

THE BIG DOG EATS FIRST:
MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATOR EXPERIENCES DURING A
MERGER BETWEEN TWO DISTINCT POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

by

ADRIAN KIRK KLEMME

(Under the Direction of James C. Hearn)

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are facing significant economic, political, and demographic challenges. In response, institutions have increasingly turned to mergers and consolidations. While the impetuses and outcomes of merger decisions are well understood, little is known about the process of implementation. Mid-level administrators are important actors in the implementation of a merger and understanding their role is especially critical as their work can have bearing on the merger outcome. This dissertation focuses on the implementation work mid-level administrators perform during these transitions to implement, embed, and sustain new practices within the institution. It focuses on mid-level administrators within functional and business units of the institution where high duplication exists. Accordingly, this single qualitative case study leverages normalization process theory as a guide to understanding the “how” and “what” of the busy work during mergers.

INDEX WORDS: higher education mergers, higher education consolidations, mid-level administrators, change implementation, organizational change, change management, normalization process theory

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the long-term sustainability of higher education has been a growing concern for leaders of higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs have been facing unprecedented challenges including rising costs, changing state support, growth in technology, changing demographics, massification, competing values, and maintaining institutional prestige (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). Further complicating these challenges is the rapid rate of social pressure from students, parents, alumni, and policy groups regarding the effectiveness of higher education and the benefits gained from it (Tierney, 1998).

In part, these challenges stem from the massive revolutions in travel, digital communication, and technology, which have facilitated an unmatched degree of global competition in the academy. In addition, there have been increasing needs to invest in these institutions while simultaneously transforming the way HEIs teach and learn in response to the increasing demand by industry and students for the personalization and individualization of learning. The increasing openness and democratization of higher education, and the inexorable rise in the proportion of future jobs that will require at least some, if not a significant, amount of post-secondary education and training, are also adding to the complexity of these challenges (Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs, & Ladd, 2017).

The financial and demographic challenges for HEIs are real. The Great Recession of 2007, the longest recession in United States history since the Great Depression beginning in 1929, itself contributed to the development of a global financial crisis, which led the U.S. higher

education sector to experience a sharp decline in state support for public education as tax revenues softened and other priorities demanded greater attention (Azziz et al., 2017). In a 2014 updated report from a 2012 survey of 1,700 colleges and universities, Bain & Company discovered that one-third of the institutions surveyed are in dire financial trouble as a result of their operating costs rising faster than revenues and investment returns (Denneen & Dretler, 2014). In the fall of 2014, Moody's reported that between 40 and 45 percent of all colleges and universities would suffer enrollment declines in the 2015–16 academic year (Martin & Samels, 2017) and this trend continues for many HEIs today. Adding to these pressures have been the increasing diversity of the national and student populations, declining numbers of high school graduates, the pool of potential college students, increasing demands for accountability, and the changing dynamics of the professional groups that make up the institution.

As HEIs consider ways to respond to these challenges, decisions have included both minor adjustments and drastic organizational changes for many. Some HEI's have resorted to making minor adjustments including tuition discounting, increasing the number of executive and professional degrees programs, eliminating academic programs, and introducing small incremental policy changes. As leaders seek to ensure continued growth and impact, greater efficiency, greater economies of scale, better value (to both consumers/clients and shareholders), improved competitiveness, and improved chances of long-term survival, minor adjustments have been insufficient. Consequently, many institutions and their sponsoring entities have begun initiating more seismic shifts in how they are organized and operate to ensure their longevity and meet their strategic objectives (Clark, 1995; Dill & Sporn, 1995). These leaders have considered a wide array of options including developing systems of shared services, shared campuses, partnerships, co-branding efforts, joint ventures, consortiums, strategic partnerships,

program and asset transfers, and educational affiliations among many others (Azziz et al., 2017; Martin & Samels, 2017). While many institutions have found success in these efforts, others have elected to pursue a more aggressive path by consolidating or by merging institutions. A consolidation involves a merger of at least two HEIs, normally of equal size and power, wherein participating institutions lose their autonomy and are transformed into a new entity (G. Harman, 1991). In contrast, in the case of a merger or acquisitions, one institution absorbs another without being substantially affected in the process (Eastman & Lang, 2001).

Mergers and consolidations have long been accepted and practiced in higher education outside of the United States, and have been leveraged by sponsoring government entities as a means for countries to meet strategic economic and educational objectives. In the United States, however, efforts at merging HEIs have historically been less systematic and more sporadic. However, this trend is changing. In recent years, both private and public HEIs in the United States, and their sponsoring entities, have increasingly considered mergers as a viable option to long-term sustainability. The State of Georgia is one example. In October 2011, the University System of Georgia (USG) and its Chancellor, Hank Huckaby, initiated a multi-phase process of consolidating institutions “to ensure that it has a 21st century structure while providing a network of institutions offering the proper range of degrees and opportunities in research and service to students and faculty. The purpose [was] to increase the system’s overall effectiveness in creating a more educated Georgia” (University System of Georgia, 2014). Other states that have pursued dramatic restructuring include Wisconsin (1974), Minnesota (1995), Kentucky (1997), Kansas (1965-2008), Alabama (2015), Louisiana (2015), and Texas (2015) (Russell, 2016). As of this writing, New Mexico, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut have begun discussions or have recently approved merging institutions within their systems.

In the case of the University System of Georgia, an important distinction needs to be made about the use of the term ‘consolidation’ used to describe their efforts to reorganize their system. This distinction has bearing on the title I have selected for this thesis and how I refer to the case I present here. The USG consciously classified all phases of their reorganization process as “consolidations.” However, not all of these reorganizations can be appropriately described this way. Some of the changes that were made are more appropriately classified as mergers because of how the processes were implemented at these institutions. Some more closely align with the description of a merger offered by Eastman and Lang. In this study, I consciously use the word “merger” to describe this case study that includes one phase of the USG reorganization affecting two institutions. As I present my findings, it will become evident that the term “merger” is a more appropriate label to describe what transpired in this case.

While mergers in U.S. higher education are beginning to increase, the current research literature on this important topic is limited. The extant literature has largely focused on understanding the motives that drive these decisions, which have traditionally been reactionary, and the outcomes from them. A more recent push in the literature has focused on helping system and institutional leaders to be more opportunistic at the possibility of mergers, to think strategically about them, and to assist in considering the complexities of these organizational changes while contemplating these decisions. While these research findings provide valuable insight into these complex changes, their perspectives largely reflect on the factors that drive the decision to merge and the outcomes of these decisions.

The extant research literature does very little to help us understand what happens after the decision to merge institutions are made. We understand very little about the implementation phase of a merger and how administrators tasked with the day-to-day changes actually navigate

this process. This is especially critical in functional units of the institution where administrative, business, and operational services reside and where high levels of duplication exist. These functional units may include financial services, IT services, student services, admissions, enrollment, athletics, human resources, auxiliary services and physical plant, police, and other services. In most cases, the administrators in these units have never experienced a merger and have no previous experience managing the process of implementation. Certainly, their experiences and the work they do during implementation are important pieces in understanding how those efforts might impact a merger's intended outcomes.

In the case of the USG, the overall process for each of the institutions being impacted in their reorganization efforts would be overseen by officials at the system office and by the presidents of each of the affected institution. Furthermore, it was determined that Operational Working Groups (OWG) would be created to oversee and manage the day-to-day tasks surrounding implementation of the changes. The OWGs, co-chaired by leaders from each of the institutions selected for reorganization, were responsible for examining all aspects of the units where they worked and for making recommendations for implementation to the executive committee. The executive committee often consisted of the presidents, senior leaders, a consultant, and representatives from the system office. In most cases, the OWGs were co-chaired by mid-level administrators who were often the directors of units, and/or other administrators who filled various roles and assignments within those functional units. These individuals were most familiar with the day-to-day operations of their offices and units.

Mid-level administrators make significant contributions to the academic enterprise. They constitute the largest administrative group within most college and university systems, but so often they have little participation in administrative policy decisions and no formal structure of

governance. Despite their significant numbers and professionalism, they lack visibility throughout the academy and have been of little concern to educational researchers (Rosser, 2000, 2004). The unique structure of the OWG in the USG mergers, and the opportunity these individuals were given to be key participants in “administrative policy decisions,” created an ideal space to bring together two understudied topics in higher education literature.

In this dissertation, *I examine the intersection between a higher education merger and the role of mid-level administrators during implementation*. OWGs, and the individuals who served on these committees in units where high duplication existed, constitute the unit of analysis for this study. I employ a single case study approach at one merger in the USG between two distinct post-secondary institutions, Georgia State University (GSU) and Georgia Perimeter College (GPC).

This study is narrow in its focus and will not seek to provide justification or pass judgment on the decision to merge these institutions, nor will it evaluate the outcome of the merger between GSU and GPC. Rather, my intent is to better understand how the merger process unfolded and was implemented by the mid-level administrators serving on OWGs at these institutions during this transition. I seek to understand how these leaders worked together to complete their charge, addressed the challenges they faced, and facilitated key recommendations for change. To accomplish this, I ask the following research questions:

RQ#1. How did a critical structural change process, the merger of two distinctive postsecondary institutions, unfold among mid-level administrators in the affected institutions?

RQ#2. What substantive issues emerged during the merger between mid-level administrators in the affected institutions, and how were those addressed?

These research questions will inform my examination of the implementation of the GSU GPC merger.

This study is particularly salient as the higher education sector in the United States, both private schools and public state systems, consider or determine that a merger is a viable long-term survival strategy in response to the economic, political, and demographic pressures they are facing. Given the current dearth of research literature seeking to understand the implementation of a merger, and the role that mid-level administrators play in realizing these decisions, how can key stakeholders including system leaders, presidents, boards, and administrators alike hope to conduct a successful merger? This study is significant in that it seeks to understand what happens at the individual level of implementation during the complete integration of two very distinct institutions. My hope is that this study will allow us to better understand implementation issues that may hinder successful merger integration, and how synergies, services, policies, and unity can be attained during these difficult transitions.

This qualitative study consists of five chapters. In this chapter I provided a general overview of the state of U.S. higher education, highlight mergers as one response to those challenges, and make an argument for the importance and need for this study. In chapter two I provide a more comprehensive picture of the current state of U.S. higher education, review the extant literature on mergers as a response to those challenges, and the role of mid-level administrators in the academic enterprise. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework that will help guide my inquiry. Chapter three addresses the research

methodology I use in this study. Chapter four highlights the findings of the study. And finally, chapter five discusses the application of these findings for practitioners and provides suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the growing economic, political, and demographic challenges HEIs in the United States are facing. It follows with a review of the extant literature on the higher education sector's response to these challenges in the context of a merger. I review the precursors, motives, objectives, and outcomes of these decisions from both international and domestic perspectives. I also present a more in-depth look at the motives for mergers in U.S. higher education, provide an overview of the dominant reasons for merging, and explore the differences in these motives between private and public institutions. Next, I provide clarity on the language used to describe the spectrum of conjoining institutions, review these terms, and discuss approaches to studying them. I also provide a review of the literature on mid-level administrators in higher education, and I make a case for the need to better understand the role these individuals play in the execution of a merger. The chapter concludes with a brief review of the theoretical framework that guides my inquiry.

THE CURRENT STATE OF U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

In recent decades, the long-term sustainability of higher education has been a growing concern for leaders. Many indicators are pointing to colleges and universities coming under increasing stress from all sides including rising costs, changing state support, growth in technology, changing demographics, massification, competing values, and maintaining prestige (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). In 2005, then U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings

commissioned a report on the future of U.S. Higher Education which examined issues of accountability, affordability, quality and access. On issues of affordability, the commission stated:

Our higher education financing system is increasingly dysfunctional. State subsidies are declining; tuition is rising; and cost per student is increasing faster than inflation or family income. Affordability is directly affected by a financing system that provides limited incentives for colleges and universities to take aggressive steps to improve institutional efficiency and productivity. Public concern about rising costs may ultimately contribute to the erosion of public confidence in higher education. (Department of Education, 2006, p. 10)

Not long after this report was released the economic status of the country worsened. The Great Recession of 2007, the longest recession in United States history since the Great Depression of 1929, itself contributed to the development of a global financial crisis. This crisis reverberated throughout the U.S. higher education sector which experienced a sharp decline in state support for public education as tax revenues softened and other priorities, including healthcare, demanded greater attention (Azziz et al., 2017). Since that time, the problems have been exacerbated as institutional borrowing has increased which has added to the debt service on annual budgets, while endowments and other investments have continued to underperform. Furthering these challenges, as predicted by the Spellings Report, has been the rapid rate of social pressure from students, parents, alumni, and policy groups regarding the effectiveness of higher education and the benefits gained from it (Tierney, 1998).

