways people perceive change may impact their willingness to accept a change initiative (Will & Pies, 2018). Literature makes it clear that emotion, organizational change, and leadership are closely connected.

### **Conceptual Framework: The Bridges Transition Model**

The interconnected nature of emotion, organizational change, and leadership warranted a conceptual framework focused on understanding that organizational transformation has a fundamental underlying human component. The three phase Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) was such a framework. The phases of organizational change as illustrated in the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) provided an appropriate conceptual foundation for exploring the emotions leaders shared as they navigated substantial organizational transformation.

#### **Defining the Bridges Transition Model**

Change is an organizational norm (Al-Haddad & Kortner, 2015). While change may be an organizational norm (Al-Haddad & Kortner, 2015), change is also to varying degrees an organizational inflection point. The means by which individuals come to both understand that inflection point and determine whether an organization is stable is largely a matter of perception, particularly of the organization's stage (van de Ven & Poole, 2005) in its life cycle. Organizational life cycle can be understood as deriving from an organization's "trajectory to the final end state that is prefigured and requires a specific historical sequence of events" (van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 515). The ability to perceive an organization's stage in its life cycle requires knowing and being able to cope with the inevitability that an organization's circumstances will shift (van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

The subjective (van de Ven & Poole, 2005) and sequential nature of change (van de Ven & Poole, 1995) as an organizational norm (Al-Haddad & Kortner, 2015) warranted a conceptual framework centered on the ways in which people come to understand organizational change. The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) emphasized three phases of people's

adjustment to change, including sequential periods of people letting go, moving into a neutral period, and then moving forward and embracing something new. The model's three stage process (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) consequently provided a key overview of how people come to understand and embrace an organization's evolution (Larry, 2017). The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) further stood out because while it provided a high-level understanding of organizational change, it did so at a deeply human level rooted in the previously cited definition of empathy (Decety, 2012).

### **The Significance of the Bridges Transition Model**

The Bridges transition model's (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) inherent empathy (Decety, 2012) was significant both because of its fundamentally human focus as well as the fact that it echoed seminal organizational change literature. Lewin (1947) for example described organizational change as involving "freezing" the past in order to move forward, "moving to the new level," and, in turn, "freezing group life on the new level" (p. 35). The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) was shown in this study to support Lewin's (1947) description of organizational change. The multi-dimensional nature of the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) made it a valuable research tool.

### **Topical Research on the Bridges Transition Model**

The topical research on the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) was abundant. The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) has been recognized as not so much involving the act of organizational change as instead describing the emotional transitions people go through during the process of such a transformation (Miller, 2017). Larry (2017) for instance noted that the Bridges transition model emphasized change and transition as being exclusive, with change being an occurrence and transition being the psychological ramifications

deriving from the change itself. Much can be learned both from and about the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking**

Literature on organizational change initiatives identified that such efforts both often fail and make significant and unease-inducing demands on individuals (Holzmer, 2017). The leaders of organizations surely recognize that leaders are often judged by their accomplishments (Burnes et al., 2018) and that their professional positions may be impacted due to the need to move a change initiative forward (Ozawa, 2019). Leaders also inevitably are aware of Talat et al.'s (2017) description that “human societies remain continuously in flux through the organizing processes of organizations” (p. 237). Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) was proposed as being an appropriate theoretical foundation for developing an understanding of these ideas.

### **Defining Sensemaking**

Sensemaking (Weick, 1995), like the Bridges transition model (2009), is oriented around the human experience with organizational change. The critical difference between sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and the Bridges transition model (2009) is that while transitions inherently involve moving forward, sensemaking closely correlates with an individual's ability to look backward honestly and with clarity. This retrospection is evident in sensemaking's being characterized as an ongoing way for someone to understand an era after its conclusion (Steinberg, 2018). Sensemaking can further be described as closely associated with an individual's ability to come to terms with a specific experience (Weick, 2012) while simultaneously coping with ambiguity, surprise, and uncertainty (Atilola, 2018). Making sense of a circumstance in an organization is ultimately “a temporal process rather than a one-off

activity” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012, p. 81). The ongoing and reflective nature of sensemaking presents considerable demands on individuals impacted by organizational change.

### **The Significance of Sensemaking**

It was anticipated that an in-depth, sensemaking-based study of the emotional elements of organizational change would provide an important addition to Burns’s (2012) research on leadership and Bass and Riggio’s (2008) writing on transformational leadership. This was expected to be the case, especially given Dumas and Beinecke’s (2018) identification of the issues associated with the processes surrounding change and Wee and Taylor’s (2018) work on the frequency of change within organizations. The importance of emotions surrounding organizational change and the ways organizations can plan for them were central to this study.

### **Research Applicable to the Process of Sensemaking**

Ample research exists on leadership, organizational change, and emotion. Recent literature identifies various issues associated with organizational change. This is particularly true in relation to the processes surrounding change (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018) and the frequency of change within organizations (Wee & Taylor, 2018). Such literature makes important contributions to organizational change research, especially in relation to how it builds on foundational organizational change theory (Lewin, 1947). Organizational change literature similarly has identified that, in addition to often failing, change initiatives make significant, uncomfortable, and very personal demands on individuals (Holzmer, 2017). Research has also identified that organizations are driven to change by the external forces they face (Graetz & Smith, 2010).

Organizational change is therefore both difficult and strategically important (Chen et al., 2018). The ways people cope with organizational change when they are aware of its inherent

challenges and strategic value may considerably influence the likelihood of a change initiative's success. The reason is grounded in this study's sensemaking-based (Weick, 1995) theoretical framework. Sensemaking has been described as a tool people can utilize to adjust to unique events taking place within organizations (Khan, 2018).

### **Sensemaking and the Bridges Transition Model**

These unique events inevitably entail psychological transitions. Bridges and Bridges (2009) described the transitions associated with change as being phases entailing an initial ending period, followed by a neutral phase, and concluding with a final stage involving a new beginning. This study acknowledged the beginning stage of organizational change as being especially stressful due to its fundamental uncertainty (Smollan, 2015). Uncertainty demands people at a minimum attempt to understand their circumstances as they move forward.

Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) consequently shared a close connection with the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) within the context of this study. Sensemaking's underlying assumptions "present a view of history as a phenomenological aspect of human interpretation rather than an objective set of immutable facts" (Suddaby & Foster, 2017, p. 28). The subjective nature of sensemaking means that any adjustment through the transitions (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) involved in a change initiative is likely to be uniquely felt and experienced. Self-reflection was anticipated would be a critical tool for those impacted by a change initiative to utilize to both work through the phases of organizational change (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) and come to terms with the circumstances surrounding an organizational change initiative.

Sensemaking's emphasis on retrospection (Weick, 1995) means people can control their reactions to shifting circumstances. People's ability to control their reactions to changes taking place around them reflects the significance of context as an important theme in organizational

change literature (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). The process of sensemaking takes place within the context of an evolving organization (Marshall, 2016), meaning the researcher's ability to connect the concepts underlying the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) was essential to understanding the emotions leaders experienced as they navigated their organization's change process. This navigation reflected the fundamentally human component of organizational change.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review was designed to document existing research on organizational change, emotion, and leadership. Two concepts provided the basis for this literature review. These concepts included that organizations of all types will likely change (Raza et al., 2018) as well as that organizations are often driven to change by demands made by external environments (Clausen & Kragh, 2018). The consistent theme within existing literature on organizational transformation is that leaders play an important role in determining the likelihood of a change initiative's success (Bakari et al., 2017).

### **Organizational Structure**

The seeds of the need for organizations to change rests in the reason organizations are structured in a particular manner. Organizations are at their core structured to serve an institutional purpose (Emery, 2019). This purpose can be nearly anything, whether it be to produce a knowledge-based product such as would be provided by a professional service firm (Emery, 2019) or to offer student affairs services in higher education settings in order to support student development (Marine, 2011), and is almost certainly facilitated by organizational operations. Skivington and Daft (1991) described organizational structure as a means of configuring those operations (as cited in Zheng et al., 2010).



## **What is Organizational Change?**

Organizational change has been described “as a process starting with an initial stimulus that motivates organizations to move from one state of being to another” (Schweiger et al., 2018, pp. 658-659). This process involves both uncertainty and ambiguity (Buchanan & Badham, 2008) and occurs in an organization whose state exists “somewhere on the edge of order and chaos” (Maimone & Sinclair, 2014, p. 347). It was tempting to think of organizational change solely as existing on a large scale and being a rare event required in order to adapt to infrequently occurring circumstances. Organizational change however is, instead of being rare, both frequent and a means of adapting to shifting business requirements and processes (Maimone & Sinclair, 2014).

## **Themes in Organizational Change Literature**

Several themes build on these characteristics and regularly appear in organizational change literature. These themes include literature’s focus on the evolving organization as well as the individuals impacted by an organization’s transformation (By et al., 2018). Literature further emphasizes that organizations need to evolve to survive and thrive in new environments (Schweiger et al., 2018). The challenge of meeting these expectations was evident when viewed through the prism of sensemaking, which involves a leader’s ability to grasp the unknown (Peng, 2018) as well as their being adept enough to oversee an organizational change process in which employee empowerment is essential to success (Aida et al., 2018). This type of assessment is critical to an organization’s transformation given that change centers around people both shifting behavior (Prochaska, 2008) and being ready to complete the organizational change process (Holt et al., 2010).

Themes in organizational change literature further identified that organizations must come to understand both the interconnected nature of organizational change and creativity (Jeong & Shin, 2019) as well as the correlation between change and well-being (de Fatima et al., 2020). Literature also showed that a key component of leadership is guiding and directing change (Nelson-Brantley & Ford, 2017). Finally, research indicated that a leader's ability to influence the conduct of others is an important element of change leadership (Kotter & Cohen, 2012) and that individuals associated with a change initiative must adapt to and cope with an organization's evolution (Nery et al., 2019).

### **Emotion and Organizational Change**

Organizational change involves, as has been noted previously, ambiguity, surprise, and uncertainty (Atilola, 2018). Uncertainty was especially noteworthy in the context of researching organizational change given that "uncertainty is an inescapable element of human life" (Van Horen & Mussweiler, 2014, p. 73). Seminal economist Keynes (1937) wrote in relation to the accumulation of wealth that "our knowledge of the future is fluctuating, vague and uncertain" (p. 213). Keynes' (1937) observation clearly correlates with emotions associated with organizational change.

### **Defining Emotion and Resiliency**

Emotions are both subjective and unique. The personal nature of emotion is revealed in the work of James (1884) who wrote that emotions consist of "the bodily changes [which] follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion" (pp. 189-190). James's (1884) writing underscores that emotion is a distinct mental state (Dixon, 2012). These unique states of mind may include negative emotions such as anger (Greenwood et al., 1994; Kunzmann & Wrosch, 2018), resentment (Quade et al., 2019), or

uncertainty (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Kunzmann and Wrosch (2018) took this idea a step further by writing “that different negative emotions can serve as distinct and highly adaptive functions by helping the individual navigate through a continuously changing social and physical environment” (p. 59). Barabasz (2016) noted additionally that “organizational change...evokes strong emotions, as any change tends to interfere with security and arouses anxiety” (p. 156).

Emotions were not assumed from the outset to be uniformly negative within the context of an organizational change initiative. Emotions may instead be self-transcendent and involve feelings such as compassion and admiration (Stellar et al., 2017) rather than sadness and loss (Castillo et al., 2018). Emotionally resilient people need to be more than simply strong internally. They need to be self-aware, adaptable, and willing to embrace new ideas and experiences (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). The anxiety inherent to organizational change (Barabasz, 2016) may make reaching such a state far from easy.