HEIs have increasingly become cash strapped as revenues are struggling to maintain pace with rising tuition costs. The report *The Condition of Education 2014* (NCES, 2014) found that tuition had increased 39% between the academic years 2002-2003 through 2012-2013 for public institutions, and 27% during the same time period for private institutions. And as recently as December 2017, Moody's Investor Services downgraded its 2018 outlook for U.S. higher education from stable to negative as the report discovered that while aggregate operational revenue moderated, expense growth continued to increase. The report found that the annual change in aggregate operating revenue for four-year colleges and universities would soften to about 3.5% and not keep pace with expense growth which they estimated to be almost 4%. And while they expected private institutions would outperform public institutions, the report estimated at least 15% of these private institutions would be forced to cut costs in response to stagnant or weak revenue growth. The report anticipated that net tuition revenue growth would be affected by affordability concerns and limited enrollment growth over the outlook period. The report went on to predict that public institutions, which face state limits on raising tuition, would only have growth in net tuition revenue of 2% - 3%, which would still fall below the anticipated 4% expense growth.

HEIs are also becoming increasingly vulnerable to a volatile political climate as it has experienced and awaits looming changes in federal policy and funding. The impacts of recent tax reform have affected philanthropy and endowments. And eliminating private activity bonds, which private colleges have used to facilitate tax-exempt borrowing, has increase borrowing costs for these universities. Potential tax changes to tuition support for graduate students would also negatively impact graduate enrollment and research levels since research is a key component of many graduate programs. Further political disputes in 2018 have stalled the

reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which allows for allocations to all financial aid programs and governs almost every aspect of the sector. Changes to Pell Grants and the direct student loan program are expected to further impact higher education affordability and access, and cuts would further suppress net tuition revenue growth. Further complicating these issues has been the turmoil experienced with immigration policies and visa allowances and their impact on international student enrollments. After a decade of positive growth in international student enrollments, trends have started to reverse, depriving many universities of an important source of high-paying students (Seltzer, 2018).

National population projections are yet another area of concern for HEIs. Data show significant declines in the number of high school graduates entering the college pipeline in coming years, narrowing the student populations that serve as the lifeblood of traditional educational enterprises. In 2016, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education released their 9th edition of *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). This report is written with the intention of informing a broad education audience about how the numbers of high school graduates are likely to change in the years ahead. This most recent report spans the school years 2000-01 through 2031-32 and examines data on public and private schools, and projects the number of high school graduates for the nation.

The report concluded that the U.S. public high school graduating classes have reached a plateau after a steady 15-year increase between 2000-2015. The nation is also projected to produce fewer high school graduates in all of the 10 graduating class years between 2014 and 2023, compared to the highest recorded number of graduates in 2013. The year of greatest decline was projected to be 2017, with about 81,000 fewer high school graduates, representing a

2.3 percent decrease. Three years of growth in graduations are projected for the years between 2024-2026, reaching about 94,000 more graduates in 2025 (2.7 percent increase) than in 2013. Between 2027 and 2032, the average size of graduating classes is expected to be smaller than those in 2013. The number of high school graduates from private religious and nonsectarian schools is also projected to decline at an even greater rate than the overall trend, from 302,000 in 2011 (the last year for which confirmed graduate counts are available for private schools) to about 220,000 by the early 2030s, representing a decrease of 80,000 graduates, or 26 percent (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Figure 1 provides a visual of the past and projected high school graduation numbers in the United States.

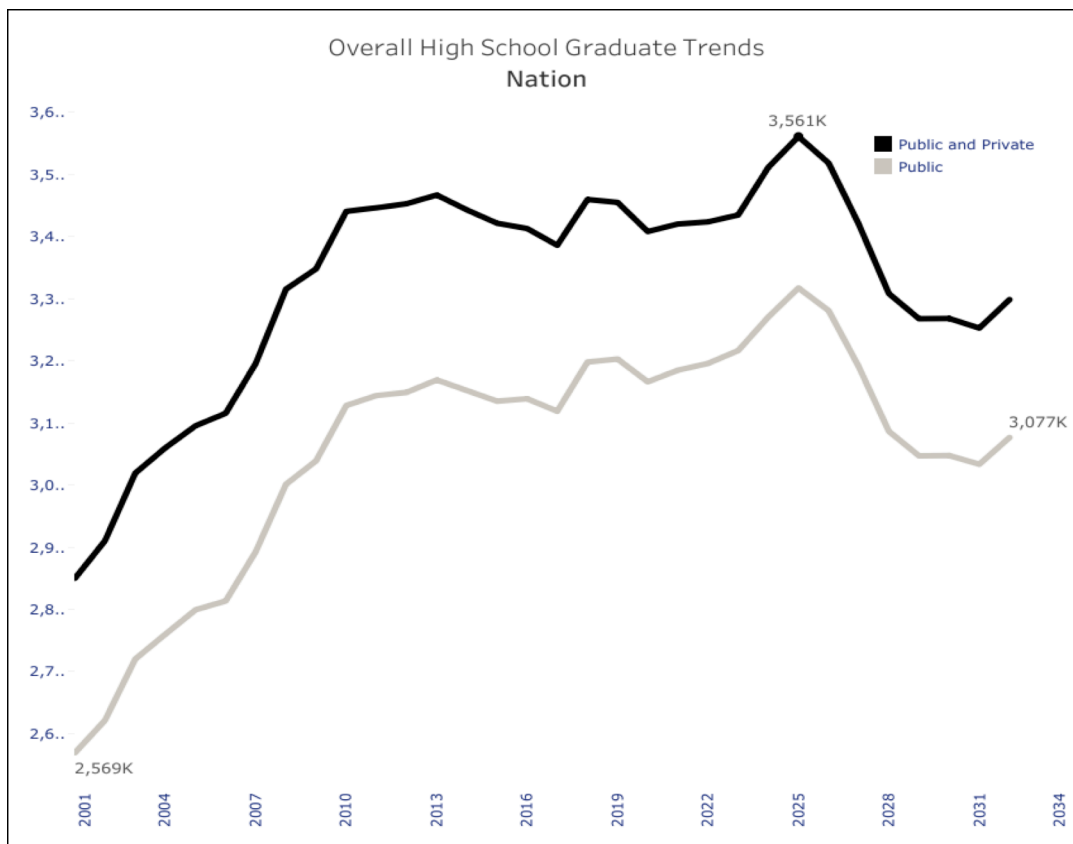


Figure 1. National Graduation Trends, 2000-2032

Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, 2016.

Further complicating the challenges associated with declining high school graduations involves where these high school graduates reside and from which demographic groups they come from. Fewer students are expected to graduate from private high schools. Fewer will be in the college-dense regions of the Northeast, industrial Midwest, and the West. Fewer students will be white, and more will be students of color. The number of white public high school graduates, once at 1.84 million in 2013, will fall by approximately 114,000 students by 2025. Declines in the number of white high school graduates will be offset by growth in the non-white population, but not all groups will see their numbers grow. The number of black public high school graduates, which was about 474,000 in 2013, will slip by 3,000 or so students through 2025. The number of Hispanic high school graduates, which totaled some 640,000 in 2013, will rise by 277,000 by 2025. The number of Asian and Pacific Islander high school graduates will climb from 184,000 in 2013 to 210,000, and the number of American Indian and Alaska Native high school graduates will slide from 32,000 in 2013 to 25,500 in 2025 (See Figure 2).

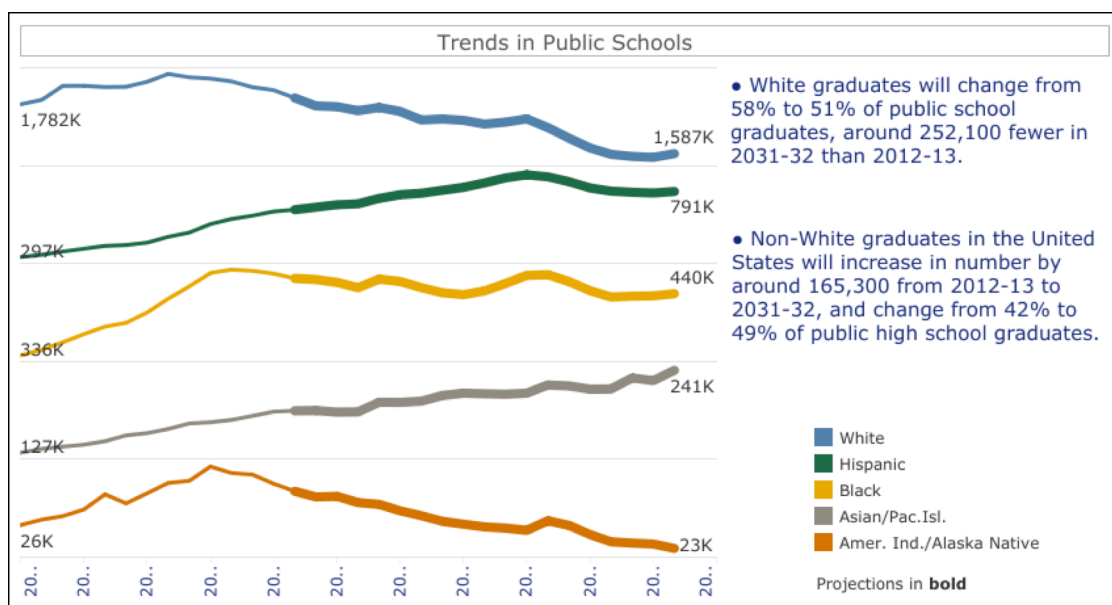


Figure 2. Graduation Trends by Race in Public Schools, 2000-2032

Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, 2016.

Slicing the demographics when projecting college enrollment matters, because white students have traditionally been more likely to graduate from college than members of most other racial or ethnic groups. Put differently, the group that has traditionally completed college in the largest total numbers, white students, is about to decline in number most drastically. The group that has been among the least likely to complete college, Hispanic students, is the one poised for the most significant growth. While institutions short on students can hope to educate more adult or minority students, or more students from any number of other populations, doing so is much easier said than done and requires resources for marketing and education outreach that many floundering colleges lack (Seltzer, 2018).

HIGHER EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THESE CHALLENGES

The economic, political, and demographic issues currently facing U.S. higher education are serious and HEIs can anticipate significant volatility for the next 15 years. As these institutions consider the most appropriate ways to respond, some have resorted to making minor adjustments including tuition discounting, increasing the offerings of professional degrees, eliminating academic programs, and introducing small incremental policy changes. However, as fiscal concerns grow, public demands for accountability increase, and demographic projections continue to shift and slide, small-scale changes will be insufficient to satiate these concerns. Recognizing the magnitude of these challenges, some institutions and their sponsoring entities are initiating more seismic shifts in how they are organized and how they operate by merging to ensure their longevity and meet their strategic objectives (Clark, 1995; Dill & Sporn, 1995). Advocates argue that mergers give options for institutions for continued growth and impact, greater efficiency, greater economies of scale, better value (to both consumers/clients and share-

holders), improved competitiveness, and in some cases, improved chances of long-term survival (Azziz et al., 2017).

The U.S. higher education sector has a long history of institutional mergers. Since the founding of the colonial institutions – Harvard, Yale, William & Mary, Pennsylvania, Brown, Rutgers, Columbia, Dartmouth, and Princeton – institutions have merged, closed, and opened based on the changing demographics of the communities they were created to serve (Thelin, 2011). And since their inception, all of these colonial institutions have acquired or merged with other smaller institutions to enhance their offerings to students. The fact is, a significant portion of mature HEIs today have been participants in, or are the product of, at least one higher education merger during their history.