### **Emotion amid Organizational Change**

Moving on toward a new sense of self (Pawar, 2017) in the face of significant organizational change may be difficult. This is especially true given that change of any kind has a human dynamic that can be characterized by a sense of loss (Castillo et al., 2018). The inevitable uncertainty surrounding excessive change may lead constituents into counterproductive emotional states resulting in their feeling a need to take drastic and perhaps unnecessary action. Employees experiencing excessive change can for example become both anxious (Johnson, 2016) and unduly stressed (Cullen-Lester et al., 2019) and consequently determine that it is best to leave their organization. The reason this is the case is that the loss of the past may involve mourning, an element of which entails creating a new identity (Maddrell, 2016). The ability for someone to both identify with an organization facing change in the present

as well as maintain that identification in the future (Elstak et al., 2015) was proposed as being a substantial element of meaningful and effective organizational change leadership. Maintaining this identification may even require those impacted by a change initiative to experience raw emotion akin to the Kubler-Ross (1969) theory of the stages of grief (Castillo et al., 2018).

The experience of the visceral emotions associated with the Kubler-Ross (1969) stages of grief theory may come at significant cost. Change and loss in an organization has substantial and long-term ramifications (Romaniuk, 2014) and grief is a byproduct of change (Climent-Rodriguez, 2019). Even though this study did not seek to uncover the raw emotion the Kubler-Ross (1969) theory entails, the ideas the theory presented were important considerations. Grief and loss are interconnected (Friedrich & Wustenhagen, 2017). Sadness, according to Ekman (1999), stems from the loss of someone close, the failure to reach a goal, or ceasing to have control (as cited in Shirai & Suzuki, 2017). Change in organizations can be hard (Allen, 2008) and may, in the end, be shown to involve Ekman's (1999) description of the origins of sadness (as cited in Shirai & Suzuki, 2017).

### **Organizational Change, Emotion, and Crisis**

The predominant understanding of organizational change has shifted from one labeling change as being a rare event in an organization's lifecycle to one viewing change as being continuous and ongoing (Holten et al., 2020). The ubiquity of organizational change does not lessen its emotional impact, particularly given that strong emotions are likely to be involved with organizational change (Kataria et al., 2018). Organizational change and negative emotions are often intertwined (De Klerk, 2019), and the process of sensemaking is one that is challenging (Maitlis et al., 2013). Maitlis et al. (2013) notably contended that sensemaking, despite being

challenging, has many positive attributes and can serve as a means of creating change, making decisions, and resolving difficult circumstances within organizations.

Developing an understanding of the emotions associated with organizational transformation may be complicated when the organization in question is facing crisis. Organizational crisis involves “highly ambiguous situations with low probability of occurrence” (Klein & Eckhaus, 2017, p. 227) which both take place unexpectedly and demand quick, decisive action. While the profound impact of COVID-19 was at the time of this study incalculable, it was clear that the pandemic had impacted all levels of education throughout the world (Murphy, 2020). Higher education was no exception to this reality. COVID-19 was at the time this study was underway ravaging state colleges (St. Amour, 2020), small colleges (Murakami, 2020), and large research universities (Most, 2020) alike. There was every reason to believe the global financial impact of the pandemic constituted an unpredictable crisis following Klein and Eckhaus’s (2017) definition of the term.

Crises can also be argued to be “manifestations of underlying institutional vulnerabilities, sharing a developmental logic that can be traced to the pre-crisis period” (Alink et al, 2001, p. 287). It would have taken considerable prescience and historical awareness for anyone to anticipate the impact of the need to socially distance to combat COVID-19 (Fairchild et al., 2020). The consequences of the social distancing required to cope with a pandemic such as COVID-19 (Fairchild et al., 2020) in a setting like a college or university (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020, as cited in Murphy, 2020) were real. COVID-19 may be recognized as illustrating the underlying vulnerabilities, especially those related to weak demographics (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2019), higher education already faced prior to the pandemic.

## **Leading Organizational Change**

The demands placed on leaders tasked with implementing an organizational change initiative, especially in relation to facilitating the change process (Kotter, 2012), are substantial. These expectations seem to be particularly evident when leaders are forced to recognize that organizations need to change to weather difficult circumstances (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016). Managing such circumstances demands a leader possess a high level of emotional intelligence (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016) as well as the ability to both live in the present while envisioning a future. Living mindfully and in the present is difficult for any adult (Wallace, 2009), let alone one tasked with securing an organization's future in the face of what could reasonably be described as chaos. Leaders are expected to recognize "that chaos is the beginning, not the end" while simultaneously knowing that chaos provides a "source of energy and momentum" (Bennis, 2009, p. 187).

### **Recognizing Environmental Dynamics and the Need to Change**

Weick and Quinn (1999) described episodic change as tending "to be infrequent, discontinuous, and intentional...when organizations are moving away from their equilibrium conditions" (p. 365). Teece et al. (1997) defined an organization's dynamic capabilities as those that "can be seen as an emerging and potentially integrative approach to understanding the newer sources of competitive advantage" (p. 510). Organizational environments can correspondingly be described as following Wang and Wang's (2017) description of an environment as being "low dynamic" (p. 732). Such an environment involves predictable circumstances that can be handled through processes by utilizing existing resources (Wang & Wang, 2017). The inevitability of organizational change correspondingly follows Uotila's (2018) definition of change as involving periods of instability taking place amid long periods of stability. Means of coping with such

inevitability, such as building coalitions (Kotter, 2012), creating a nimble environment capable of implementing a change initiative successfully, and recognizing that structure matters in terms of organizational behavior (Tarakci et al., 2018), were fortunately shown not only to exist but to also be plentiful.

### **The Expectations Organizational Change Places on Leaders**

The leader's role is additionally complicated by the expectation that they engage in sensegiving activities with those impacted by a change initiative (Kraft et al., 2018). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) described sensegiving as involving both persuasion and influence on others (as cited in Kataria et al., 2018). Sensegiving requires that a leader provides a contextual understanding to a follower (Sparr, 2018), and its outward-facing nature is considerably different from the more internally driven process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Clark and Geppert (2011) further described the relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving as involving sensemaking's interpretation of a circumstance and sensegiving as a means of influencing behavior in the short- and long-term future. Cook (2017), who wrote that the immediate future is one which an individual can expect to experience, and a long-term future is based on a vision that extends beyond one's expected lifetime, demonstrated that an organization has a future far beyond a leader's tenure. It is the leader's job to secure that future.

It was consequently unsurprising that organizational change is stressful (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016) and demands resiliency on the part of those impacted by a change initiative (Shin et al., 2012). Managing the emotional elements of organizational change is a substantial expectation, especially of those leading the transformation itself. Leaders of an organizational change initiative invariably know both that "change resides at the heart of leadership" (Latta, 2009, p. 35) and that "leadership is about coping with change" (Kotter, 2013, p. 6). They

presumably are also at least tacitly aware of Fugate et al.'s (2012) determination that attempts at organizational transformation often fail due to the burdens such initiatives place on employees (as cited in Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Leaders surely recognize the importance of strategic leadership to the success of any change initiative (Coban et al., 2018) as well as the critical nature of change to management (Zhang et al., 2019). The resulting burdens leaders are expected to shoulder as they implement a change initiative are substantial.

**Managerial skillsets.** The managerial skillsets involved in implementing a successful organizational change initiative are considerable. The complex nature of organizational change requires more than a leader's ability to manage their emotions. Organizational leaders must manage their emotions while simultaneously displaying transformational behavioral characteristics and articulating a vision (Bass & Riggio, 2008). A transformational leader must for example be able to develop a relationship with constituents that is based on mutual trust (Eliophotou-Menon & Ioannou, 2016). A constituent, in order to take on the risks inherent to any transformation, must be able to feel confident in his or her leader's abilities. This confidence may derive from the constituent's identification with the leader's idealized influence (Bass, 1990). Similarly, organizational change requires both effort and a willingness to commit to a change initiative (Tasler, 2017).

### **Leadership and Organizational Change**

Various and often differing means exist to understand organizational change leadership (Nelson-Brantley & Ford, 2017) regardless of the setting in which the leader is being assessed. The critical functions organizations play in modern society (Besio et al., 2020) require diverse leadership competencies in different settings. Military leaders for example are expected to be not only strategically capable but also entrepreneurial and creative (Metz, 2020). Research into the



private sector has demonstrated the importance of a leader being visionary and mindful of the external challenges an organization faces (Brandt et al., 2019). Though the means may be distinct, clear concepts consistently appeared in literature detailing leadership and organizational change.

Kotter (2012) wrote that effective leadership is vital to an organization's ability to successfully implement a change initiative. Leading an organizational change initiative is a particularly complex responsibility mandating a leader navigate a series of challenging stages (Kotter, 2012) while knowing there will likely be no immediate apparent benefit during an organization's transformation (Commons, 2018). Communicating change as a long-term process is critical due to the reality that leaders must know their employees are actively engaged in the organizational change initiative (Augustsson et al., 2017). A leader must be able to communicate both the need for change as well as a message that change is possible (Armenakis et al., 1993). Evidence of this concept was clear in the literature. Bart Jeroen and Aliyu (2018), in a study of a merger in higher education, for example demonstrated that communication is an important determinant of employee trust. Developing this trust is doubly significant to the leader personally given Kouzes and Posner's (2006) observation that a leader's legacy derives from the story their actions tell.

Higher education may be an industry requiring a leader's willingness to reinvent themselves in the face of an unknown and likely imminent future. Higher education is also an industry that adapts to change (Cox, 2019) and where leaders can emerge from various hierarchical levels even if they do not serve in capacities normally associated with being authorized to create change (Kezar et al., 2011). The precedent for successful change in higher education was enormously important to this study. The reason this precedent was significant is

that poorly executed change at a college or university can have substantial consequences for constituents far beyond staff. Leaders in higher education are ultimately responsible to various constituencies. Staff may be working at a college out of necessity. Students however are attending a college out of choice. This choice has costly and potentially life-changing ramifications (Coelho & Liu, 2017). The consequences of a poorly executed change initiative in a higher education setting as a result have wide-ranging and possibly dire ramifications for many people. Higher education has however been shown to be a context where transformational leadership has been utilized effectively (Bass, 1990). The appeal of transformational leaders in a higher education setting is unsurprising. Individuals at any organizational level, and particularly those who are intelligent, motivated, and resilient, can be agents of change (Monnot, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This literature review documented existing research on the relationship between organizational change and the emotions leaders experienced as they implemented a significant change initiative. The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) were used throughout this study. Both the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) revealed organizational change as being a complex, multi-faceted, and emotional process. Literature has demonstrated the nature of change and its effect on leaders. This study sought to fill a gap in the literature related to the emotional experiences of change shared by leaders of a public university undergoing significant organizational transformation. Such a study was expected to provide critical insights into the human elements of organizational change processes.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The third chapter of this study describes the means the study used to research the emotions leaders experienced during a period of substantial organizational change. This chapter describes this study's phenomenological research method as well as the study's research site. Chapter 3 addresses the instrumentation used for data gathering in support of this study, the corresponding analytical strategy used throughout the work, and the limitations of the study's design. Most importantly, this chapter explores this study's understanding of ethics and establishes clear guidelines to ensure that the rights of the participants involved were protected.

### **The Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotions leaders of a state university experienced during a period of organizational transformation. The rationale for this study was that the emotional experiences leaders have to a change initiative play an important role in determining the likelihood of the initiative's success (Agote et al., 2016).

### **Research Questions and Design**

This study sought to answer two research questions. These research questions were:

- How did leaders of a non-profit state university experience and come to understand a period of significant organizational transition and change?
- How did the leaders experience the stages of transition through the organizational change process as they adjusted following the aftermath of the proposed change and the ramifications of COVID-19 (as identified on the university's website)?