U.S. higher education experienced many mergers between 1830 and 1960. Some of the older mergers are difficult to account for because data on these have fallen through the cracks as time passed or because they were unreported or underreported (Seltzer, 2018). Nevertheless, mergers began picking up steam in the 1960's and became one of the major means of reorganization through the early 1980's. It was during these decades the country grappled with population fluctuations, economic issues, and war (Breuder, 1989). Most of these changes were characterized by involuntary closings, financial insolvencies, forced reorganizations, and massive human and programmatic retrenchment (Martin & Samels, 1994). These institutions were also challenged to respond to shifts in federal policies aimed at expanding and enhancing the quality of research in science and engineering. The Carnegie Mellon University and Case Western Reserve University merger is an example of a new institution created as a result of the federal government's research push.

During these decades mergers also made it possible for the trustees of a failing college to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities while still providing some degree of continuity of education for students, as well as employment for faculty and staff (O'Neill & Barnett, 1980). Mergers were viewed as a way to manage decline rather than seize opportunity for educational advantage. U.S. higher education witnessed individual and groups of institutions restructured into larger systems, resulting in the growth of multiple-campus institutions (MacTaggart, 1996; Millett, 1976). As the economy improved through the 1980's and 1990's and interest in merging institutions began to decline, the higher education sector still saw changes transpire and mergers continue. Some examples included the mergers of the Delaware Law School and Boston State College merging with the University of Massachusetts Boston. And Mercy College merged with the University of Detroit to become the largest private Catholic university in Michigan (Etschmaier, 2010; G. Harman & Harman, 2008)

Beginning in the year 2000 this trend once again reversed and the U.S. higher education sector began seeing mergers come back with a vengeance. In 2014, Higher Education Publications, Inc., identified 64 mergers or consolidations in the 1980s, 63 in the 1990s, 71 in the 2000s, and 72 between 2010-2014. The research and consulting firm EAB has also been compiling data on college and university mergers, which includes data on 250 mergers proposed between 1830 and the end of February 2018. Most of the institutions in their dataset (220) were completed, although some remain works in progress and some of the merged institutions were later dissolved or closed. Figure 3 provides a snapshot of the trends in college and university mergers by decades since 1830 as identified by EAB.

A significant and precipitous rise has been experienced over the past 8 years, nearly doubling the number of mergers from the previous decade. One example of this push has been in

the state of Georgia, which has been pursuing an aggressive path to merging institutions. Since the University System of Georgia initiated its push for mergers in 2011, the state has merged 18 institutions into nine and has cut its total institutional count from 35 to 26. This effort came just a few years after having consolidated its institutions within its technical system, which consolidated thirteen institutions to six. Georgia is not the only state considering mergers. They have been or are currently being explored in other states including New Mexico, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Wisconsin.

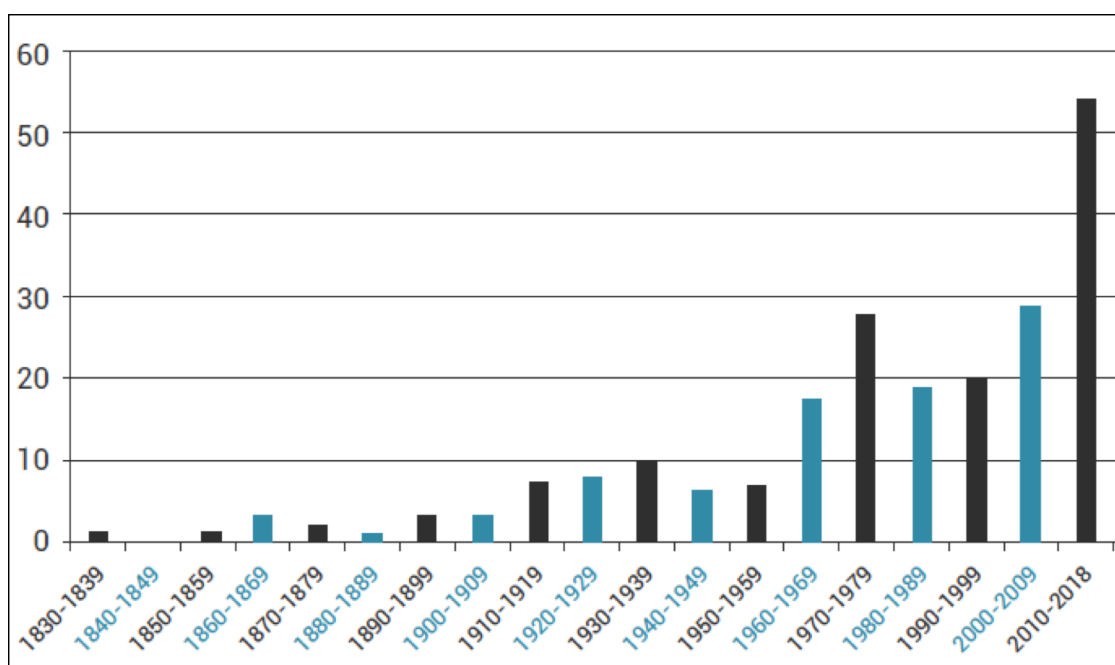


Figure 3. College and University Mergers by Decade, 1830-2018

Source: EAB Data (Seltzer, 2018)

OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION MERGER LITERATURE

Despite a long history of mergers in higher education, both globally and domestically, the academic literature examining mergers in this context is a small body of work. Much of the research has focused internationally in countries where the higher education sector was managed

more centrally by government organizations (e.g., Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, a number of countries East Europe, Asia and Africa in the 1990s and 2000s). In the 1960s and 1970s governments in Australia and the UK used mergers as a means of separation to create a technical system as well as an advanced postsecondary university system. These efforts were later reversed during the 1980s and 1990s to create a unified system of higher education (Fielden & Markham, 1997; Goedegebuure, 1992; G. Harman & Meek, 1988; K. Harman & Meek, 2002; Meek, 1989).

Mergers were also initiated in various parts of Europe including the Swedish reforms of 1977, the comprehensive university effort in Germany during the 1970s, the reorganization of the Norwegian higher education sector in 1994, the Flemish college sector in 1994, the creation of the polytechnic college sector in Finland between 1991 to 1995, and the restructuring of the college sector in the Netherlands from 1983 through 1987 (Goedegebuure & Vos, 1988; K. Harman & Meek, 2002; Skodvin, 1999). These initiatives were promoted for a variety of reasons including building capacity, improving efficiency and effectiveness, achieving economies of scale, increasing access to the public, to address narrow specialization and institutional fragmentation, and for these institutions to be more intentional in serving regional economic interests and social objectives (Eastman & Lang, 2001; K. Harman & Meek, 2002)

International higher education mergers carried out in the Netherlands, Australia, and the U.K. have been the subject of the most scholarly research, examining them from a policy perspective, in an effort to understand why and how these decisions were initiated and implemented, and examined their outcomes against policy objectives (Fielden & Markham, 1997; Gamage, 1993; Goedegebuure, 1992; G. Harman & Meek, 1988; Martin & Samels, 1994; Rowley, 1997). In both Australia and the Netherlands, as a result of the implementation of the

government's restructuring operations, nearly all of the higher education institutions in these countries have been impacted in some capacity. In terms of the scope of the policy and the number of institutions involved, these initiatives have probably been the most far-reaching examples of the restructuring of higher education systems through mergers.

The experiences and lessons learned from these experiments have influenced, to different degrees, the efforts by governments in other countries. Several have taken similar approaches to reform and restructure their higher education systems during the 1990s and the early 2000s. (Wan, 2008). Examples include studies of mergers in China (D. Li, 2010; Mao, Du, & Liu, 2009; Su, 2009; Wan, 2008), South Africa (Sehoole, 2005; Tsheola & Nembambula, 2015), Iran (Ahmadvand, Heidari, Hosseini, & Majdzadeh, 2012), and Ireland (Hazelkorn & Harkin, 2014).

In contrast to externally initiated international higher education mergers, mergers among institutions in the United States have typically been voluntary, meaning that the institutions themselves initiated the process (Skodvin, 1999). And while mergers have occurred in all segments of the U.S. higher education market, they have been most common among non-selective, two-year institutions. Of the public and private institutions that were involved in a merger between 2000 and 2015, only 10% were doctoral universities while 45% were associate's degree colleges, 9% baccalaureate granting colleges, and 2% were master's degree colleges. The remainder involved specialized institutions such as theological seminaries, medical schools and health professions schools, schools of art and design, and schools of business (Russell, 2018).

Studies of higher education collaborations, consolidations, and mergers focus disproportionately on less numerous research universities rather than more numerous non-university tertiary institutions (such as polytechnics or universities of applied science), and postsecondary non-tertiary institutions. Research likewise focuses more often on mergers than

alliances and collaborative agreements, even though the latter are likely to be more common.

Despite these international and domestic research efforts, a majority of these studies have examined mergers from the institutional level and the senior leaders overseeing the change (Hawks, 2015; Schoole, 2005; Waldman, Bass, & Einstein, 1987; Wan, 2008; Weinblatt, 2012) while very few studies provide insight into this phenomenon at the individual level where implementation happens.

Higher education mergers defined

The extant merger literature has used a variety of terms to describe the process by which two separate legal entities are joined together to form one organizational unit with a single governing body and chief executive (Harman 1991). The degree of restructuring falls along a continuum of organizational classification where institutions contract with one another to change the degrees of control at one or both places (Chambers, 1983). Figure 1 provides a quick visual of how the continuum is described in the literature. Martin and Samuels (1994) and Eastman and Lang (2001) offered a typology of mergers, which range in the extremity or degree of the organizational arrangement.

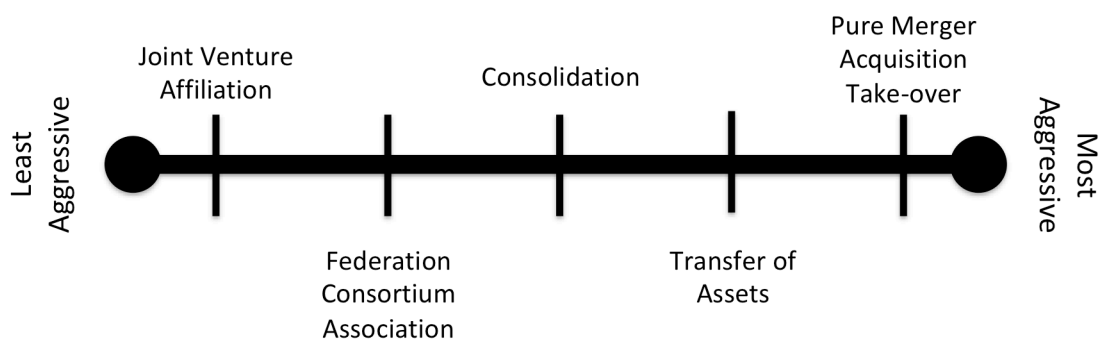


Figure 4. Continuum of Higher Education Organizational Restructuring

The terms most often used for institutional-level unification, beginning from the least aggressive to those that are considered the most aggressive, include joint venture or affiliation, a federation, consortium, association, consolidations, transfer of assets, and mergers, acquisitions, or take-overs. A *joint venture or an affiliation* exists when School A and School B may form a narrow agreement on some initiative. The terms *federation, consortium, or association* implies that School A and School B engage in a common resource sharing agreement in the creation of some sort of system, whereby the governance of the whole remains under shared control of the various participants.

In a traditional *consolidation*, the equation $A + B = C$ preserves the consolidated institutional name and niche. Higher education consolidations involve two or more institutions that are collapsed into one new college or university, usually with a different name, mission, and scale of operation. The new institution typically houses multiple schools or colleges and reflects a diversity of degree program offerings at undergraduate and graduate levels. Several variations of corporate governance structures are available to accommodate separate but coordinated or reconstituted trustee boards (Chipunza & Gwarinda, 2010). A *transfer of assets* exists where School A transfers some responsibilities to School B but still maintains some autonomy for some of its programs.