This study's phenomenological design facilitated its exploration of the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) of leaders who were associated with an instance of significant organizational transformation. Merleau-Ponty (2012) characterized phenomenology as being a methodology

involving “describing, and not explaining or analyzing” (p. 8). Merleau-Ponty's (2012) definition of phenomenology speaks to the various reasons why it was a suitable research method for this work:

- Phenomenology met the needs of this study due to its focus on the ways people experience a phenomenon (van Manen et al., 2016).
- Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because phenomenology relies on interview tactics that are “less concerned with the factual accuracy than the plausibility of an account – whether it is true to our living sense of it” (Cypress, 2018, p. 304). This study adhered to this concept and emphasized emotional experience as being both subjective and unique.
- Finally, this study did not seek to psychoanalyze the changes taking place at SIU (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

### **Site Information and Population**

State Industrial University (SIU) is a pseudonym for a rural, remote (as defined by NCES, 2020) university in the Northeast United States. SIU offers technical and professional training in an array of academic areas and had at the time of this study an enrollment of approximately 1,600 undergraduate and graduate students (as identified on the university’s website). Nearly half of SIU’s undergraduate students attended on a part-time basis (as defined by NCES, 2020). The college offered undergraduate and graduate degrees (as defined by NCES, 2020) and boasted small class sizes and a high placement rate for both jobs and opportunities for further education for its graduates (as identified on the university’s website). SIU was well-regarded regionally (*U.S. News.com*, date redacted) and nationally (*Military Times*, date redacted).

SIU, despite not being the author's home site, presented significant ethical considerations. The author maintained throughout the study a close personal connection with SIU, making the acknowledgement of possible researcher bias important. Those being interviewed were assured that the goal of the study was to understand at a high level the emotions leaders experienced during the process of organizational change. This study did not seek to judge or criticize SIU, nor did it seek to uncover what could be considered unflattering stories from SIU's past. Considerable efforts were made to ensure that participants were confident knowing that this study sought to explore their lived experience (van Manen, 2017) of organizational change. Member checking of transcripts was one method employed to provide such assurance. It was also anticipated that the invitation's inclusion of the informed consent form and the researcher's encouragement that participants both sign and keep a copy of the consent form provided additional assurance of the study's intentions.

SIU and its approximately 30 senior administrators (as identified in the university's academic catalog) faced at the time this study took place challenges seemingly stemming from uncontrollable issues. These issues derived from several factors, including SIU's geographic location, the demographic trends associated with that location, and state-level politics. SIU is in a state whose population at the time this study took place was trending downward, had a median household income of approximately \$32,500 per year, and was notably lacking in racial and ethnic diversity (as defined by the U.S. Census, 2020). These statistics were important to this study given that at the time the study was being conducted 85% of SIU's students came from its home state (as identified on the university's website). Both population trends in SIU's state (as defined by the U.S. Census, 2020) and limited financial support for higher education by its state's government (State Higher Education Officers Association, 2020) had been, at the time

this study was conducted, particularly detrimental to its public and private colleges, including SIU.

Various means existed to illustrate the ramifications of these trends. Outside auditors (2019) determined that SIU's state college consortium had recently seen declining student-based revenue. SIU's private college neighbors had either closed (as written in a State Executive White Paper, 2020), been placed on probation by a regional accrediting agency due to financial hardship (as designated by NECHE, 2018), or merged with stronger institutions (as stated by a Neighboring Private College, 2020). SIU faced the additional hurdle of being in a state where there was a notably low financial appropriation provided per full-time equivalent (FTE) by its state government (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2020).

The demographic trends SIU faced stood in contrast to its neighboring states. SIU for instance shares a border with a state whose population had grown in recent years, was more diverse, and had a stronger economic foundation (as defined by the U.S. Census, 2020) than SIU's state. Enrollments in public higher education institutions in this more prosperous and demographically viable state had, despite a similarly low appropriation per full-time equivalent (FTE) to SIU's state (State Higher Education Officers Association, 2020), increased between spring 2018 and spring 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). This stood in contrast to enrollment in public higher education institutions in SIU's state, which was both down in spring 2020 and constituted less than 25% of the total enrollment in the neighboring state's public higher education institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

SIU was at time of this study unquestionably in a challenging market position. The circumstances SIU faced however were not unlike those many colleges and universities were

experiencing at the time. All colleges and universities faced increased competition for student enrollments (as written in a State Executive White Paper, 2020). Enrollments at higher education institutions were falling (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic presented difficulties seemingly daily in a host of areas ranging from whether students should return to campus (Smith, 2020) to more specific areas like study abroad (Redden, 2020). Outstanding federal student loan debt had increased from 516 billion dollars in 2007 to more than 1.5 trillion dollars in the first quarter of 2020 (Velez et al., 2019). Colleges and universities doubtlessly needed to change to navigate the circumstances they faced (Mintz, 2019). SIU's leaders acknowledged their institution was no exception to this reality (as identified on the university's website).

This study utilized a sample of full-time employees working at SIU who held the rank of Director or higher within its organizational hierarchy. These employees were employed by SIU when the study took place. These employees were also with SIU when its transformational initiative was announced and when the executive of the college consortium of which SIU is a part abruptly proposed to close SIU's main campus (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020) and then resigned shortly after doing so (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020). Several of those invited to participate in the study were, in addition to being campus leaders, members of the Change Group (as identified on the university's website). Defining the population in this manner narrowed the possible participants and established a common status based on employment classification and length of affiliation with the university.

### **Sampling Method**

Burns (2016) described a shared experience as one that can be characterized as having "an essential noetic sense implying ownership by several people" (p. 370). This study, based on

Burns (2016), employed non-probability and purposive sampling. Non-probability sampling was a suitable methodology to utilize because such a method is appropriate when it is understood that a population being researched shares common characteristics (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Purposive sampling was appropriate to use because the data collected from the study's participants were expected to be generalizable to the population and it was also anticipated they would provide substantially unique and valuable information for the study (Etikan et al., 2016). The participants shared the bond of working at SIU when the study was underway and during the early stages of its transformation. Non-probability purposive sampling ensured this research explored as many variations on the experiences these employees had during SIU's transformation as possible.

The step-by-step process for this study's sampling method was rooted in Tracy's (2010) emphasis on qualitative research involving, among other characteristics, a researcher being both sincere and credible. The researcher:

- Obtained site approval from SIU.
- Obtained approval of the dissertation proposal from the researcher's committee.
- Obtained approval of the research from the University of New England's Institutional Review Board.
- Reached out to possible participants by email. These emails included a statement that the study did not seek to research SIU as an organization but instead sought to focus on emotional experiences associated with significant organizational change. The researcher included the informed consent form as an attachment with this email.
- Obtained consent from volunteers to participate in the study.
- Conducted semi-structured individual interviews with participants.



- Provided participants with raw transcripts and deidentified transcripts or deidentified transcripts.
- Edited the transcripts as requested by participants.
- Returned the edited transcripts to the participants.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures**

This researcher used an instrument based on pre-determined semi-structured interview questions. The flexibility provided by semi-structured interviews (Kallio et al., 2016) was essential. This was especially true because this study warranted a substantial degree of empathy on the part of the researcher. The reason empathy was so important is that empathy facilitates knowing “the embodied mind of the other” (Zahavi & Rochat, 2015, p. 544). This study consequently relied heavily on empathy as a component of the interview process.

The interview questions derived from the work of Bridges and Bridges (2009) and Weick (2010). The researcher planned to ask a pre-written series of questions following Bridges and Bridges (2009) examining the stage in the organizational change process the participant was experiencing. The follow-up questions to each structured question were pre-written and open-ended and relied on aspects of sensemaking and retrospection (Weick, 1995). The instrumentation employed in this study did not seek to extract information from those being interviewed but rather acknowledged participants as being unique subjects (Mason-Bish, 2018) having different experiences as they shared a complex series of organizational events together.

It was anticipated that a phenomenological study deriving from interview data would align closely with literature on the emotions surrounding organizational change. Literature has demonstrated that organizational change can create feelings such as tension (Kump, 2019), grief (Kearney & Hyle, 2003), and happiness (Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019). Semi-structured

interviews were used to help determine whether such an alignment with the literature existed within the context of SIU's transformation.

Interview data was recorded by the researcher using Zoom to help ensure confidentiality. Interview data were transcribed professionally using Rev.com. Interview transcripts and other documents were stored securely on the researcher's password-protected UNE cloud-drive. These practices were consistent with the researcher's practices throughout the UNE program.

### **Data Analysis**

The emotional experiences presented by SIU's leaders as they navigated the university's transformation were, as expected, shown to be complicated. This study recognized the likelihood of this complexity in advance and consequently employed a multi-stage process of data gathering and analysis. Data was coded to understand and analyze the themes it presented (Cypress, 2018). This coding process followed Chenail's (2012) description of qualitative data analysts being responsible for making "overt and transparent what we hold to be metaphorically evident in the data" (p. 251). In order to realize Chenail's (2012) description of the requirements of effective qualitative research it was deemed necessary to follow four steps. These steps included:

- Step 1: Developing a clear understanding that coding seeks to discover patterns evident in the meaning of qualitative data (Saldana, 2011) through the reduction of qualitative data to shorthand phrases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).
- Step 2: Dividing the qualitative data into manageable sections (Saldana, 2014).
- Step 3: Following the creation of these sections, highlighting data evident in the codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016)
- Step 4: Utilizing in vivo coding to code data from the interviewees that stood out as being unique or that summarized the data involved (Saldana, 2014).

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) aimed at facilitating qualitative research (Lewins & Silver, 2009) was used to help establish coding processes. MAXQDA Standard was the software utilized for this purpose. The employment of these analytical methods was essential to successfully developing a high-level understanding of the emotions SIU's leaders experienced as changes took place at the university.

### **Limitations of the Current Research Design**

Several limitations existed in this research design. The study's clearest limitation related to its use of phenomenology as a research method. "Phenomenology," according to van Manen (2017), "is the study of the primal, lived, prereflective, prepredicative meaning of an experience" (p. 776). The timing of the process of data-gathering may have been problematic according to this definition. Given that SIU's changes were already underway (as identified on the university's website), those being interviewed may have had time to think about their experience adequately and move beyond their "prereflective" states (van Manen, 2017, p. 776). It is believed however that data gathering took place early enough to mitigate this risk.

Another possible limitation of this study related to its potential lack of transferability, particularly to another college or university. Transferability requires that a study can be applied "to other contexts, situations, times, and populations" (Statistics Solutions, 2020, para. 1). It may not be possible consequently for other colleges and universities to benefit from a study of SIU. SIU's state demographics and geographic location may be the ultimate indicators of why a study of SIU may not be transferable elsewhere.

SIU, despite the nature of its transformation and the relationship of the author to the site, presented opportunities for the study in terms of sampling. This study acknowledged that a goal of qualitative research in general is to reach saturation, a term implying larger numbers of

subjects and resources are more effective than smaller populations and data sources (van Rijnsoever, 2017). Saturation is not however applicable to phenomenology due to there being “no saturation point with respect to phenomenological meaning” (van Manen et al., 2016, p. 5). Organizations have employees who are adapting to change at different rates (Weick & Quinn, 1999), and this study’s phenomenological method enabled the researcher to explore the emotions associated with this adaptation meaningfully rather than focus solely on achieving data saturation as an end point.

There were at the time this study was conducted approximately 30 administrative staff at SIU who hold the rank of Assistant Dean, Associate Dean, Chief Technology Officer, Director, Dean, Executive Director, Program Director, Registrar, or President (as identified in the university’s academic catalog). While clearly identifiable hierarchical positions existed at the university (as identified in the university’s academic catalog), there were admittedly a limited number of potential subjects overall. This study as a result saw phenomenology as a means of exploring the ongoing analysis of lived experience (van Manen, 2017) and sought to leverage qualitative research as a way of understanding peoples’ views on circumstances as well as their overall experience (Toews et al., 2017). It was also important to capitalize on one of the core strengths of qualitative research. This strength, qualitative research’s flexibility to meet the needs of a study (Kohler et al., 2019), helped facilitate the exploration of the phenomenon of SIU’s change.

It was similarly acknowledged that the possibility of researcher bias may also be considered a limitation of this study. While bias cannot be eliminated in a research project, this researcher proposed that it could be managed through self-awareness. Probst and Berenson (2014) defined reflexivity as being “generally understood as awareness of the influence the

researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher” (p. 814). Researcher self-awareness in accordance with Probst and Berenson (2014) helped eliminate possible bias, especially based on the researcher’s embrace of Hellowell’s (2006) emphasis on a “researcher’s deliberate self-scrutiny in the research process” (p. 486). The researcher in this case acknowledged having positive feelings about SIU but sought to hold these preexisting feelings in check during the research process through the constant reflection on the work of Probst and Berenson (2014) as well as Hellowell (2006).