Alternatively, an institutional *merger, acquisition, or take-over* refers to the combination of two or more separate institutions where one or more surrenders its legally and culturally independent identities under the control of another existing institution (K. Harman & Meek, 2002). In other words, School A takes legal control over School B. In the corporate world, a merger is the combination of two entities of the same approximate size and standing and executives from both precursor institutions are retained. In its purest form, mergers assimilate

two or more institutions: $A + B = A$. In effect, the merged institution is dissolved, leaving the other institution as the sole survivor. In a best-case situation, the merging institution will devise a self-liquidating resolution of outstanding liabilities, with remaining assets dedicated to continuing the merged institution's programs according to mutually agreed-upon parameters (Chipunza & Gwarinda, 2010).

Higher education has traditionally avoided publically using the word “acquisition” or “take-over,” instead stretching the term “merger” or “consolidation” to cover almost any transaction, as it is often perceived to be more politically palatable (Harman, 2002) and takes into account the sensitivities involved in bringing together two institutions with two distinct cultures and constituencies. Nonetheless, most of these activities among institutions fits the definition of a merger, acquisition, or take-over (Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995).

Public vs. private motivations to merge

A synthesis of the literature on mergers in the United States reveals that financial motives and strategic motives are the primary drivers of higher education mergers. While these two broad categories provide a general understanding of the challenges both public and private institutions face when considering these decisions, they also provide a more structured framework for understanding the motivational differences that exist between the two.

Some of the early and more well known literature highlighting the financial and strategic motives mentioned previously include the work by Millett (1976), Peters (1977), and Chambers (1981, 1983, 1987). Millett's work, *Mergers in Higher Education*, consisted of 10 case studies of college and university mergers and was designed as a “how-to” approach for institutions considering a merger. At the time, there had been a slight increase in mergers in higher education, but many other schools were struggling financially and both the Academy for

Educational Development and the Carnegie Foundation wanted to provide research for those schools to consider as they prepared strategically for financial exigency (Millet, 1976). While a number of mergers were included in Millet's report, and some quality findings generated, it did not significantly influence the rate or behavior of institutions involved in or considering mergers (Millet, 1976).

Peters (1977) work *Mergers of Institutions of Higher Education* was an exploratory investigation of 31 mergers that transpired between 1963 and 1973. His investigation sought to understand the advantages and disadvantages of a merger from an empirical perspective. He concluded that the advantages included improved financial support, improved or eliminated duplicate programs, and improved student enrollment, while the disadvantages cited were loss of autonomy, unsatisfactory degree of participation from faculty, and geographic separation.

Chambers (1981, 1983, 1987) produced some of the most comprehensive studies on mergers as she sought to better understand the reasons why institutions merge. At the time, little was known about the process of mergers in higher education. Using data from the Higher Education General Information Survey, Chambers studied private college mergers attempted since the 1970s, and developed a model of the necessary conditions for mergers among private institutions. Her research found that institutions considering mergers were most concerned about mission, risk, and institutional reputation.

Later scholars have taken a different approach to the research on the subject. In Martin and Samels (1994) book *Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth: A New Strategy for Academic Managers*, and their subsequent volume *Consolidating Colleges and Merging Universities: New strategies for higher education leaders* (Martin & Samels, 2017), the authors argue that mergers transpire and should be considered by institutions for strategic purposes. Others have augmented

this position claiming that institutions will need to be proactive in hedging the looming challenges ahead (Azziz et al., 2017; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Partnenon-EY, 2016). These motives include enhancing institutions' academic standing, diversifying their academic offerings, or growing their market share (Weinblatt, 2012).

These two main emergent themes emphasizing the *financial* motives (including an institution's or sponsoring entities desire to achieve economies of scale or deal with financial exigency) and *strategic* motives (including aspirational desires, mutual growth, or diversification in academic offerings) for merging provide an excellent context to briefly explore some of the similarities and differences that exist between public and private institutions.

Financial motives to merge. Financial motives are the most frequently studied motive for institutions merging in higher education research and in the United States. Many scholars involved in these studies have long felt that financial concerns are the primary motivation for merging (Millett, 1976; Skodvin, 1999). Many of these institutions looked to the business industry model of mergers as a way to decrease infrastructure, decrease costs, increase enrollments, and diversify offerings (Etschmaier, 2010). These institutions operated from the idea that a merger eliminates waste within a system and frees up resources to be used in more productive ways.

While the higher education sector has witnessed a significant rise in the number of mergers for financial motives, opponents have argued that mergers are not always the answer to these challenges, and may not always yield positive outcomes. Chambers (1981) raised concerns of whether a merger actually helped to resolve financial difficulties of institutions and whether they could be ultimately considered successful. Many institutions merging for financial reasons assume the change will eliminate or reduce unnecessary expenditures. The argument follows that

maintaining fewer schools should cost less money. However, mergers rarely yield cost savings, in large part to the fact that they rarely result in closed buildings (Fielden & Markham, 1997; Wieder, 2012).

Financial motives for merging can be sub-divided into two topics including an institutions desire to achieve *economies of scale* and a response to *financial exigency*. Economies of scale in higher education involves administrative, economic, and cost savings or other financial efficiencies achieved by merging several smaller units into a larger unit which allow for institutional and operating expenses to be minimized on a per student basis. On the other hand, institutions facing *financial exigency* deal with imminent financial crisis, which threatens the viability of an agency, institution, office, department, or one or more of its programs.

Economies of Scale. The most dominant theme in the extant literature about higher education mergers is achieving economic efficiencies (Bowen, 1980; Cohn, Rhine, & Santos, 1989; Lang, 2003; Patterson, 2000; Skodvin, 1999), or from the government (public) perspective especially, to help better align systems with the needs of the public. The common argument in the research literature is that larger institutions, by achieving economies of scale, are able to spend less per student than smaller institutions would be able to (Brinkman, 1981; Cohn et al., 1989; De Groot, McMahon, & Volkwein, 1991). Research has suggested that significant cost savings are observed when institutions enroll between 9,000 and 20,000 students (Lang, 2003; Patterson, 2000; Toutkoushian, 1999). While some studies point to smaller private institutions citing economies of scale as a motivating factor (Fielden & Markham, 1997; Skodvin, 1999), a far majority of the studies observe this motivator among public colleges and universities. Smaller private institutions are physically unable to provide accommodation for student growth in order to achieve economies of scale. Public institutions, on the other hand, may already have, or are

able to provide, capacity for growth in enrollments. This is critical given the increasing pressure these institutions are facing to serve as good stewards of the public resources available to them.

Public institutions often find themselves part of a state-governed multi-campus “system,” and the impetus for considering mergers among these campuses often originates from a powerful source of administrative authority and funding, often in pursuit of increased efficiencies and rationality in response to public accountability for taxpayer funds. G. Harman and Harman (2008) provided greater clarity on this issue and the increasing use of mergers by government as a response to the financial pressures stating, “Mergers became an increasingly common phenomenon across many higher education systems, particularly as higher education provision rapidly expanded and governments looked for cost savings and ways to build stronger degree-awarding institutions” (p. 102).

As recipients of public funds, there is a growing expectation that these institutions and the government bodies that support them achieve economies of scale in order to maximize on the investment made in the institutions. Public institutions face greater demands for accountability, including the number of administrators and faculty they hire, management practices they employ, and the efficient use of those resources and physical facilities. Cost savings are achieved through reduced duplication in staff (benefits and compensation), buildings and facilities, academic programs, travel, administration, contracts, and other costs (Fielden, 1991).

Inefficiency and cost savings opportunities are often found among stand-alone public higher education entities, and states are seeking for ways to maximize how they are investing in their educational resources. In one example, the Texas A&M Health Science Center merged with the much larger Texas A&M University to better leverage the university’s research prowess. Before the merger, the Health Science faculty conducted about \$80 million in research annually,

while the main university had \$700 million in research grants. The hope was that if researchers worked more closely together under the umbrella of one university, they could maximize efficiency in how resources were utilized and the institution as a whole could bring in more money overall (Partnenon-EY, 2016).

Financial Exigency. While efficiency and economies of scale have been major drivers for merging, especially among public institutions, financial distress or the anticipation of distress has also been a common motivating factor most predominately among private institutions which lack the financial backing of a government body (Chambers, 1981, 1983; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Millett, 1976). Traditionally, the small size of private institutions often has been a key indicator of risk to institutional survival. Financial exigency among these institutions often occurs when enrollment and endowment goals are missed, and dedicated funds are utilized under the pretext of interest-free loans for which repayment is unlikely over time. As fiscal matters deteriorate among many of these smaller private institutions, senior administrators unavoidably delay payments to product and service vendors, credit lines are constricted, and payrolls and debt service obligations are deferred (Martin & Samels, 2017). These smaller institutions, in particular, are typically more vulnerable to changes in their resource environment than are larger institutions, where larger and more diversified institutions are better able to pool risks and maximize institutional flexibility to meet changing circumstances.

Many of the mergers resulting from financial exigency have been referred to as bankruptcy-bailout mergers (O'Neill & Barnett, 1980) which are usually driven by the financial distress of at least one of the merger partners. In the United States, many of the higher education mergers taking place in the 1970's could be classified in the bankruptcy-bailout category. In the 1980s and 1990s, interest in mergers was especially strong among small, private liberal-arts

colleges, particularly those in New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and parts of the Midwest. This same trend continues today. In many cases, colleges merged to stay afloat and out of bankruptcy proceedings, and these actions were viewed by small colleges as a practical means of gaining the financial stability to afford them a future (Grassmuck, 1991).

Much of the financial exigency issues institutions faced in the past have been exacerbated as revenues continue to be squeezed and costs continue to rise. Rising costs, partnered with declining enrollments, have forced many institutions to respond by pushing up their tuition discount rates. This impact has been felt much more dramatically among smaller private institutions that rely heavily on tuition revenue to support operating expenses. Tuition dollars make up 56% of the revenue pie at private not-for-profit colleges with enrollments under 5,000 students, compared to 42% at large universities, meaning that a small decline in enrollment at these smaller institutions has a significant impact on their financial bottom line (Partnenon-EY, 2016).

While many smaller institutions are being faced with increasing financial pressures, public institutions on the other hand, are able to compete for students with the help of funding from their state sponsors. This financial “safety net” minimizes the potential impacts brought about by fluctuations in the higher education marketplace. Furthermore, public universities, because of the vast amount of resources and opportunities they can offer, have been able to more successfully recruit international students who pay full-tuition in order to make up for revenue shortfalls in times of dwindling public support. Public institutions are able to provide a more attractive option for these international students because of the academic profile and the amenities they offer. This scenario often affords public institutions a buffer from being compelled to merge for reasons of financial exigency.

Strategic motives to merge. Strategic motives are the other principal motive for institutions merging in U.S. higher education. While the distinction between public and private institution economic motives to merge is more readily apparent, the line distinguishing public and private strategic motives is a bit more blurred. Strategic positioning is a way institutions respond directly to market conditions in an effort to survive. Looking at higher education mergers from a strategic perspective, scholars have identified autonomy and competition, not cooperation, as the factors that influence the forms that institutions take, including the various forms that result from a merger (Eastman & Lang, 2001).

The argument follows that institutions seek out mergers in order to gain a competitive advantage in the educational marketplace. They may include efforts made by institutions to consume more of the educational market share or to provide a broader range of academic offerings that entice students to attend in an increasingly competitive market (Harman & Harman 2008; Martin and Samuels, 1994). Critics of this approach have argued that the strategic pursuits of HEIs, influence in part by national and international rankings, distort university missions by placing a higher emphasis on research over teaching. Leaders may use mergers as a unique opportunity to achieve these goals, but measures of how successful this strategy is have been elusive (Etschmaier, 2010). There may also be different perspectives on the success or failure of these efforts by different stakeholders (Millett, 1976).