### **Participant Rights and Ethical Concerns**

Sabar and Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (2017) described ethics as the “combination of values, character traits and principles that guide the proper behavior of people in their work” (p. 409). This description of ethics played a key role in informing this study’s processes, especially in relation to the protection of subjects. Participants had the right to know this study would not entail covert, and therefore deceptive, research strategies (Roulet et al., 2017) such as personal, off the record, third-party conversations. Participants could rest assured knowing any data was gathered ethically through confidential interviews following a script (James, 2020) only.

This study acknowledged the importance of informed consent to research ethics (Abbott et al., 2018). The Consent for Participation in Research form (University of New England, 2018) was given to all participants, and no data were gathered without the consent form being completed fully and returned to the researcher. The form was sent by standard email inviting people to participate in the study (Sacks, 2017). These standards of procedure and researcher conduct helped ensure against conflict of interest and maintained the validity of the study.

## Conclusion

This was a phenomenological study of the emotions experienced by leaders working for a state university undergoing significant change. This study sought to answer two research questions related to the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) these leaders shared during a period of organizational transition. The university is in a state whose shrinking demographics at the time the study was conducted were challenging (as defined by the U.S. Census, 2020) and whose government had chosen not to invest heavily in higher education (State Higher Education Officers Association, 2020). These trends were detrimental to public and private higher education institutions in the state. The university also was abruptly threatened with the closure of its main campus (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020) by a former executive who resigned shortly after making the proposal (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020).

Limitations exist in this study, particularly in relation to its phenomenological method (van Manen, 2017) and its likelihood of transferability. This study used in vivo coding (Saldana, 2014) and software to analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews. This study's adherence to appropriate step-by-step procedure and a strict definition of ethics (Sabar & Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2017) hopefully means it has, through its findings, provided valuable insights into the emotions associated with experiencing organizational change.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotions leaders of a state university experienced during a period of significant organizational change. This study utilized a phenomenological research design to realize this purpose. Phenomenology was deemed to be an appropriate methodology for this study because it qualitatively facilitates the exploration of lived experience (van Manen, 2017). Similarly, phenomenology is not rooted in understanding fact but instead deals with understanding how people are conscious of experiences (Husserl, 2014). This study did not seek to uncover the facts surrounding the emotions leaders felt during a period of organizational change. This study instead sought to explore the emotions shared by leaders as they underwent a specific instance of the phenomenon of organizational change.

Phenomenology's focus on experience and consciousness made it an appropriate research method to utilize in order to answer this study's research questions. The research questions this study asked are:

How did leaders of a non-profit state university experience and come to understand a period of significant organizational transition and change?

How did the leaders experience the stages of transition through the organizational change process as they adjusted following the aftermath of the proposed change and the ramifications of COVID-19 (as identified on the university's website)?

The first research question was based on Weick's (2010) conceptualization of sensemaking. The second research question was based on the work of Bridges and Bridges (2009). The work of Bridges and Bridges (2009) involved understanding how people manage the transitions associated with change.

The data gathered in support of this study were generated through interviews with 11 top and middle managers who were working at SIU at the time the interviews took place and who were working at SIU in April 2020. April 2020 was significant in relation to this study because it encompassed the period when the executive proposed the closure of SIU's main campus (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020) and when that same executive resigned (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020). One additional candidate was invited to participate in an interview. This candidate could not participate in the study due to time constraints.

Interviews took place over a three-week period in August through early September 2020. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Data were gathered after the researcher reached three milestones in the research process. The first of these milestones was obtaining appropriate permission to conduct the interviews at SIU. The second milestone was obtaining approval of the study's proposal by the researcher's dissertation committee. The final milestone was obtaining an exemption from UNE's Institutional Review Board.

Measures were carefully followed to ensure proper procedure and research protocol. Once the interviews were concluded all participants were given the opportunity to review either raw interview data and/or the fully deidentified versions of the interview transcripts. Edits to the transcripts were made as requested by the interviewees. These edits were then confirmed with the interviewees.

Further measures were taken to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were conducted by Zoom and transcribed by Rev.com. In accordance with the release signed by the participants, interview transcripts have been stored on the researcher's password-protected UNE cloud drive. These transcripts were downloaded only as necessary and only to the researcher's personal



computer. Data were coded using MAXQDA software stored on the researcher's personal computer. Finally, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

### **Participants**

This study's participants hold the rank of director or higher in SIU's organizational hierarchy. Participants were confirmed to be working at SIU at the time the interviews took place. The participants were also confirmed to be working at SIU when the change measure was proposed (as reported by a State Public News Author, 2020; as documented by State Senate Speaker & State House of Representatives, 2020; as described by a State Representative, 2020) and the resignation of the executive who proposed the initiative was announced (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020). The following section presents vignettes of the leaders and documents those data gathered through the interviews with them.

#### **Participant 1: Jane**

Jane holds a significant leadership role at SIU. She shared several important insights in her interview concerning both SIU's organizational hierarchy and her role within that organizational structure. Jane identified the specific date of the organizational change initiative's announcement. Jane likened the experience she has had with organizational change in her professional career with the experience she was having at SIU. She characterized both experiences with organizational change as involving "an unsettling force" and a sense of "powerlessness."

Jane described SIU's importance to its state's economy while simultaneously noting the challenges of being deemed to be expendable by the executive. She stated:

...education is incredibly transformative and provides access to a middle-class lifestyle that half of our population wouldn't have access to otherwise...when you feel so strongly

about the value of your organization and to have other people judging you as not valuable enough to live...it was very harsh to be judged so worthlessly.

Jane acknowledged the difficult emotions associated with the change initiative's proposal. Jane also discussed what she feels are her responsibilities as a leader within the context of an organizational change initiative. She noted that while "we all had moments of hysteria where you could make some pretty bad decisions," as a leader she "had to try to bring down the temperature." Jane further described the emotional turbulence associated with her experience at SIU by identifying that "there definitely were periods of time when I went through every single stage, like I was mad, I was in denial, I was sad." She described her feelings at the time of her interview as being an amalgam involving exhaustion, seeing the negative elements of SIU's current state, and feeling positive about "unearthed" opportunities for "a lot of alumni and employers who want to do nothing more than help us get through this and students continue to get some pretty spectacular education."

### **Participant 2: Allison**

Allison serves in a vital position at SIU. Allison relayed several significant thoughts related to issues impacting the university in general. She described the role the economy plays in relation to SIU's enrollment by stating that "...when people are having a hard time getting jobs, then they do tend to go to school." The reason people go to school is in Allison's estimation that "they want something that's really going to set them apart, something that's needed in the workplace." Allison similarly noted the impact of SIU's state's demographics on enrollment, particularly in relation to the state's declining population of high school students. Allison expressed her optimism that this population trend may change due to the ability people had to

work remotely. She also described her hope that the ability to work remotely may draw people to a more rural environment.

Allison described the emotional impact of the executive's proposal. She said the proposal was:

...shocking to everyone, insiders and outsiders, for sure, never would have thought that would ever be on the table. I think a big part of it was shock and just trying to wrap my head around, that this doesn't make any sense.

Allison went on to add that the change proposal felt "out of the blue." She also said that the uncertainty at SIU was diverting attention away from what she feels should be its priorities. Allison believes these priorities should involve focusing on SIU's students and, in her words, "making, especially right now, this as positive an experience for students as possible."

### **Participant 3: Elizabeth**

Elizabeth has a substantial and influential leadership role at SIU. Elizabeth described herself as having both seen and been a part of organizational change initiatives in her career. She also indicated that the change SIU was experiencing during this period in its organizational history was different from others she had experienced professionally. According to Elizabeth, "...now is probably the most rapid and overwhelming time to be in this type of leadership role. There's a lot of change happening, forced change, in a way that I think has never been so present before."

Elizabeth shared several insights concerning the population trends in SIU's state. She characterized SIU's geographic location as:

...an aging state. We struggle as a state to...keep young people here. And I think that's definitely something to consider as we run our institutions in this state...we have a lot of younger (residents) that leave the state for different opportunities.

Elizabeth further indicated that despite SIU's state's declining demographics, SIU's various campuses provide "a really accessible and remote distributed model of education that I think is absolutely critical to reaching (state residents) where they are." Elizabeth similarly noted that she felt the period in April:

...has jump-started our community in terms of a change management perspective to really take a hold of the reality and move forward on some change that might not have existed if we hadn't gone through what we went through.

Elizabeth went on to state that while leaders may be "overwhelmed personally" or "overwhelmed professionally," it was important that they project stability while simultaneously being transparent and communicating openly. She also emphasized that a leader's conduct is critical, particularly in a time of crisis. The potential benefits such positive leadership conduct can produce are in Elizabeth's estimation substantial. "Good leaders," Elizabeth said, "are going to give people a sense of hope."

#### **Participant 4: Lauren**

Lauren's leadership role at SIU is important to the university's overall success. Lauren described her personal experience with organizational change as being considerable. In a previous professional setting, Lauren worked for an organization in which "there was quite a bit of organizational change" and that this change involved "frequent leadership changes." Lauren noted various challenges related to the organizational change she experienced in this previous professional setting, particularly in relation to its impact on human resources. Lauren described

the challenges she faced in this setting as involving absenteeism, turnover, and a lack of respect for leadership.

Lauren raised several points related to the population in SIU's state. She noted being familiar with the university's state's demographics. Lauren depicted an area of the state she was especially familiar with as being "overwhelmingly white" but diversifying slightly. Lauren also noted that residents of SIU's state living in areas she was similarly familiar with may not access higher education in large numbers. "I've been around," according to Lauren, "a couple of areas in (the state) where the number of students going to college is pretty low anyway."

Unlike other interviewees Lauren noted that she was not surprised by the proposals made by the executive. When asked how she would have described the events taking place in April as they were occurring, Lauren indicated she would have characterized them as being "chaotic" and unsurprising. Lauren said:

I think everybody knows that we've been in financial trouble for a while now. So, I was not necessarily surprised at the proposals. It was a hectic time for us as well because of COVID of course. So, my priorities were really focusing on [her department] and making sure that the students' needs were met for the remainder of the year since we went remote at that time.

Lauren went on to describe that despite not being surprised at the events taking place at SIU, she felt as a leader she had an obligation to various constituencies at the university. Lauren stated, "I would say that students, faculty, and staff and employers are the biggest stakeholders that I am obligated to." Similarly, when asked about the obligations Lauren feels to herself as a leader, she relayed that meeting her professional obligations was especially important to her.

The ability to collaborate was to Lauren an important leadership skill. Lauren indicated that she not only hopes that SIU begins to collaborate more often, but that collaboration may be the key to the university's survival. "I hope," Lauren said in relation to interoffice collaboration at SIU, "that we get to a place where we collaborate more." Lauren concluded her interview by saying that "I think we're going to be forced to make those changes in order to survive as a system and as an institution."

### **Participant 5: Katherine**

Katherine described her leadership role at SIU as being centered around work rooted in the university's institutional mission. Katherine relayed that she finds her work interesting and enjoyable. Katherine has experienced organizational change throughout her professional career. The organizational change Katherine has experienced professionally has been in various settings.

Katherine described SIU's state's population as being interconnected with her job at the university. Katherine characterized SIU's state's population as not only aging but declining overall and declining among K-12 students. Katherine emphasized that this decline makes maintaining positive relationships with her community important. She said SIU is in:

...a very small state, so it's very connected and everybody kind of knows everybody. So, having those relationships is really...important and critical because if someone needs something, they...know who to speak to, who to get engaged, who to work with.

Katherine went on to describe the emotions she felt during the time period in April 2020 as "frustrating" and "shocking" and that she "wondered what was driving the narrative. Because a lot of the information that was shared was incorrect. We financially, as a college, were pretty strong. In terms of our enrollment, very strong." Katherine characterized the events in April

2020 as being both difficult to understand as well as having long-term, detrimental effects on SIU as an institution. She said:

It was difficult to kind of quantify what was happening, because it didn't click with anything that was happening on the ground. So, it felt really disconnected. And I think that's probably why you saw such a response, but I think the damage was done. And it's hard to fix something once it's a gaping wound.

The effects of the events in April 2020 placed considerable demands on Katherine as a leader. Katherine's leadership role required that she help to support those at the college as well as team members who were "really distraught" and "were just besides themselves about what this narrative was portraying, and it wasn't true." Katherine indicated that she and other leaders at SIU chose to respond to the events taking place defensively. She noted that SIU's leaders "deployed our team to talk to legislators, to talk to community members." This defensive position, according to Katherine, was consistent with how she copes with challenges. "For me," she said, "...that's kind of how I roll. I go into defensive mode."

Katherine noted several leadership skills in her interview. She described the importance of a leader being an effective communicator. Such communication to Katherine involves both relaying information from her senior peers to members of her team as well as information from her team to her senior colleagues. Katherine made a special point to emphasize that the technology required to maintain social distancing during the pandemic added an additional layer to the already complex nature of the communication needed to work effectively during a period of significant organizational change. Katherine also emphasized that a leader should be fiscally responsible, creative, collaborative, and be focused on making data-driven decisions rather than decisions rooted in emotion.

Organizational change to Katherine is a never-ending process. She noted that change is necessary and should be approached with a sense of openness. According to Katherine, leaders should recognize they “need to pivot, shift, adapt, be creative, be kind to one another, be supportive of one another. And really always say that people have good intentions.”

### **Participant 6: Joan**

Joan has a substantial leadership role at SIU. Joan noted she has experienced organizational change, and particularly leadership changes, in her career. Joan praised the diverse types of colleges and universities in SIU’s state while simultaneously acknowledging that not all state residents may be able to access these institutions due to the selectivity of each. She noted that a particular challenge SIU faces is that there is a lack of awareness among the public of the various types of programs it offers.

Joan indicated that declining demographic trends in SIU’s state have been evident for some time. The demographic trends SIU faced in Joan’s estimation also closely correlated with the former executive’s proposal. Joan said:

...and of course (the former executive) had made the recommendation of the closures before COVID hit, or around the same time, but people were pretty upset about that. But on the other hand...some major change has to take place, otherwise institutions won’t survive and maybe they’ll be more adversely affected.

While Joan may have recognized the reasoning behind the proposed change for SIU, she still felt “it was a real shock” when it was announced. The shock Joan felt derived from the unprecedented nature of the change and the way the news of the change was communicated to the SIU community. Joan described the circumstances surrounding the proposed closure as being challenging because members of the SIU community “were all hearing it...at the same time as the



general public. It was like, we didn't even have a head's-up." Joan characterized her current feelings by saying:

I think, because just things have been so busy, especially with the COVID stuff, that I almost look back upon it as...did that really happen, or was that a nightmare or something that I had? And it seems like we've been just so busy and just go, go, go, maybe it was almost like a bit of a reprieve.

Joan went on to identify that she felt SIU faced financial challenges before the pandemic. Joan indicated that despite any challenges SIU may continue to face there may be some positive change for the university stemming from the crisis, particularly in terms of giving people the opportunity to think differently about circumstances. She also said that, in comparison with private institutions, the general public may feel more ownership over a public college or university. Joan concluded her interview by emphasizing that strong leaders may not be well-liked because they "have to make the tough decisions" and that a leader's willingness to delegate responsibility may play a key role in navigating difficult circumstances surrounding organizational change.

#### **Participant 7: Mark**

Mark occupies a complex and demanding role at SIU. Mark, like each participant in this study, has experienced organizational change in his career. He described the scope of the change he is experiencing at SIU as being unprecedented in his professional life. Mark noted that the contrast between the organizational change he has experienced in his career derives from the financial challenges SIU faced.

The period in April 2020 following the executive's initial proposal was a difficult one for Mark. Mark described the time as:

And then [shortly thereafter], he pulls his proposal back, and then he resigns. I felt like I was on a TV show, a reality show that...it just was surreal. And all of that, with the midst of COVID, and us trying to keep our students safe, getting them off campus, going home, trying to come up with a plan of what the fall would look like, every day I wake up and I'm like, "What do I expect to see now?"

Mark described feeling a sense of empathy for those closely connected with SIU. He said people "were hearing" the executive's proposal and thinking the site "is just going to shut down, with the flip of the switch. I felt really bad for them." Mark went on to express his disagreement with perceptions that the executive's proposal may have been strategic. Mark hoped the executive's proposal "was a wake-up call for the state" due to the state's limited investment in higher education. "When you don't have the resources to function," according to Mark, "it's hard to be a college."

Mark shared that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused his "laser focus" to be the well-being of SIU's students. Such focus is for Mark both a matter of students being safe as well as SIU surviving as an institution. While success is important to Mark in the short-term, Mark also values long-term strategic planning for the university. "I want to just get through the whole COVID world, and get a vaccine," Mark said, "so that we can start thinking about what the true transformation" for SIU "will look like." SIU's future may be challenging in Mark's estimation given the institution's lack of financial resources and its reliance on enrollment.

SIU in Mark's estimation was going to have to change. The skilled SIU team Mark works with makes him optimistic for the institution's success, provided SIU can work independently and free of outside influences. Mark said:

I guess what scares me the most is, it's not in our control. There's the system, there's the legislature. I worry where their heads will be at. But I think if [SIU] can control our destiny, we will be fine. We will make it through this.

**Participant 8: Elaine**

Elaine is a leader at SIU who has worked in higher education at the senior level. Elaine sees her role at SIU as being complex and not simply as one tasked with enforcing rules and policy. Elaine recognizes that, in addition to making sure policy is followed, she is responsible for managing a complex human dynamic in her work. Elaine consequently perceives her role as being nuanced, particularly in the face of uncertainty. Elaine, when describing her position, said:

...when a situation of change comes around, it's not just looking at the institution and what is good for the black and white. Again, the letter of the law, but also taking into consideration the emotional component and the support that members of the college community may require when there's uncertainty.

Elaine is familiar with key aspects of SIU's state and its residents. Elaine was also quick to describe SIU's state's demographic characteristics. She noted SIU's state's sparsely populated areas and the lack of ubiquitous and reliable internet access across the state. Elaine also described the gap in influence in SIU's state by noting one of its geographic areas as being considerably more influential than others, particularly in terms of financial clout. Elaine described this imbalance in influence as being "the big kids in the block have decided how it's going to be. So, there's that disparity and that kind of tale of two states up to a point."

The announcement of the proposal was to Elaine a "moment of upheaval" which was both damaging for SIU and which sparked a considerable emotional response among constituents. Elaine characterized the circumstances surrounding the announcement as involving

mismanagement by the executive. She described the immediate aftermath of the announcement as:

Well I think I speak for myself and also a whole bunch of my peers that there was that “What the heck?” The first kind of shock reaction to something that we knew was not accurate and not necessary, but well, it was done. And how do we do damage control and how do we try to preserve what we can while dancing on a moving carpet because everything was changing

Elaine was clear that she feels the chaos sparked by the executive’s announcement is in the past. She expressed optimism that the consortium’s new leader will move the system forward. Elaine also emphasized that her experience with organizational change will allow her to play an important leadership role at SIU. She said:

I have seen this reorganization thing coming and going and at times coalescing and at times going away. And it is part of the nature of the beast and kind of bringing that point of view or reassuring them that there’s a light at the end of the tunnel and that yes, this happens and that this is part of the normal cycle of an institution and trying to help defuse the fear factor. I take that as part of my responsibility.

Elaine emphasized that SIU had been planning to change but that the executive’s proposal was a catalyst for the change taking place more quickly than had been anticipated. She also noted that “what COVID put on top of that is the uncertainty.” Such uncertainty can in Elaine’s estimation be navigated effectively by leaders, and particularly those leaders who are at the cabinet level, if they approach their responsibilities with confidence. Senior leaders can in Elaine’s estimation succeed if they work with “...self-awareness. And a point of self-confidence.

I'm not talking about that type of cocky confidence. I'm talking about the reassurance that this too shall pass."

### **Participant 9: James**

James is a leader at SIU whose role at the institution is multi-faceted. While James has been involved in organizational change initiatives in his past professional experience, he believed the crisis SIU and the world at large faced entailed events that take place "once or twice in a career." James' history with organizational change has involved difficult circumstances. He pointed out however that nothing in his professional past rivals what he was experiencing when the study was being conducted.

James has carefully considered important aspects of SIU's state's population and SIU's student population. He emphasized that half of SIU's current students are traditionally aged college students. When asked about the demographics in SIU's state James was clear that SIU has been planning for the decline in the state's population of traditionally aged college students. SIU to James has a unique role as an institution in its state due in his words to "such a big portion of our market" being "what we call non-traditional students, working age students, students who are going back for another degree." SIU's enrollment is to James "a very, very complicated picture."

James shared that he would have described the time period surrounding the executive's proposal as being a difficult one. James said:

...everybody was trying to emotionally process some of the new realities, which were as global as, what does this institution's future look like? And as personal as, will I have a job in a month from now? So, when I think back to that particular period, let's call it March, early March to late April, early May. I would characterize it as a time of

complete crisis, everybody knew the magnitude and the danger and everyone was trying to be there as much as possible.

James remembered this period “as a time of great emotional intensity and great intellectual uncertainty.” The challenges SIU faced during this time were exacerbated in his opinion by people’s inability to take advantage of traditional ways to relieve stress. “Nobody was at the gym,” James said, “everybody’s social networks were disrupted.”

James emphasized that, while SIU had experienced challenges in its recent history, immediately prior to the onset of the pandemic SIU’s financial position was solid. James said, “Going into March of 2020, our enrollment looked quite strong and our financial performance and projections looked excellent. So, we were having an exceptional year and were thinking forwardly about things.” The pandemic caused what James described as the need for “an emotional reset” followed by a period of rethinking the future, adjusting to that future, and looking ahead before moving into the next few months of leading the response to the pandemic.

James coped with the external responsibilities he has as a leader by concentrating on the needs of SIU’s students. His commitment to SIU’s students allowed James:

...to remember what’s really important and what’s really core to what you’re doing. And to depersonalize it, to think about “Okay, this is something that we all do. It’s changing and it’s big and there’s emotional heaviness around that. What are we focused on as we try to get through this?”

Centering his attention on SIU’s students and the education the university provides gave James both a means of coping with the difficult circumstances taking place at the institution and a way to “just face the day, to make ends, if something came up, I would try to just reframe it in those terms.” James believed SIU was positioned to look forward. “April,” James said, “was a

period and we had speculation about the future.” Despite being challenging, James was clear that good came from the experience, particularly in terms of the relationships he developed with SIU’s other leaders during that time. James said when speaking of the period in April that the experience “...strengthens that bond” because he could rely on his fellow leaders for support. “That was a good experience,” James said, “we all went through a bumpy ride together.”

### **Participant 10: Brenda**

Brenda is an experienced leader at SIU. Brenda has worked under various executives at the university. Some of these executives have in her opinion instituted positive changes for the university. Brenda feels others have failed to do so. The change that Brenda has experienced throughout her career has not always been easy. “I have seen organizations change,” Brenda said, “painfully.”

Brenda raised several points related to SIU’s state’s demographics and the university’s enrollment. She described SIU’s enrollment somewhat differently than James by saying that the university has shifted from being focused on adults toward currently being focused on traditional students. This shift has to Brenda caused SIU to be engaged in unwanted competition with its peers. Brenda described this competition as “fishing from the same pond.”

The period in April was according to Brenda “one of the hardest things that I think I’ve been through, professionally, in a really long time.” The period was especially hard for Brenda given her belief that the university offers so much value for its students. Brenda said:

...it was just so hard to process. When we think of us as an institution that is providing education for folks that are really going out and they’re making good money and they’re not in debt up to their eyeballs...