Like financial motives for merging, strategic motives can also be divided into two sub-sections. These institutions, operating from a strategic perspective when they initiate a merger, do so in response to a *competitive market response*, with institutional reputation or prestige being a driving factor, or for *mutual growth and diversification* of the institution's academic offerings.

Competitive market response. Many scholars would argue that competition in the U.S.

higher education section is what makes it a global force. Competition is what drives innovation and the U.S. higher education sector has some of the most prestigious and wealthy institutions in the world. Unlike most other nations, the U.S. higher education sector is comprised of a multitude of public colleges and universities, residential liberal arts colleges, and private research universities creating an education marketplace.

Market responses from HEIs increasingly mirror business goals as higher education institutions seek to enhance their competitive advantage. While simply viewing a merger from an economic perspective, a merger reduces the total number of institutions in the marketplace resulting in fewer players in the market. However, in the higher education sector this perspective shifts whereby a merger is a means to create an institution capable of expanding their reach and better competing against other institutions for customers (students) and resources (non-tuition based funding). A merger in higher education is considered “strategic” when its aim is to “enhance [its] competitive advantage” or aspire towards “mutual growth,” enabling the institution to attain a “best in class” or “top” ranking as a world class institution (G. Harman & Harman, 2008).

This strategic perspective, and motivation to merge, is most notable among public institutions that are constantly finding ways to distinguish themselves and enhance their academic reputation and profile. Public institutions, and some large private research institutions, are in a position of financial status and reputation to most often pursue these strategies. Public institutions have begun looking to mergers as a means to accomplish broader growth strategies, to increase their collegiate rankings, seek differentiation, to develop partnerships that would enhance their students’ success, and to close student achievement gaps (Martin & Samels, 2017).

A recent example of a competitive market response merger involved Rutgers University and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. This was a dramatic and complex merger that took effect on June 30, 2013. At the time of the merger, university officials noted that Rutgers was officially absorbing most of the state's medical university, described as a sprawling enterprise that included hospitals, clinics, and institutes, as well as eight professional schools spread across five campuses. This significant and complex merger, causing the annual budget of Rutgers to increase by more than forty percent, brought the state university coveted medical and dental schools as well as a renowned cancer institute. The deal also elevated Rowan University to the status of a research university, a coveted title in the higher education marketplace.

In another example, in July of 2018, the University of Illinois trustees approved a merger between the University of Illinois-Chicago and the private John Marshall Law School with the change expected to take effect in the fall of 2019. The University of Illinois, having a history of acquiring medical, dental and pharmacy schools a century ago, saw the addition of a law school as a necessary step in the competitive market space. Those who supported the decision cited the fact that two-thirds of the public universities designated as top-tier research institutions by the Carnegie Foundation had law schools. The UI-Chicago, the second-largest university in the state, was among the 35 percent that did not. Leaders anticipated this ranking would change with this new acquisition, as it would be the first public law school in Chicago. Chicago is one of a few major cities in the United States without a public law school. This change, promoted by the merger website set up by the two schools (<https://jmls.uic.edu>), cites a natural alignment between the campus' public mission and John Marshall's commitment to provide access to students from underserved communities and fill a "justice gap" for Chicago residents.

Other more recent examples of public mergers that were implemented for strategic purposes and for meeting public education goals have included the merger between Jefferson College of Health Sciences with Radford University's Waldron College of Health and Human Services, the University of Colorado-Denver and University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and The University of Toledo with the Medical University of Ohio.

Mutual growth and diversification. Another way institutions have sought to remain competitive in the higher education marketplace, has been for institutions to seek out mergers or pursue partnership or alliances as a way to enhance their competitive edge and diversity of offerings (Lang, 2003, Martin and Samels, 1994, Millet, 1976). By finding ways to combine resources and expertise, multiple institutions are able to offer new and unique programs they otherwise would not be able to accomplish alone. U.S. higher education continues to face intense competition from within the sector and from new suppliers of educational services. However, what has emerged is this new idea of seeing students as consumers and institutions as providers (Furedi, 2010) and institutions are finding ways to meet those needs. With increasing pressure to serve students and the constituency groups institutions cater to, Lang (2003) argued,

The conventional wisdom is that mergers are undertaken mainly for economic reasons, either to expand markets or to reduce costs.... There is, however, another motive....

Mergers can produce greater diversity of programs and services, both among individual colleges and universities and within systems of postsecondary education. (p. 19)

Most private institutions in U.S. higher education are small and are limited in their resources and are therefore limited in the offerings they can provide to students. This includes anything from a diverse academic offering, campus experiences, and amenities. As a result, these institutions have sought out shared agreements or partnerships that provide the type of

experience students are seeking. Such was the case when the Monterey Institute of International Studies approached Middlebury College about a possible affiliation in 2005. Monterey, which offered master's degrees only in international affairs, had run deficits in two of the previous three years and was enrolling several hundred students under its capacity. The Monterey Institute of International Studies turned to Middlebury College, which was historically known for its strength in language instruction and international studies. After five years, the institute turned into a graduate school of Middlebury College which created the opportunity for new degrees, team-taught classes, and joint research efforts (Partnenon-EY, 2016).

Other times, these partnerships are done for strategic community building efforts and to target underrepresented students. In 2007, the presidents of Bates, Bowdoin, and Colby colleges in Maine partnered together and met with four Native American chief from the Wabanaki tribes to forge a union among the colleges and tribes. Their purpose in doing so was to link both groups by encouraging more Native American youth to consider higher education at the premiere liberal arts colleges in the state.

Other mergers have focused on opportunity and innovation and have overcome traditional barriers in the public private divide to address local and regional workforce needs. In one recent example, an affiliation agreement arose between the College of Idaho (a small private institution on the western side of the state) and Idaho State University (a public doctoral research institution on the east side of the state) in recognition of the complementary strengths, a history of successful partnerships, and a moment of opportunity. The College of Idaho had been seeking new sources of revenue and was well known for its strength in the sciences. Idaho State University was known for its healthcare programs. As a driver of the affiliation agreement, the state of Idaho's Department of Labor had projected a forty percent increase in the need for

physician assistants by the end of 2018. Together, the two saw an opportunity to meet a rising need in the healthcare professions and both were able to expand their offerings to both student bodies (Martin & Samels, 2017).

Affiliations and partnerships are also arising in pursuit of grants or funding for research opportunities individual institutions would be either unqualified for, or unwilling to assume the full burden of the responsibility that comes with accepting these awards. In September 2018, a University of Utah-Brigham Young University partnership was awarded a \$6.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support student scholarships for language study and international education in Latin America and Asia over the next four years. The two schools, traditionally fierce rivals and separated by 45 miles, regularly compete for many of the same students. The University of Utah, a state institution, and Brigham Young University, a private faith based institution with a global presence, each sponsor strong language and international study programs. Recognizing the strength of these programs, and the fact that over 50 percent of the student body at each institution is fluent in a foreign language, a partnership made sense given the fierce competition for U.S. Department of Education funding.

Other motivators mentioned. While financial and strategic motivators are the primary reasons institutions merge, there are other factors that drive these decisions. One of these factors identified in some of the research literature involves the role institutions play in economic development (Newcomb, 2011). Public higher education institutions, as an extension of a state entity, are often tied to the economic impact of a region or part of a state. While private institutions can also have the same impact, they are not held to the same legal or political standard that public institutions are. Their commitment to these communities is more out of moral duty than the economic impact it may have. In fact, the research literature does not

identify any private higher education mergers motivated by economic development obligations. However, this can be a significant motivating factor for many public institutional mergers.

Public institutions are often the economic lifeblood in communities. These institutions traditionally provide some of the highest-paying jobs in the communities elected officials represent. As a result, state and local representatives become key players in mergers and fight to prevent the closure of campuses. The impact of jobs is especially critical in rural settings where a public institution may be the only college operating in a region. These leaders also understand, and data support the fact that, most who graduate from an institution choose to stay in the area, making these entities powerful engines that drive economic development. Several examples in the literature highlight mergers as the motive of economic development including the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, the creation of the University of North Alabama, and the Williamsport-Penn State mergers (Newcomb, 2011). The University System of Georgia cited one of their six guiding principles for consolidation to include the enhancement of regional economic development.

Many mergers between public institutions tend to be highly political events. As Seltzer (2018) described, “Mergers are difficult...authority is disorganized and dispersed, dueling centers of power develop, and everyone feels they should have a say in what happens.” (p. 63) As was mentioned previously, public mergers involve politicians and, in many cases, state coordinating boards. Governance structures can either be centralized (as was the case in Georgia) or diffuse, which can either facilitate or complicate the process of a merger. In the case of Georgia, the Board of Regents oversees the activities of the USG and enjoys a relatively high level of autonomy. It does not require a legislative vote to change the status of a college, institution, or

university. Private institutions, on the other hand usually only have to contend with student, faculty, alumni, presidential, and trustees.

Mergers are also often complicated by instances where special interest groups are powerful, faculty and staff groups may be unionized, and where governing structures may not be centralized. There are also issues of public open records laws and transparency that private institutions don't often need to address. Other motives and factors identified in the literature include historical interactions or prior relationships, fit between purpose and program offerings, whether both are either public or private, and geographical proximity (G. Harman & Harman, 2008)

This review provides a good starting point for developing a general framework for understanding the merger process in higher education, the motives, the participants, the factors, and issues that are involved with these decisions. It also offers a good foundation for understanding how mid-level administrators may experience or respond to a merger, depending on the type of institution of where they are a part. There are clear and distinguishable differences between public and private institutional mergers and understanding these differences will help us to better understand what we learn from the data gathered during in this study. In the remaining part of this chapter I synthesize this knowledge into what is already known about how mergers have been studied and make a case for additional research and inquiry on the topic.

Approaches to studying mergers

Mergers in higher education have traditionally been studied by employing descriptive, experience-based case studies to understand the precursors and outcomes from these decisions (Chambers, 1983, 1987; Millett, 1976; Peters, 1977). They have been examined through a variety of theoretical lenses, including strategic management, economics, finance, organizational theory

and behavior, decision-making, human resource management, and process perspectives (Hawks, 2015; Larsson & Finkelstein, 1999; Weinblatt, 2012). As has already been discussed, the literature has focused primarily on the motives for these decisions which have included increasing demands for education and research, diminishing resources, changing markets, threats to the continuous supply of critical resources, obstacles to organic growth, changing ecological niches, or in some cases, government and political pressure (Chambers, 1981, 1987; Eastman & Lang, 2001; G. Harman & Harman, 2003; Lloyd, Morgan, & Williams, 1993; Patterson, 2000).

Mergers can be classified in the literature based on the types of institutions that combine. These include *horizontal* mergers between schools with similar offerings or are mission-complimentary. Examples have included small, private liberal arts schools merging or professional schools (i.e. law or dental). *Vertical* mergers involve schools that provide different academic offerings or provide different academic credentials. *Single sector* mergers are when two or more institutions of similar classification merge, such as two colleges, while *cross sector* mergers involve schools that are in different classifications and the merger offers students increased academic options (i.e. community colleges merging with a 4-year institution). (K. Harman, 2002).

Mergers have been studied in three different ways, including macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis (Goedegebuure, 1992). Macro-level studies have focused on the phenomena at a system or sector level as the unit of analysis (Goedegebuure, 1992; Goedegebuure & Meek, 1991; G. Harman, 1991; Kyvik, 2002). These studies have explored the system dynamics in the context of policy as a result of a governmental initiative. Most of the studies conducted at this level are concentrated where postsecondary higher education systems are highly centralized (i.e. Europe, Australia, and China). These studies most often provide a comprehensive review and

analysis of structural changes within the system and evaluate outcomes against policy objectives.

Meso-level studies are conducted at the institutional level and focus on the relationships, interactions, and negotiations between key decision makers usually at the president's cabinet level or above and government or board stakeholders. These studies often examine the motivations or objectives behind a merger, bargaining strategies, and institutional outcomes. A majority of the merger research literature is conducted at this level (Chambers, 1987; Hawks, 2015; Mulvey, 1993; Peters, 1977; Rowley, 1997; Weinblatt, 2012). The case study method, which considers the policies and the impact from of policies, is largely used.