The executive's choice to make the proposal created difficult emotions for Brenda. She said for the executive "to make that decision unilaterally, without taking the time to get some feedback from Presidents of...what should be the decision, that was just really hurtful." Brenda went on to say that once she was aware of the proposal, moving forward with daily operations was hard. Working while waiting for the SIU community to find out about the proposal was for Brenda "kind of like living in a dream or some...alternate universe."

Brenda described her feelings that leadership requires a commitment to being an advocate for her constituents and being willing to communicate effectively. Brenda discussed her belief that "sometimes shorter, more frequent communication" can play an important role in a leader's success. The benefits of a leader's ability to communicate effectively are substantial according to Brenda, particularly in terms of creating trust. Brenda said:

...that's the other piece of that, right? You know, with good communication comes good trust. And so, they trust me enough to know I will work on getting an answer, fixing a situation to the best that I can. So, and it isn't always the answer that folks want, but at least it's...they know that I've tried.

### **Participant 11: Jonathan**

Jonathan occupies a key operational position at SIU. Jonathan felt his department plays a significant role at the university. A critical aspect of the work of Jonathan's department has recently been to provide essential support for the university's operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jonathan emphasized his experience with organizational change has shown him the importance of being flexible. Different executives at SIU have, according to Jonathan, chosen distinct ways of conducting the university's essential functions. "You kind of go with the flow," Jonathan said, "we got a job to do."



The effects of the pandemic on SIU were unlike anything Jonathan had experienced in his career or expects to experience in his future. “We’re in the second week of classes here,” Jonathan said, “and the parking lots are empty. I’ve never seen this.” Jonathan went on to say the impact of the pandemic on SIU is something he “probably won’t ever see again in my lifetime.”

Jonathan echoed his colleagues in both his assessment of the demographics in SIU’s state and the impact of the state’s declining population on the university’s enrollment. “The demographics are showing that college age students are going down,” Jonathan said. This decrease has in Jonathan’s estimation had the ripple effect of increasing competition for student enrollments among the state’s higher education institutions. Jonathan went on to state that SIU’s market position puts it in a place to succeed even though the competition for students is fierce. Jonathan described SIU’s market position by saying “we are a good solid institution with hands-on learning and that’s what a lot of students are looking for, so a lot of them come here.”

Jonathan described how SIU’s academic offerings play a role in the state’s economy. SIU is according to Jonathan starting to do more with what he described as “manufacturing work” with area companies. Jonathan identified that SIU students who take advantage of such opportunities come from both in and out of SIU’s state and may choose to remain in SIU’s state if they are hired by local employers. Jonathan believed the willingness of these students to remain in state after graduation benefits the economy.

Jonathan further characterized the period surrounding when the executive made his proposal as “too much stuff happened at once.” The proposal, in Jonathan’s estimation, “did not sit well with people” in SIU’s state. Jonathan also emphasized that SIU as an institution plays a key role in its local economy. “There are two major employers in the town,” Jonathan said, and without SIU its town “would have been wiped off the map, you know?” Jonathan also indicated

that SIU brings a great deal of value to its local economy in terms of the day-to-day economic activity the university provides for its town and the opportunities the university offers for continuing education for nearby companies. The importance of a college or university meeting this type of civic obligation is no different according to Jonathan whether the university is public or private. Such responsibility is for Jonathan one that should be shared by all colleges, regardless of whether they are public or private institutions.

Jonathan concluded his interview by describing how the impact of SIU's state's demographics has caused the university to be more focused on what he characterized as serving students as customers. "We're doing more for the students," Jonathan said, while also noting that the university is now focusing more on retention. The key to the university's success to Jonathan in the end lies in its continued commitment to:

...customer service, I think that's the big thing. Just we're here to serve the students and help the students get through and get the students their diploma, graduate, so on and so forth. So that's what I think we need to focus on.

### **Themes and Subthemes**

In vivo coding of this study's data revealed four themes and various corresponding subthemes. The first theme, higher education as a public service, yielded two subthemes. The second theme, crisis, yielded two subthemes. The third theme, change, yielded two subthemes. The final theme, survival, did not yield subthemes.

The following table of the themes and subthemes as well as the structural outline for this chapter is adapted from Cannon (2020). The themes and subthemes evident in the data are gathered in Table 1. Table 1 lists the four themes revealed in the study. Table 1 also includes a breakdown of each theme's corresponding subthemes.

Table 1

*Themes and subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Higher Education as Public Service	Access
	Economic Impact
Crisis	Emotion
	Leadership
Change	Shock
	Buy-In
Survival	

The coding process reflected qualitative data gathering as being a means of engaging in a research method rooted in discovery (Forman et al., 2008). Prior to the completion of coding it was not anticipated that higher education as a public service would be shown to be an element of this study. Coding however made it readily apparent that public service is a central and underlying component of this work. The theme of crisis was expected. The visceral relationship between the theme of crisis and its subthemes was however unforeseen. The theme of change was also predicted. The participants' consistently evident shock and the corresponding lack of buy-in to the change initiative was not foreseen. The theme of survival was unforeseen.

James' (1884) definition of emotion should in hindsight have made the themes and subthemes apparent in the data as well as any relationship between them entirely foreseeable. The previously cited definition of emotion established by James (1884) that emotion consists of "the bodily changes [which] follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion" (pp. 189-190) is the reason why these themes and subthemes were so clear. James' (1884) definition of emotion is predicated on the idea that an emotion is a response. The "exciting fact" (James, 1884, p. 189) in the case of this study was the executive's proposal. The coding process revealed the reason the proposal was the "exciting fact" (James, 1884, p. 189) derived from how much those interviewed care about SIU both as an entity and as part of the public higher education system in its state and local communities.

### **Theme 1: Higher Education as a Public Service**

SIU's mission involves providing students career and professional training in a supportive environment (as identified on the university's website). This mission resonated throughout the data generated from this study's interviews. Coding revealed that participants in the study are committed to realizing this mission in their working lives. Coding similarly revealed that SIU's market position allows it to consistently and effectively serve its constituents in accordance with this mission. These revelations ultimately illustrated that the study's participants believe SIU's mission allows it to play a significant public service-oriented role in its state.

This public service role was revealed by this study's data to take two notable forms. The first of these forms related to student access to higher education. The second of these forms was SIU's role as a member of its state and local communities. Allison addressed both subthemes by

saying that she not only believes in SIU's mission but that she also feels "(SIU's state) needs a (SIU)." Michelle likewise noted that in her position she has found SIU "can deploy pretty quickly if an organization needs some sort of training opportunity." Michelle indicated that SIU's solid reputation in its state means that many of its state's companies rely on SIU "for their first choice of technical education."

***Subtheme 1: Access***

The idea that SIU plays a key role in providing access to higher education for its state's residents was a frequent subtheme of the interviews for this study. Jane and James both noted that SIU provides a transformative educational experience for students who may be otherwise unable to attend a university. Lauren recounted that she did not lose focus on her commitment to making sure her students had access to their coursework during the volatile period in April 2020.

Lauren said:

It was a hectic time for us as well because of COVID of course. So, my priorities were really focusing on (her department) and making sure that the student's needs were met for the remainder of the year since we went remote at that time. So, (the executive's) resignation and his proposal were secondary to me because it wasn't my priority at the time.

Elizabeth detailed the importance of access to a SIU education for students in operational terms. Elizabeth described the distance education opportunities for SIU students as:

It's a really accessible and remote distributed model of education that I think is absolutely critical to meeting (state residents) where they are. And I would say that just from a mission perspective...the state college perspective, that's something that has been really

important to serving (state residents) that might be different than what others do around the state.

Elizabeth additionally shared that SIU is facing questions “in terms of access right now and how we engage those populations with the opportunity to get an education which improves...many other things systematically connected to the benefits of receiving an education.”

### ***Subtheme 2: Economic Impact***

The potentially dire economic impact of the executive’s proposal was a consistently present public service-oriented subtheme evident in this study’s interviews. Jonathan described SIU’s economic importance to its community. “We’re a spoke in the wheel,” Jonathan said when asked about the role SIU plays in its local economy. The ramifications of the loss of the university would be economically devastating for its area in Jonathan’s estimation. This devastation would derive according to Jonathan from the economic activity the university brings to its town being taken away and be exacerbated by the significant amount of lost agricultural industry SIU’s area has endured. Jonathan described this loss of agricultural business by saying frankly that “...there’s a lot less operating farms now than there were 20 years ago.” The enormous ramifications of SIU’s loss that Jonathan alluded to was something decision-makers clearly carefully considered. James said, “Finding a way to preserve that asset for the state...was a way to orient myself in very difficult situations and when faced with very difficult decisions.”

Participants recounted how the loss of SIU as a public institution would negatively impact its state’s workforce. Lauren noted that while the support SIU receives from its state is limited, public institutions like SIU play a vital role in developing a state’s labor pool. “I think employers have an expectation for public institutions because they’re helping to support the state,” Lauren said, while noting “that doesn’t change the obligation of the state college system

to produce the workforce that the state needs.” SIU’s alumni are, as Jane described, actively sought after as being members of that workforce.

## **Theme 2: Crisis**

Crisis resonated as a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Jane addressed the theme of crisis directly by noting the impact of the pandemic and the executive’s proposal happening simultaneously. Jane said:

...what happened in April felt like two parallel crises. One which was nature-based because a natural pandemic had happened to not just the college, but everyone. And secondly, a man-made crisis of our own doing exacerbated by the pandemic, but the leadership at the (executive’s) office at the time, making some pretty drastic decisions in a very short period of time looking to preserve the institutions, the programs as a whole, rather than the institutions as individuals. But that crisis felt self-generated.

James described crisis more broadly. James talked about the effect of COVID-19 on colleges and universities as well as the world at large. He said the pandemic impacted “...not just the industry in which we work, higher education, but rather [was] a globally reaching financial and health crisis.” James also indicated that while at SIU he had been involved in what he believed to have been a crisis at the time but now feels was “much less significant” in comparison with what the university faced in April 2020. Brenda similarly addressed the impact of COVID-19, particularly in relation to social distancing’s effect on means of communication amid what she deemed “this financial disaster.” Elaine characterized the period surrounding the executive’s proposal as a “moment of upheaval” with long-term and detrimental ramifications. Elaine said:

...once the cat is out of the bag, it's very difficult to put it back in. So, the damage caused by that kicking of the hornet's nest, it's still with us and will be with us and will dictate a lot of what would happen at a pace that it wouldn't have been our choice, but now it's taken out of our hands.

The data revealed that participants see the crisis as not being entirely negative. Elizabeth said the crisis "has forced us to really think about our future in a different way." Joan echoed Elizabeth's sentiments by noting that while she feels SIU has financial challenges, there may ultimately be some benefit to the circumstances SIU faces. Joan described such benefits as being particularly apparent in relation to approaching future challenges the university may face differently. Joan also indicated that she is not alone in feeling this way, saying:

Well, I think a lot of people have brought up there could be a lot of really good things that come out of this, the whole making the best use of a crisis as possible sort of thing, and so it's sort of forcing people to look at things in different manners.

Mark addressed the theme of crisis in more personal terms. Mark acknowledged what he felt were some obvious financial challenges SIU faced. Mark also said however that he expected any initiative to radically change SIU's operations to involve a long-term plan. Mark said the executive's proposal "...felt really forced upon us, like we didn't have a choice whatsoever. And so, I was like, oh my God, I got to start getting my resume ready. I'm not going to have a job anymore."

### ***Subtheme 1: Emotion***

Mark's comments reflect that emotion was a consistently present subtheme evident in this study's data. Jane's feelings of experiencing emotions like the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969) were captured previously in this chapter. Allison, as was noted earlier, described in her



interview having feelings of “constant uncertainty.” Brenda characterized her experience as “a really brutal situation to go through.”

Coding revealed that emotion informed the ways participants approached their leadership roles. Katherine noted the importance of “emotional intelligence” during a period like the one SIU faced. Katherine said such a mode of thinking “...was really kind of a key thing to always be reflecting on. Because it was easy to just get upset, and angry, and that kind of takes over your reactions.” Elizabeth recognized that she was expected to manage her own emotional experience while simultaneously being empathetic to those around her. She said:

So, I think the time was chaotic, it was stressful. And I think it was stressful in large part because our community wasn't prepared for the reality that was facing us. So, it definitely was, for me personally in a leadership role, a critical time where I had to really be aware of the challenges facing the institution, but more about people and how it was impacting them emotionally.