Micro-level studies seek to understand the effects of the merger on the very basic units within the institutions and the members of those units. Studies examining the merger process from this perspective are very limited, and largely focus on institutions outside of the United States (Cannon, 1983; H. R. Hay, Fourie, & Hay, 2001). These studies tend to focus on attitudes related to the merger and often identify issues of stress, fear, and distrust among the people impacted. Increasing calls are being made to understand the merger phenomena at this level in greater detail. This dissertation aims to add to this level of research by examining the role mid-level administrators played during the implementation of a merger.

MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS

Mid-level administrators have been variously termed "mid-level administrators" (Rosser, 2000, 2004), "administrative managers" (Whitchurch, 2004), "professional managers" (Whitchurch, 2007), "academic professionals" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), "non-academic staff" (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004), and "managerial professionals" (Rhoades, 1998) in the higher education research literature. They are often coordinators, specialists, assistant or associate

directors, directors, managers, and assistant deans. These positions have become key actors in the production of higher education by contributing significantly to the structure of the academic organization. They have been regarded as loyal, skilled, and enthusiastic about their jobs (Austin, 1985; Scott, 1978).

Mid-level administrators are most often identified by the units in which they coordinate or direct activities within the four traditional service areas of higher education: academic support, business/administrative services, external affairs, and student affairs (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; Rhoades, 2007; Rosser, 2004). Each day they interact with students, faculty members, and the public in a variety of roles and services. While the administrative work units they oversee may vary by institution, typically *Academic Support* includes media and library services, learning skills centers, and cooperative education; *Business/Administrative Services* includes fiscal management, accounting and human resources, operations and maintenance, information technology, and planning and budgeting; *External Affairs* (or institutional advancement) includes public relations, alumni affairs, communication, and fund-raising; *Student Services* includes admissions, registration, financial aid, counseling, advising, and other aspects of student life (Rosser, 2004). These individuals have diverse areas of expertise and fill a growing need for specialization in certain managerial areas, such as business affairs, finance, instructional technology, and legal counsel (Hazel, 2012).

Mid-level administrators are the largest and fastest growing employee group on today's university campuses, accounting for as many as half of all university employees (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011; X. Li & Carroll, 2006). They are often considered to be the "unsung professionals" of the institutions they serve because they are often unrecognized for their contributions to the functioning of the campus (Rosser, 2000). Despite their significant numbers

and the rise of professional credentials within their ranks, they lack visibility throughout the academy and have been of little concern to educational researchers (Rosser, 2000). Although a handful of scholars have written about mid-level university administrators over the years (Bess & Lodahl, 1969; Hazel, 2012; Moore & Twombly, 1990; Rosser, 2000, 2004; Scott, 1978) little scholarship exists to understand the critical roles these professionals currently play in the university. This should concern higher education leaders, researchers, and policy makers given that this formidable group of administrators can significantly affect the tone, manner, and style of the entire institution. Their daily performance levels can determine the quality of relationships with faculty, students, and the public they serve (Scott, 1978). While the roles of mid-level administrators traditionally encompass most of the execution and enforcement of policy, rarely are they involved in policy-making, university governance, and institutional decision-making (Hazel, 2012). In the context of a merger, they are often the constituent group called upon to deliberate, plan, recommend, and at times, execute on how these institutions will come together. Learning about the work of managerial professionals is crucial to furthering our understanding of academic organizations (Rhoades, 2007) and how their roles may influence a merger outcome.

One might argue that the merger studied in this case study is in reality a distinctive effort compared to many of the mergers the literature focuses on between two or more distinct institutions. While this may be true, this thesis focuses on mid-level managers and their experiences during implementation. The argument presented here is that these leaders experience a merger differently regardless of who made the decision to move. At some level, all mergers are centralized and mid-level administrators are going to be told what to do. Understanding their experiences and their role during implementation is a critical component to making sense of mergers, the challenges these institutions encounter in the process, and how they impact the

outcome. Mid-level administrators link the senior level administration (as a part of their role of carrying out policies and procedures) and employees (their role as supervisor to lend support and guidance during a merger) (Vangrov, 2010). This case study enriches our understanding of this important constituent group at the intersection of post-secondary mergers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the previous section I established that mergers are often initiated by the need to respond to external challenges or to alter the status quo of the affected institutions. This includes the redesigning of both formal and informal organizational structures accompanied with the challenge of making the informal and formal boundaries congruent. Despite the level of attention that higher education studies have given institutional mergers, the approaches taken and frameworks employed have largely focused on the formal organizational structure from an evaluative perspective. Examinations of the informal organizational structure, the blending of different norms, values, and belief systems are often overlooked (Sutela & Cai, 2016). These informal internal boundaries are often more challenging to understand and to re-form times of change (Cai & Yang, 2016; Levine, 1980), but are key to understanding how implementation occurs.

Individual actors, such as formal managers and other staff members, play a crucial role in successful mergers. Conflicting values arising from distinct historical traditions and local identities tend to create cultural barriers to merger implementation (Cai, 2006; Pinheiro, Aarrevaara, Berg, Geschwind, & Torjesen, 2016). While institutions, or their sponsoring organizations can influence the behavior of administrators and professionals within these organizations, these same individuals have substantial influence in creating, maintaining, and

disrupting what might transpire during change (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). Even more, these institutions and their employees do not interact in a vacuum, but within a specific context, suggesting that past events are important for understanding the dynamics of the organization (C. Hay & Wincott, 1998; Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014) and the factors that may influence the implementation phase of a merger.

Formal organizational studies of mergers in a higher education context pose challenges for researchers seeking to understand what happens inside the informal organizational “black box” from the implementation perspective (Cai & Yang, 2016). There is a need to leverage frameworks that help researchers understand behaviors and mechanisms that have bearing on a merger’s implementation, and ultimately their outcome, from the individual level of analysis. The primary research approach of this qualitative single case study is inductive inquiry. However, frameworks are important to consider as they help guide my thinking, inform my analysis process, and provide conceptual boundaries for the research study. Rather than utilizing frameworks for this study with the intent to deductively test hypotheses traditionally employed in a positivist approach, the framework I use provides grounding to my approach. Used this way, a framework provides guidance and some flexibility to learn inductively from the field, while facilitating the development of themes, categories, and concepts gathered from interviews, observations, and documents. This allows for a more focused approach to inquiry and interpretation of the data. The Normalization Process Theory may prove useful in shining a light into the informal organizational “black box.”

Normalization Process Theory

In 1998, a group of medical sociologists began empirical research with the aim of understanding how practice is embedded into the everyday work of groups and organizations.

This work led to a focus on three interacting problems. First, they considered how practices are brought into action within organizations (implementation), then how these practices become part of the everyday habit of individuals and groups (embedding). Finally, having embedded new practice, sustainability in the longer term becomes a prominent issue (integration). Together, these processes bring normalization of a process or innovation into organizational practice. However, in its first iteration, the model was limited in scope and did not explain how complex interventions were formed in ways that held together, how actors were enrolled into them, or how they were appraised. Through additional analysis and interpretation of empirical research focusing on the dynamics of these processes, May et al. (2009) filled these gaps and developed Normalization Process Theory (NPT). In the field of Implementation Science, NPT is considered an implementation theory and is utilized to achieve enhanced understanding and explanation of the how, the why, and certain aspects or barriers of implementation. Since the publication of their initial work, the theory has been rapidly adopted as a framework for understanding the relative success or failure of innovation normalization in health and social care contexts.

NPT provides a set of sociological tools to understand and explain the social processes that frame the implementation of material practices, which become routinely embedded in social contexts as the result of people working, individually and collectively, to implement them. Implementation processes are organized expressions of human agency that involve patterns of dynamic and contingent interactions within a specific context over time. To understand the embedding of a practice, researchers must look at what people actually do and how they work. To this end, the work of implementation is operationalized through four generative mechanisms: coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, and reflexive monitoring. These four generative mechanisms are in turn affected by factors that promote or inhibit the routine

embedding, or normalization, of a practice in its social contexts and organizational contexts. The theory proposes that the embedding of a practice is thus dependent on organized and organizing agency, and the production and reproduction of a material practice requires continuous investment by agents in ensembles of action that carry forward in time and space. This continued investment sustains the integration of a practice in its social context and the actors' investments, and the work that flows from these, are themselves affected by the play of power and by changing social context. These processes are dynamic and contingent, activities in all four domains may occur concurrently, and their production and reproduction over time is emergent. Simply stated, they focus our attention down on *how the work gets done*, the everyday business of getting on with the job in hand (May et al., 2009). Figure 5 provides a visual conceptualization of this theory.

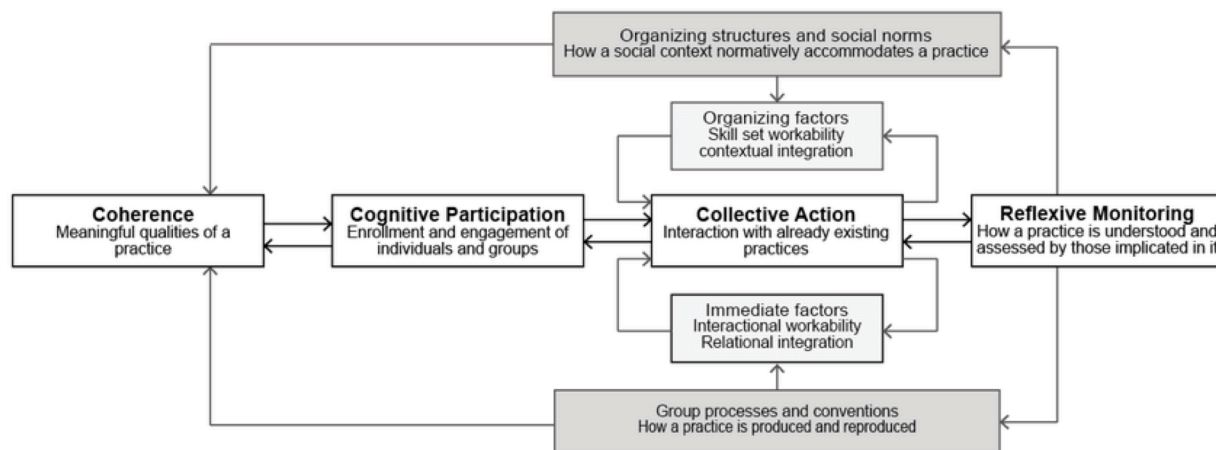


Figure 5. Normalization Process Theory Conceptual Model

Source: Vis et. al. 2019. Original Paper Toward an Objective Assessment of Implementation Processes for Innovations in Health Care: Psychometric Evaluation of the Normalization Measure Development (NoMAD) Questionnaire Among Mental Health Care Professionals. *J Med Internet Res* 2019 (21) 2.

The mechanism of coherence refers to an ensemble of beliefs, behaviors, and acts that manipulate or organize objects and others, and is made possible by a set of ideas about its

meaning, uses, and utility. Coherence then is the sense-making work that people do to individually and collectively when they are faced with the problem of operationalizing a set of practices. These meanings and competencies hold the practice together and make it possible to share and enact it and embedding the work is shaped by factors that promote or inhibit actors' apprehension of a practice as meaningful. The coherence construct is defined by four components. The first is differentiation, which seeks to understand how an innovation or set of practices and their objects are different from current practices. The second is communal specification, or people working together to build a shared understanding of the aims, objectives, and expected benefits of a new set of practices. The third is individual specification, where individuals work to do things that will help them understand their specific tasks and responsibilities around a new set of practices. And the fourth component is internalization, which involves people working to understand the value, benefit, and importance of a new set of practices.

The mechanism of cognitive participation refers to the symbolic and real enrolments and engagements of human actors that position them for the interactional and material work of collective action. In this mechanism the work runs through long interaction chains that can involve highly focused work, or more diffuse patterns of activity. These chains are the relational work that people do to build and sustain a community of practice around a new complex intervention. The cognitive participation construct is defined by four components. The first is initiation and involves work that brings a new initiative forth. A core problem noted here is whether or not key participants are working to drive them forward. The second is enrollment, and involves actors working together and organizing themselves to participate in a new practice. In this component, participants may need to organize or reorganize themselves and others in

order to collectively contribute to the work necessary to bring forth the new initiative. This is complex work that may involve rethinking individual and group relationships between people and things. The third is legitimation, which requires the work of interpreting and 'buying in' to the initiative and that participants believe it is right for them to be involved, and that they can make a valid contribution to the new initiative. And the fourth component is activation, which suggests that once the implementation of a new initiative is underway, participants collectively invest commitment in it.

The mechanism of collective action refers to the work (mental and material) that operationalizes a practice or initiative. This work may be to reshape behaviors or actions, to employ objects or artifacts, or it may be to reorganize relationships and contexts, but it involves collective purposive action aimed at some goal. The collective action construct is defined by four components. Interactional workability refers to the work that people do with each other, with artifacts, and with other elements of a set of practices when they seek to operationalize them in everyday settings. The second is relational integration, which refers to the knowledge work that people do to build accountability and maintain confidence in a set of practices and in each other as they use them. The third component is skill set workability, and refers to the distribution and conduct of work that underpins the division of labor that is built up around a set of practices as they are operationalized in the real world. And finally, contextual integration involves the resource work, or managing a set of practices through the allocation of different kinds of resources and the execution of protocols, policies and procedures.

Reflexive monitoring is the final construct in Normative Process Theory and is the formal and informal appraisal work that people do to assess and understand the ways that a new initiative or set of practices affect them and others around them. The formality and intensity of

this monitoring work reflects the nature of their cognitive participation and collective action. The reflexive monitoring construct is defined by four components. The first, systemization, refers to the methodological formality participants employ to determine how effective and useful the new initiative or practice is for them and for others. The second is communal appraisal and involves regular and organized procedures (formal or informal) to evaluate and assess the worth of the new initiative or practice. The third involves individual appraisal that relies on experiential and unsystematic practices of judging the value and outcomes of a new initiative or practice, and from which stem individual commitments to its conduct and performance. The final component involves reconfiguration whereby the appraisal work produces ideas about the use and utility of a practice, which may lead to attempts to redefine procedures or modify practices being implemented.

THE PRESENT STUDY

As institutions continue to grapple with countless external constraints, including finances, government mandates, accountability measures, and enrollment declines, among other challenges, they are continually faced with decisions on how to manage these concerns. Some have responded by initiating mergers between institutions. Despite the recent rise in mergers in the U.S. higher education sector, very little research has been conducted to understand this phenomenon. Most studies have examined the motives for these decisions and the outcomes of them but very few have sought to understand how the process unfolds within the institutions themselves.

In this study, I explore the role of mid-level administrators assigned to an OWG during a merger between two distinct post-secondary institutions, focusing particularly on understanding

how implementation occurred, the issues that surfaced, and how they were addressed. I leverage Normalization Process Theory to guide my inquiry. Given the rise in U.S. higher education mergers within the past decade, this dissertation aims to contribute to what is understood about mergers to better inform decisions made by state, board, and institutional leaders and stakeholders with the aim of improving merger outcomes. In the next chapter I outline my research approach to address this need.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of higher education mergers and the role of mid-level administrators during implementation. My intent was to better understand how these mid-level administrators navigated the process, addressed the challenges they faced, and how they worked together to complete their charge. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ#1. How did a critical structural change process, the merger of two distinctive postsecondary institutions, unfold among mid-level administrators in the affected institutions?

RQ#2. What substantive issues emerged during the merger between mid-level administrators in the affected institutions, and how were those addressed?

These research questions informed a comprehensive examination of the issues these leaders face during these difficult transitions.

I employed a single case study approach at one merger between Georgia State University (GSU) and Georgia Perimeter College (GPC), two very distinct post-secondary institutions in the USG. This chapter discusses the reasons why a single case study approach is most appropriate to answer the research questions posed. I provide information on the site selection for this study,

how the data were collected and analyzed, limitations of my study, and conclude by addressing trustworthiness concerns.

METHOD

Qualitative studies are exploratory by nature and are especially useful in discovering the meaning people give to events as they experience them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lincoln & Denzin, 2013). A case study is a unique way of observing any natural phenomenon which exists in a set of data, is designed to be “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (S. B. Merriam, 1998, p. 21), and seeks to facilitate understanding of how individuals ascribe meaning to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). From this perspective, my study provides a unique viewpoint of the experiences from mid-level administrators who were asked to serve as a co-chair of an OWG and were tasked with the implementation of a merger between two distinct post-secondary institutions in units where high duplication existed.

This study employed a single case study research design. Several reasons provide justification for this approach. First, a case study helps explain both the process and outcome of a phenomenon through complete observation, reconstruction, and analysis of the case under investigation (Tellis, 1997). This approach provides an in-depth, and accurate detail of an event referred to as a “rich, thick” description (S. B. Merriam, 2009) and focuses on a certain practical problem or situation which creates a scenario appropriate for this approach. Second, case study research is aimed at understanding processes or phenomena in-depth in a bounded system, rather than attempting to predict or show causality (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2013). S. B. Merriam (2009) described the bounded system as the “what” of the study, being a person, place, or things. A

bounded system allows the researcher to have defined limits to the number of people to interview, the documents to incorporate and analyze, and other data that could be collected. When the USG initiated mergers they established the process to be overseen by OWG's comprised of mid-level administrators to serve on these committees. These groups, and the individuals who served in them constitute the bounded system, or single unit of analysis for this dissertation.

Third, a single case study approach creates a space for research on an event that has taken place in a real world setting and where the relevant behaviors being studied cannot be manipulated (Patton, 2005; Yin, 2013). Fourth, a qualitative approach is warranted when the nature of research questions requires exploration (Stake, 2005) as we aim to satiate our desires to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2013). Research questions in a qualitative case study typically begin with "how" or "what," which allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of what is transpiring relative to the topic being studied (Patton, 2005).

SITE SELECTION

The GSU-GPC merger provided the ideal opportunity to employ a qualitative single case study research approach for a variety of reasons. First, the merger was a highly complex, in part due to the differences that existed between the two institutions. GSU was a rising R1 institution while GPC was a struggling two-year open access institution. Second, data on the merger was readily available from public sources, including the names of individuals who served in OWGs. In addition, I had already spoken to several individuals from both institutions through professional associations or networks that were eager to share their experiences. This particular merger was also one of the most recently "completed" mergers in the USG at the time this study

was conducted, and I anticipated that the experiences of participants would still be relatively fresh. While the tactical list of to-do's that frequently accompany a merger can be finalized to the point of completion, the refitting of a merger can be experienced for years it is declared complete. I expected that many of the participants would still very likely be dealing with ongoing and persistent challenges from the change.

GSU and GPC could not have been more different when the merger was announced. Georgia Perimeter College was a two-year, multi-campus, open access institution which had been experiencing surging growth in the years leading up to the announcement. It was also mired in significant financial issues and faced public embarrassment, which ultimately led to the president's dismissal. Georgia State University, on the other hand, was described as "a vibrant twenty-first century university" located in the heart of the city of Atlanta, Georgia and is considered the most comprehensive public institution in the Atlanta area. Recognized as one of the four "R1" research universities in the state, the institution has become increasingly more selective in its admissions requirements. A few years prior to the merger, GSU was recognized nationally for its pioneering work in predictive analytics, which led to increased retention and graduation rates for students.

On January 6, 2015, the USG Board of Regents voted to consolidate the two institutions. They determined that the consolidated university would be called Georgia State University and President Mark Becker, then president of GSU, would lead the newly formed institution. The following month the two presidents appointed members to the Consolidation Implementation Committee (CIC), which included students, faculty, and staff from GSU and GPC. They were charged to spend the next year examining and working through all aspects of the consolidation.

During this same month, work began on developing a new mission statement and representatives were appointed to co-chair the OWGs.

A total of twenty-two thematic groupings of OWGs, representing forty-three OWGs, were formed during the GSU-GPC merger. Many of the OWGs also had sub-committees, which were formed around specific tasks the OWGs were responsible for. In many instances, the OWGs and subcommittee membership was the same. Of the twenty-two thematic groupings, one was dedicated to the overall university structure at the institutional level and three were specific to addressing academic tasks including merging degree programs, non-degree academic responsibilities, and faculty affairs. Those four thematic groups represented seventeen of the forty-three total OWG. The remaining eighteen thematic groups were primarily administrative functional units where high duplication existed between the two institutions. These eighteen groups represented twenty-six of the forty-three OWGs. Table 1 provides additional clarity on the breakout distribution of these groups. Between March 2015 and November 2015, the OWG's began developing their work plans and working on tasks. It was during these months that co-chairs participated in monthly meetings with USG officials, consultants, and the CIC to report on their progress.

Table 1. Operational Working Groups in the GSU-GPC Merger

	Institutional	Academic	Administrative	Total
Thematic Groupings	1	3	18	22
# of OWGs	1	16	26	43
# of Subcommittees	4	3	47	54

DATA

The primary data sources for this study came from interviews, documents, and observations. While the interviews provided the most rich, meaningful, and specific data for this

study, a carefully conducted case study benefits from having multiple sources of evidence, which ensures that the study is as robust as possible (Yin, 2013). Multiple methods of data collection are critical for triangulation of the data and an important method for validating results in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation corroborates evidence obtained from individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection and is crucial to performing a case study reliably (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013).

Interviews

Interviews constitute an important data source for this study because they capture the lived experiences of leaders that experienced the merger (Yin, 2013). The quality of the data that comes from interviews is most crucial, rather than the length of an interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). I used a semi-structured approach to data gathering during interviews. This approach allowed me to ask guiding questions to direct the conversation without being too highly structured or going too in-depth on irrelevant topics (S. B. Merriam, 2009). While each interviewing approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, the researcher must select the approach that is most appropriate for the study and the evidence needed to address the research questions at hand (Yin, 2013).

Non-probability sampling is a commonly used approach in qualitative research, with the most common form being purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher seeks to understand and gain insight and must select a sample from which they can learn the most (S. Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I was very purposeful in my approach to selecting individuals to interview for this study by selecting participants across the eighteen major thematic categories of OWGs, while attempting to capture as many of the twenty-six OWGs where high duplication existed. I selected individuals who served on multiple OWG

committees and subgroups to ensure adequate coverage of all groups and to ensure that the perspectives of each of these OWGs were reflected in my study.

I was also intentional in making sure I had a balanced representation from the two institutions to make sure that the data accurately represented the experiences of mid-level administrators from both institutions during the merger. I was also careful to select individuals who served in various roles, including those who served as a co-chair on a committee and in some cases as a committee member on a separate OWG. Several of the individuals I interviewed filled both roles on various committees. I utilized three strategies to select, identify, and invite people to participate in my research. The first approach I used to identify OWG co-chairs of the merger implementation relied on publicly available documents on the consolidation.gsu.edu webpage. I then reached out to people I had some connection with from professional associations or through other professional networks and invited them to participate. The third approach I took to identify a robust pool of potential interviewees involved snowball sampling, (S. B. Merriam, 2009) a sample selection technique that involves participants already involved in the study referring other potential participants to provide data. As a result of these efforts, nine of the participants were female, while eight were male. Thirteen of the participants held the title of Director, while four were one organizational level higher, at the Assistant Vice President or Assistant Dean level when appointed to serve as a co-chair.

I conducted seventeen interviews for this study ranging from 45 minutes to 95 minutes, representing 15 of the 16 thematic OWG groupings were represented in this study. The average interview length lasted approximately 65 minutes. Legal Affairs Issues was the only thematic OWG grouping I was unsuccessful in securing an interview for my study. Nine interviews were with individuals who had worked at GPC prior to the merger. Eight interviews were with

individuals who had worked at GSU prior to the merger. In addition to their co-chair duties, two interviews were with senior leaders of the institutions, and three of the senior leaders or CIC members either had a dotted line to the president, served on the CIC, or both. Table 2 below reports the number of interviews by merger role and institution. Seven of the seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face with the individual in the location where they worked. Six of the seventeen were conducted utilizing video conferencing technology where I could see the participant and they could see me. The remaining four I conducted via telephone. I did not notice any distinguishable differences in the quality of data I was able to collect from in-person interviews and video conference calls.