Elaine described the ramifications of the negative emotions created by the proposal, particularly in relation to the proposal's impact on human resources. Elaine said:

And it's not just what you say, it's how you say it. That created an awful lot of unrest. And we lost several faculty members to that, that when the news went out, they went on the search path. And that was that. It's like, “No, you're not convincing me this is stable, by any extent of the imagination. I'm out of here.”

### ***Subtheme 2: Leadership***

Leadership was a consistently evident subtheme in this study's data. Leadership as a subtheme appeared in conjunction with two concepts. The first concept was the participants'

description of their leadership responsibilities. The second concept was the participants' dissatisfaction with the way the proposal was led by the executive.

Participants defined their roles as leaders largely in terms of serving their constituents. Brenda as was previously noted characterized herself as being a leader who works in an advocacy role. Lauren similarly noted her obligations to stakeholders such as students, faculty, and staff. Mark also depicted his role as being one involving considerable constituent-focused responsibilities. These responsibilities were notably evident when he shared his sentiment that he was committed to protecting constituents' health through the development of "very stringent policies" geared toward supporting their well-being in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mark and his colleagues expressed frustration with the executive's leadership style. Elaine characterized the period as being one involving mismanagement, impulsivity on the executive's part, and a "hidden agenda that damaged what did not need to be damaged." Jane described her feelings that the executive could be prone to act recklessly. Jane said:

I developed a perception that he was a shoot from the hip kind of guy. And it felt like a shoot from the hip kind of decision, which does not describe a thoughtful process. So, I lacked confidence in the basis of the decision.

Jane wondered in hindsight whether the executive's proposal was not only well-intentioned but also whether he should be credited with attempting to set an aggressive and strategic course of action which brought necessary attention to the challenges SIU faced. Jane said:

In retrospect, you wonder, you want to give him credit for having some sort of political savvy to really have stirred the pot to create the conversation where they finally heard that we were in financial straits. Is that what it took to get the attention of the state?

### **Theme 3: Change**

Coding demonstrated various examples, many of which have been previously noted, of change as being this study's final theme. It is important to emphasize that the change coding revealed did not relate solely to organizational transition. Brenda for example felt it was important for SIU to be open to changing its student enrollment to include more adult students. Jonathan spoke of SIU's evolving emphasis on serving students as customers. Jonathan also emphasized SIU's increased emphasis on student retention. Allison discussed how she feels SIU's state's population may be changing in the wake of COVID-19 due to peoples' ability to work remotely. Joan noted that SIU's academic offerings have broadened throughout its history.

Organizational change, and particularly experience with such change, was ultimately the most obvious area where change appeared as a theme in this study's data. Participants had encountered organizational change in their careers. This change took on various forms and degrees of difficulty. Joan for example had experienced change that was "not so noticeable" in her working life as well as more obvious organizational changes such as transitions in executive leadership. Jonathan and Katherine alike noted that SIU has changed as its chief executives have come and gone. James said that he has worked through organizational change in his past but that the experience he is having at SIU is particularly difficult.

#### ***Subtheme 1: Shock***

While participants were experienced with organizational change in their careers, coding demonstrated that the abrupt nature of the executive's change proposal made it not only unexpected but ultimately shocking. Allison characterized the executive's proposal as being "shocking to everyone." Mark described how he did not expect the change to be "...this immediate, this is going to happen overnight." Jane indicated that she felt "the leadership at the

(executive's) office at the time (was) making some pretty drastic decisions in a very short period of time." The combination of these decisions and the pandemic "became," to Jane, "very destabilizing forces." Brenda similarly characterized the executive's decision as being unilateral and hasty.

### ***Subtheme 2: Buy-In***

There was a notable lack of buy-in among participants for the executive's proposal. Participants did not demonstrate a yearning to return to SIU's past and had in fact anticipated SIU changing. Coding revealed not only that participants anticipated that SIU would be changing but that they are also committed to moving SIU forward. James said, "we are definitely in a more forward-looking place. We're thinking strategically and long-term about what best outcomes we can achieve." Lauren also said she was unsurprised by what transpired at SIU and that she is open to the university changing. When asked about her perception of the period in April, Lauren said:

I think it was a good change. I think it was time for a change for the whole system. And I think it has spurred the discussion that should have been happening two years ago. It's opened a lot of people's eyes and it was a good change that had to happen.

The changes stemming from the period in April were not anticipated however to be easy, especially given that changes were happening quickly. Lauren expressed her feeling that "there's an urgency and sort of disorganized realization that we need to make a huge change now." Elaine similarly addressed the challenges the period in April yielded by saying "while the emergency has passed," she feels it:

...kicked into gear a whole lot of transformation that was going to happen. But not at this rushed level. It can be done. Yes, it should be done. But doing everything in five

minutes as a knee jerk reaction is not the right way to do it. And that is what we're contemplating.

Participants may have been open to changing SIU, but the executive's lack of coalition-building in support of the proposal was revealed as being problematic. Brenda reflected this feeling in her description of the unilateral nature of the executive's decision. Jonathan judged the period in April as being a time when:

...too much stuff happened all at once. I'm not sure. I mean, I'm sure (the executive) had a good reason for what he was doing. I mean, that was his vision, probably. That's what he saw. I mean, obviously, if he was going to make moves like that, he had put some thought into it. I'm not sure where it came from. I know a lot of the (state) people, (it) did not sit well with them.

The resentment Jonathan spoke of was articulated directly by Elaine. Elaine was blunt in her description of her feelings toward the former executive and her lack of buy-in for the proposal. Elaine expressed optimism that SIU will move forward but:

...my feelings toward the former (executive's former title), I don't think will ever change. That was a mismanaged moment. That was a hidden agenda that damaged what didn't need to be damaged. Nothing positive came out of that, but that's the past.

#### **Theme 4: Survival**

Coding revealed a final theme in this study's data. This final theme was survival. The participants in this study consistently demonstrated their commitment to ensuring SIU weather the crises it faced and perhaps even benefit over the long-term. Participants, simply put, wanted SIU to endure.

Examples of this final theme were abundant in the data. Mark was clear working through the immediate semester was “what we need to do to physically survive.” Mark went on to say that if SIU “can control our destiny, we will be fine. We will make it through this.” James was committed to keeping SIU moving forward due to the institution’s importance to the state. James further indicated that focusing on SIU’s students allowed him to see “Structuring, like when everything’s going sideways, it’s good to lock down early on what you think is important and use it as a tool, [to] keep yourself pointed in the right direction.” Elizabeth similarly demonstrated her commitment to SIU surviving and possibly thriving by saying the university now has “a real chance to own our future.”

### **Conclusion**

This was a phenomenological study of emotions leaders felt during a period of organizational change. The study emphasized the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) leaders of a public university, SIU, shared during a brief period following a proposal by their university system’s former executive to close SIU’s main campus (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020) and when the same executive resigned from his position (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020). The study’s data revealed several themes and related subthemes. The first such theme was higher education as a public service. This theme’s related subthemes were access and economic impact. The second of these themes was revealed to be crisis. The related subthemes of crisis were shown to be emotion and leadership. The study’s third theme, change, was demonstrated to have two corresponding subthemes. These subthemes were shock and buy-in. The study’s fourth theme was survival. The study’s data revealed significant relationships between its themes and subthemes. While participants demonstrated a willingness

to change, coding showed that the interconnected nature of the study's themes makes doing so a complex and difficult undertaking.

The next chapter of this study, Chapter 5, explores the themes discovered in the data and presents an interpretation of its findings. The implications of the study are also considered.

Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for further action and exploration.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Seminal literature on organizational change characterized such change as involving stages of “freezing” the past, “moving to the new level,” and “freezing group life on the new level” (Lewin, 1947, p. 35). The inevitability of organizational change in professional life (Pahkin et al., 2014), coupled with the possibility of such change having positive (Pahkin et al., 2011) or negative (Bamberger et al., 2012) ramifications for those involved, justified an in-depth study of an instance of organizational change. Such a careful consideration of the nuances of an organization’s transformation was particularly warranted given the potential for organizational change to generate an emotional response (Mossholder et al., 2000) from those impacted by a change initiative. The possibility of understanding such an emotional response to change inspired this study's phenomenological exploration of the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) of a noteworthy instance of organizational change.

The organization explored in this study was State Industrial University (SIU). SIU is a pseudonym for a rural, remote (as defined by NCES, 2020) public university whose student population was almost entirely comprised of in-state residents (as identified on the university’s website). SIU’s primary enrollment of largely in-state students was noteworthy given that SIU’s state was while this study was underway struggling with weak and declining demographic trends (U.S. Census, 2020). SIU was, and remained at the time of this study’s conclusion, part of a system of public colleges in its state (as identified on the system’s website). This system had been called financially unsustainable (as characterized by SIU’S State Governor, 2020).

While SIU was experiencing considerable challenges as this study was underway, the large-scale difficulties it faced were not unique among colleges and universities. During the time this study was conducted college and university enrollments were declining (National Student



Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Student debt was rising (Velez et al., 2019). COVID-19 presented threats to higher education that were both large (Smith, 2020) and small (Redden, 2020) in scope. The confluence of these factors, and particularly the onset of COVID-19, created a situation which could easily be characterized as a crisis for higher education, especially when viewed under the guise of crisis involving “highly ambiguous situations with low probability of occurrence” (Klein & Eckhaus, 2017, p. 227).

SIU was however notable among colleges and universities in that shortly before this study began it had experienced a brief yet extremely volatile period in its organizational history. This volatility stemmed from the onset of COVID-19 and a nearly simultaneous proposal to close SIU’s main campus made by the now former executive in charge of SIU’s state college system (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020). The vote on this proposal was postponed almost immediately (as described by the State College System, 2020) and the executive who made the proposal resigned shortly thereafter (as reported by State Public News Authors, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotions leaders of a state university experienced during a period of organizational transformation. This study’s conceptual and theoretical frameworks were the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). The research questions this study asked derived from Weick (2010) and Bridges and Bridges (2009) respectively and asked:

- How did leaders of a non-profit state university experience and come to understand a period of significant organizational transition and change?

- How did the leaders experience the stages of transition through the organizational change process as they adjusted following the aftermath of the proposed change and the ramifications of Covid-19 (as identified on the university's website)?

### **Themes Discovered**

The coding process revealed several themes. These themes included higher education as a public service, crisis, change, and survival. The theme of higher education as a public service yielded two subthemes. These subthemes were access and economic impact. The theme of crisis yielded two subthemes. These subthemes were emotion and leadership. The third theme, change, produced shock and buy-in as subthemes. The final theme, survival, yielded no subthemes. The interpretation of these themes and subthemes helped to illustrate that organizational change is a complex, emotion-laden, and very human experience.

### **Interpretation 1: Moving Forward**

A notable aspect of the themes revealed in this study is that only one, crisis, was focused on SIU's past. There was little doubt that crisis was an essential underlying theme of this work. The impact of the pandemic was still being felt at SIU as it was around the world while this study was underway. The "man-made" and "self-generated" crisis Jane spoke of however had come and gone. Data showed participants had left the events of April 2020 behind and were ready to move SIU forward.

Participants' willingness to look ahead toward something new was evident in the powerful and visceral words they chose to describe their perceptions of SIU in the months following the executive's proposal. Jane for instance spoke of "unearthed" opportunities. Elizabeth described the events in April as having "jump-started" the community. Joan reflected that while she felt she had been given a "reprieve" from the challenges brought about by the

circumstances in April, she also saw the possibility for positive change in SIU's future. Mark echoed Joan's statements by indicating that his focus was on SIU's students and that he looked forward to planning for SIU's "true transformation." James similarly spoke of the events as being in the past when he said that he and his fellow leaders "went through a bumpy ride together."

The feelings shared by the participants align with the Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009). The Bridges transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2009) emphasized the adjustment to change as involving three transitional phases. These phases include periods of an ending, a subsequent neutral period, and moving on to the acceptance of a new beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2009). Change and transition are exclusive following this model, with change being the event's occurrence and transition being the psychological experience of change (Larry, 2017). SIU's leaders were willing to move forward from the events they experienced and embrace SIU's new beginning.

### **Interpretation 2: The Leaders Have Reflected**

It became apparent throughout the course of this study that the participants had reflected considerably on both SIU's role as a university as well as on the crises it faced. James for example had carefully considered the impact of the population trends in SIU's state on the university as well as the financial challenges brought by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Elizabeth described the importance of access as being a vital component of what SIU offers students while noting she had expected potentially difficult changes coming for the university. Jonathan, like James and Elizabeth, had also thought about both SIU as an organization and about the events in April 2020. Jonathan said of the former executive "...that was his vision probably. That's what he saw. I mean, obviously if he was going to make a move like that, he had

put some thought into it.” Jane saw the events in April differently than Jonathan given her perception that the former executive had the tendency to act impulsively. Jane did however make it clear that she had put considerable thought into SIU’s role in its state’s public higher education system.

Participants also expressed frustration that the proposal came as a surprise. Katherine and Allison both used the word “shocking” to describe their reactions to the proposal. Mark described the events in April 2020 as being “surreal.” While Elizabeth saw the events coming, she still characterized the circumstances SIU faced as being “stressful and chaotic.” Other participants in the study used the word “chaotic” to describe the events in April.

Weick (2010) described sensemaking in the face of crisis and sensemaking in more routine activities as being similar in that both involve “an interruption, followed by moments of thought, action to clarify the thinking, and recovery” (p. 542). This series of events was reflected in the actions of this study’s participants. Participants had clearly engaged in sensemaking activities in accordance with Weick (2010). These sensemaking activities were ultimately what allowed them to move forward in accordance with the Bridges transition model.

### **Implications**

While SIU’s leaders may have demonstrated their willingness to move forward, they recognized that doing so would not be easy. The repercussions of the executive’s proposal and the near simultaneous onset of COVID-19 were significant and damaging to the university. The data generated from this study’s interviews indicated there were two important implications for SIU’s leaders to consider as they moved forward. These implications reflected the importance of developing coalitions and establishing context when implementing an organizational change initiative.

### **Implication 1: Coalitions are Vital**

This study's data showed the commitment SIU's leaders felt for their university, their students, and their state. Allison articulated this commitment by saying "I know I myself, I very much believe in the school, I believe in our mission. I know that the graduates get great jobs, great careers. They do really, really well. (SIU's state) needs a (SIU)." Allison went on to say "...I believe that the majority of employees really strongly believe in the school and the mission and that's why we're there."

This shared commitment to SIU demonstrated that any change initiative should be established with a coalition of others who can support the initiative and communicate that message of support to the broader organizational community. Data indicated that this type of coalition building did not take place when the executive made his proposal. Brenda spoke of the decision as having been made "without taking the time to get some feedback from the Presidents." The impulsive nature of the decision led Jane to believe that it was developed without careful consideration. This caused Jane to come to a point where, in her words, she "lacked confidence in the basis of the decision."

The consequence of this lack of coalition-building was that there was no one to back the initiative when it was proposed. Kotter (2012) described the vitally important early step of coalition-building as being essential to a successful organizational change initiative. Kotter (2012) emphasized that effective coalitions are comprised of those with power, expertise, credibility, as well as the ability to lead and drive change. It was noteworthy that the executive had the opportunity to create such a coalition based on the group of leaders interviewed for this study but chose not to do so. The executive's choice not to create a coalition made the failure of

the initiative inevitable, particularly given Kotter's (2012) statement that "the lack of a strong team" will be "fatal" (p. 59).

### **Implication 2: Context Matters**

A noteworthy aspect of the data in this study was that participants shared different opinions about the financial situation SIU was in at the time the pandemic hit and the proposal was announced. Katherine and James for example were clear that they felt SIU's enrollment and financial circumstances were strong prior to the onset of the pandemic. This stood in contrast to Lauren, who said that SIU had "been in financial trouble for a while now." Mark similarly indicated that he believed the state's limited investment in higher education left it difficult for SIU to function.

This discrepancy in the way the leaders perceived SIU's finances reflected the importance of context as being integral to a successful change initiative. This is particularly true due to the importance of a leader's engagement in sensegiving activities with followers. The previously cited description of sensegiving as being a process a leader can utilize to help followers understand context (Sparr, 2018) helps to illustrate why this is the case. People need to understand the facts providing the basis for a decision. If leaders have differing opinions of the circumstances surrounding a change initiative, it is likely that their followers will also have vastly different opinions of these circumstances as well. This will in turn jeopardize the likelihood of building the coalitions Kotter (2012) described as being so critical to a successful change initiative.

### **Recommendations for Further Action**

SIU was at a critical juncture as this study concluded. The data indicated several potential courses of action may help facilitate SIU's transformation. The following recommendations

focus primarily on how the change initiative is communicated to those involved. Communication is presumed to be critical to the change initiative's success based on Jeroen and Aliyu's (2018) work demonstrating that communication helps determine employee trust. It may be that such communication, particularly if it comes from those outside of leadership roles, would help facilitate such trust in any change initiative moving forward.

### **Recommendation 1: Develop New Leaders**

This study has noted that coding demonstrated how the leaders were consistent in their support for SIU's mission and for its students. Jane was clear she felt SIU offers "some pretty spectacular education." Elizabeth praised the access to educational opportunities SIU offers its students. James spoke of his commitment to determining outcomes that will be best for students. Allison emphasized her support for SIU's mission and indicated that others at the university felt similarly.

The commitment demonstrated by SIU's leaders to the university and its students is, particularly based on Allison's statement, presumably not unique to them as members of SIU's community. The likelihood of such feelings being ubiquitous throughout SIU's community offers the university a unique opportunity to engage those outside of traditional leadership roles in the change process. This is especially true given Kezar et al.'s (2011) characterization of higher education as being an industry where people can emerge as leaders even if they do not occupy traditional leadership roles. Kezar et al.'s (2011) description of the possibilities higher education provides for leaders to develop presents an opportunity for SIU to create new leaders who can both support the university's change process and communicate the reasons why the change initiative is critical to SIU's long-term survival.

It is important to acknowledge that SIU has seemingly demonstrated a willingness to take this step. A staff-level employee was at the time of this study's conclusion included in the Change Group (as identified on the university's website). There were however nearly 30 additional staff members working at SIU (as identified in the university's academic catalog). These staff members may be able to provide essential leadership for any change initiative SIU chooses to pursue as it moves forward.

### **Recommendation 2: Perception Matters**

Perception matters in relation to people's willingness to accept a change initiative (Will & Pies, 2018). The data reflected participants' feelings that the executive made his proposal independently and without consulting key stakeholders in the process. There were many examples of how such feelings were evident in the study's data. Brenda for example felt the proposal was made "unilaterally." Mark saw it as having been "forced upon us." Joan felt the SIU community became aware of the proposal "at the same time as the general public, and that sort of made it even worse."

Care should be taken that this does not happen a second time. The critical benefit new staff-level leaders will provide is that they may be able to help build coalitions in support of any change initiative among the SIU community. These coalitions will be critical and will do more than simply build support for the initiative. These coalitions will reinforce the perception that, while the changes may be being made quickly out of necessity, the changes are also being made with care. This shared perception will be essential to building the coalitions necessary to create effective organizational change (Kotter, 2012).

Staff, particularly given SIU's location in a struggling part of the country (U.S. Census, 2020) where jobs may be difficult to replace, have a great deal at stake in a change effort. If



SIU's staff members share Elaine's perception that changes underway at SIU are being done "in a knee jerk reaction," they will doubtlessly reject the initiative. There is no reason for non-leaders to accept something they perceive as being poorly executed. Leaders and non-leaders are no different in this regard.

### **Recommendation 3: Continue to Build Outside Support**

It is recommended that SIU's leaders continue to build relationships with constituents outside of the university, particularly within its state's political community. Elaine said in her experience only "a handful" of the members of SIU's state's government she has worked with have a solid understanding of the university. There may as a result be an opportunity to engage government officials more proactively. Katherine for instance said, "we definitely deployed our team to talk to legislators, to talk to community members," when describing how she worked defensively in reaction to the executive's proposal. The insights Elaine and Katherine shared were significant in that both seemed to imply that there may be an opportunity to engage those with statewide political influence proactively.

Jane indicated that a similar opportunity may be already underway in the private sector. Any continued pursuit of such an opportunity is crucial, especially given Jonathan's description of the significant role SIU plays in its local and state economies. Katherine similarly said companies engage SIU "for their first choice of technical education." Jonathan echoed Katherine's point when he said SIU provided training for local companies. Finally, according to Jonathan, SIU was at the time this study was conducted a key local employer. Losing a resource like SIU, especially when in Jane's estimation, "employers want more of our graduates, not fewer," presumably would have a negative influence on the state's private sector. The threat of

such a negative influence would likely incentivize private sector employers throughout SIU's state to continue to rally around the university as it moves forward.

### **Recommendations for Additional Study**

This study presents valuable opportunities for additional research into the complex topic of organizational change. The researcher emphasizes that any study resulting from this work should be focused on transferability. While SIU's experiences were unique, the experiences the university's leaders shared represented a microcosm of the considerable challenges both the world at large and higher education faced as an industry in the spring of 2020. Transferability therefore is essential for any additional work deriving from this study.

#### **Recommendation 1: Study the Recipients**

The executive's proposal entailed what Jane described as "some pretty drastic decisions." These decisions involved not simply closing SIU's main campus and the other campuses in its state (as reported by State Business Reporter, 2020). The decisions also entailed substantial demands on another state university, the community college system, and an additional SIU site as each would have been tasked with taking on new and existing students impacted by the closures (as reported by State Business Reporter, 2020). The decisions consequently were designed, according to Jane, to keep "the programs as a whole, rather than the institutions as individuals." This meant remaining members of SIU's state college system would have been responsible for taking on programs and students with little time to prepare to do so.

The proposal would as a result place significant demands on the remaining institutions, especially given James' statement that SIU's largest major is in a healthcare discipline. The researcher's experience makes him aware that this major is particularly challenging to administer. It involves a difficult accreditation, substantial physical plant investments, and

significant student support systems. The researcher suggests consequently that there is value in studying how the leaders of the receiving institutions, and particularly those leaders at the other public university, reacted emotionally to being asked to take on either additional students enrolled in majors which are difficult to administer or new programs entirely. The researcher proposes there is substantial transferable value in such a study, especially to other colleges and universities.

### **Recommendation 2: Study Emotional Reactions of Staff**

The researcher feels strongly that, just like the leaders involved in this study, SIU's staff had a great deal at stake in the proposed organizational change initiative. SIU's staff, as was noted earlier, would have been faced with the loss of both an institution they cared deeply about as well as the loss of potentially irreplaceable employment in the area. They would as a result likely share the substantial emotional reactions SIU's leaders had to the proposal. A study of the emotional reactions shared by staff impacted both by SIU's organizational change and the executive's proposal would no doubt be a valuable addition to studies of organizational change as well as higher education and human resources.

### **Conclusion**

This was a phenomenological study of organizational change. The setting for this study was a public university in the Northeast United States. The study's data revealed critical themes about the lived experience (van Manen, 2017) of organizational change shared by the university's leaders. These themes included higher education as a public service, crisis, change, and survival. The study's themes yielded various subthemes. The university was being forced to change for reasons outside of its control, including population trends in its state, COVID-19, and a proposal made by the former executive of the state's public university system. Data indicated

that the leaders were moving forward and had reflected on the circumstances they faced as an institution. The study revealed the importance of coalitions (Kotter, 2012) and context (Sparr, 2018) in an organizational change initiative and recommended various steps for the university to take as it moved forward. The study concluded with recommendations for additional research on topics related to organizational change.

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