Table 2. Interviews by Merger Role and Institution

	Georgia Perimeter College	Georgia State University	Totals
Senior Leader	1	1	2
OWG Co-chair	7	6	13
# who also served as a Committee Member on a separate OWG	3	4	7
CIC member or other	1	1	2
TOTALS	9	8	17

These interviews provided data to the point of saturation (Yin, 2013) where each additional interview added very little new information, and confirmed the data already collected. I reached data saturation at around fifteen interviews. Because these interviews were semi-structured, I had to ensure that I conducted them in line with my study protocol, ensure that any follow-up questions remained unbiased as the interview became conversational, and that I kept the interviewee focused on the evidence relevant to my study (Yin, 2013). My questions largely sought to understand the participants experience during the implementation phase, issues that emerged, and how those issues were addressed. Appendix A outlines the questions and protocol conducted for each interview.

Each of the seventeen interviewees I met with for my study consented to have our interview recorded using a digital audio recorder, or computer software. During the face-to-face interviews I made handwritten notes, highlighted my observations, documented body language, noted key phrases or words, and recorded other observations. I took the same approach with telephone interviews but instead of documenting body language took special care to observe voice intonations or changes in their speech, pauses, or other indicators that were significant. I used WebEx software to conduct and record the videoconference meetings. Recording these interviews allowed me to take minimal notes and focus on the quality of questions asked during the conversation. This approach allowed me to be more focused on the quality of follow-up questions I asked, and because I could go back and re-watch the interview, the quality of those conversations was more enriching.

When I went back to re-watch the interviews I would then take more copious notes of my observations. My notes provided an important reference point for reviewing and coding the transcribed interviews. They provided important context to the behaviors and shared experiences of these mid-level administrators. All of the interview transcripts were transcribed using a third party professionally certified transcription service. The original recordings were sent to the contractor and transcriptions returned to me utilizing a secured, password-protected file sharing service. To ensure further security and anonymity for the interview participants I utilized pseudonyms.

Documents

While interviews may be the most important source of data for this study, they are insufficient in a robust case study. In addition to the interviews discussed earlier, the other source of evidence I used for this study was documents. I was able to locate a variety of documents to

use. The first came from the institutions themselves and the work the OWGs and CIC were requested to perform. When the USG began merging institutions they attempted to be transparent by posting official records on a webpage dedicated specifically to the merger effort. These documents included meeting minutes from CIC sessions and the OWGs. These meeting minutes provided additional detail and also corroborated many of the salient points extracted during interviews. In addition, following several of my interviews, participants voluntarily shared with me some of the documents they had retained from their committee work, which included agendas, minutes, and other personal observations or notes.

The GSU-GPC merger also generated much attention from local, regional, and national media outlets, including publications dedicated specifically to the higher education sector (i.e. The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed). Other sources included newsletters, press releases, and digital media including webpages all authored by the various stakeholders who were party to the merger. These documents ranged in their scope from editorials, opinion pieces, to media reports. These media reports played the important role of providing insight not available through interviews. The most informative of documents involved meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and reports generated by the OWGs. For this study I was able to review more than 500 pages of data.

Observations

Observations allow the researcher to rely not only on what participants say about how they think or behave in a certain way, but also to witness firsthand what is going on. Of the three forms of data collection, this one may seem out of place because this dissertation focuses on an event that had already transpired. However, observations were possible for this study in part due to the institutions' desire to be transparent in the process. When the merger was announced, the

two institutions held a series of town hall meetings and other public sessions for the campus community and OWGs. Three sessions were recorded and are available for public viewing on consolidation.gsu.edu. Each session lasted about an hour and took place at each of the institutions. In addition, there were supplemental video resources posted on the consolidation.gsu.edu webpage to help leaders manage the change. I was able to review approximately 4.5 hours of footage for this study.

ANALYSIS

The data analysis began immediately upon collecting and reviewing documents and as I completed interviews employing a general inductive approach. The inductive approach is a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data where the analysis is guided by specific objectives. The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Inductive approaches are intended to facilitate understanding of meaning in complex data by developing summary themes or categories from the raw data (also called “data reduction”).

As soon as I was able to collect documents and transcribe interview, I began by engaging in a process to prepare the raw data files. This “data cleaning” made sure my files were in a common format for ease of use with necessary backups of the data. This followed with a close reading and review of the text so I could become familiar with the content and gain an understanding of the themes and details in the text. As I was reading, I began creating categories or themes. These were identified by the context of the information the participant was sharing. It also included an analysis of word choice and the tone used to relay the data. This first review

generated sixty-eight themes that I then began to bucket during the second review of the data. Within each theme I would then identify additional subtopics with the data that also contain meaning and would create labels for new categories into which the text segments were assigned. These text segments, or sub categories, were then added to the category or theme where they were most relevant. This second review resulted in fifteen broader themes that were then clustered into the seven general themes documented in chapter four.

General inductive analysis of qualitative data operates with some assumptions. First, is that the analysis is guided by research objectives (deductive) and multiple readings and interpretations of the data collected (inductive). This approach allows the findings to be guided by the objectives of the study as well as the raw data. The objectives that guided this study are the research questions. Second, the primary mode of analysis is the development of themes from the data into a model or framework deemed important by the researcher. Third, the researcher must make decisions about what is and is not important from the data and interpret it accordingly. Fourth, different researchers may produce findings that are not identical. And fifth, trustworthiness is assessed by many techniques including replication, triangulation, comparison with other research, and feedback from consumers of the research.

LIMITATIONS

This single case study is limited to one merger within a public system of higher education. The institutions differed in their primary missions, their academic and program offerings, the size of their student body, their prestige, Carnegie classification, and so many other distinguishing factors. Furthermore, this study does not examine the experiences of those who participated in an OWG and dealt primarily with merging the academic functions of the

institutions including departments, degree programs, faculty and tenure discrepancies, and so forth. This study is also limited by it being conducted with institutions as part of a state system that was involved in a proactive strategy for change. This proactive approach only represents one of many motives institutions or systems may have when pursuing mergers. The significant distinction between these two institutions may not be as applicable or fully represent other institutions undergoing a merger.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness is a key element for qualitative research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and it must contain elements of rigor in a manner that is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner (Creswell, 2014; S. B. Merriam, 2009). For this study, I followed Yin's (2003) relevant criteria for analyzing data and testing in qualitative studies, including internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Internal validity is concerned with how consistent the researcher's findings are with reality. To do this I utilized multiple sources of data and consulted with several participants to review aspects of this case study that are relevant to their roles and their experiences.

External validity recognizes the applicability of findings beyond the study at hand. And while generalizability was not the prominent goal for this study, I provide the reader with a thick, rich description of the case, and allow the reader to determine if the findings of this study are applicable to their situation. To this conclusion, the next chapter provides additional detail of the two institutions that merged as well as numerous direct quotations for the lived experiences of the study's participants.

Finally, reliability deals principally with the question of whether or not the study can be replicated. As time passes, situations change and memories are lost. It is often difficult for researchers examining social phenomena to replicate a study to precision. As a result, reliability in a qualitative study must focus on if the researcher's findings are consistent with the data gathered. To hedge against uncertainty in reliability, I generated detailed documentation including notes, documenting observations, memos, and codes to ensure I maintained close adherence to accepted case study protocol. As a precaution to my work, I asked peers and trusted researchers to review and critique my work.

SUMMARY

Qualitative research can be a rigorous, time-consuming, and laborious process. However, if conducted with sufficient rigor while being based on a defined protocol, case study research can generate detailed descriptions of a contemporary phenomenon. These efforts can lead to new or different theories and allow researchers to explore understudied subjects and shed new light on issues that have previously not been well understood. Utilizing the approaches mentioned in this chapter, qualitative researchers can ensure that their studies are not only accurate, but also make substantial contributions to the body of knowledge on a wide array of topics.

The intent of this chapter was to establish and explicate an approach for this study. It sets forth a rigorous standard that was used to collect and analyze data, summarize those themes, and present them in a fashion that will help the higher education sector better understand how mid-level administrators implement a merger.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter I present the findings of my original qualitative research, which examined the experiences of mid-level administrators tasked with the implementation of the GSU GPC merger in operational and functional areas of the institutions. These were mid-level administrators who were asked to serve in the capacity of a co-chair on an OWG. To help me better understand their experiences, my research questions were 1) How did a critical structural change process, the merger of two distinctive postsecondary institutions, unfold among mid-level administrators in the affected institutions? And 2) what substantive issues emerged during the merger between mid-level administrators in the affected institutions, and how were those addressed?

A qualitative method of inquiry was employed to analyze and theme quotes from interviews, evidence from documents, and observations from town hall and other public forums. From this analysis seven main themes emerged. These data are presented in a manner that the reader might relate to the experience of these individuals and tell the story of the creation of the new Georgia State University. To set the context of the emergent themes, I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the history of higher education mergers in the University System of Georgia and the process steps involved in the GSU GPC merger. A presentation of the themes follows.

BACKGROUND OF THE USG MERGERS

Beginning in October of 2011, then Chancellor Hank Huckaby recommended the University System of Georgia (USG) embark on a proactive path in response to the anticipated challenges of the future. According to Huckaby, there were three priorities driving his and the Board of Regent's decisions to use consolidations to manage and improve higher education in the state of Georgia. These included:

- ***Enhancing performance:*** “We had to do a better job with the resources we had and to manage our institutions more efficiently. We also had to be more effective in the classroom and to graduate more students.”
- ***Strengthening partnerships:*** “The relationship between the technical college system and the university system left a lot to be desired. We were anything but partners. ...we have made major strides in this area that have changed the calculus of that relationship.”
- ***Reinforcing the value of higher education:*** “We had to change the thinking of many in our state who were questioning the relevance of higher education” (Hayes, 2015).

Like most other state higher education systems during the Great Recession, the USG was facing deep budget cuts, enrollments were stagnating, and the future demographic projections were plateauing or declining. In response to these challenges, the system raised tuition and fees. With increasing national attention on student debt and college affordability, Chancellor Huckaby argued that tuition and fee increases would not be sustainable long-term to remedy the problem. He determined that another path would have to be pursued. While discussing the long-term future of the system he proclaimed:

We must ensure that our System has the appropriate number of campuses around the state. We need to be organized in ways that truly foster service to our students in the most effective way and that ensure our faculty are properly deployed and supported. Therefore, I believe it is time for the system to study if campus consolidations are justified and will enhance our ability to serve the people of [the state] at less cost. Our staff will begin right away to assess if any campus consolidations would further our teaching, research and service missions in a more fiscally prudent way.

This “more fiscally prudent way” involved an aggressive plan to begin recommending institutions for merging. The purpose of these mergers was not to reduce the bottom line. Rather, they were pursued to allow the USG to be more efficient, reduce administration, and direct those savings into the academic enterprise. To help guide this aggressive path forward, the Board of Regents (BOR) developed a set of guiding principles that would be used to justify the mergers, each of which was to be weighted equally in its decision-making for institutions under consideration. These included:

1. Increase opportunities to raise education attainment levels.
2. Improve accessibility, regional identity, and compatibility.
3. Avoid duplication of academic programs while optimizing access to instruction.
4. Create significant potential for economies of scale and scope.
5. Enhance regional economic development.
6. Streamline administrative services while maintaining or improving service level and quality. (University System of Georgia, 2011)

In addition to these six guiding principles, the BOR created a set of principles for the implementation of the mergers, which included:

1. Leadership – A clear, unified leadership structure shall be established and maintained.
2. Simplicity – Consolidated institutions will merge functions and merge leadership positions; inefficient and complex reporting relationships will be avoided.
3. Oversight – The Regents’ Special Committee on Consolidation shall oversee consolidation efforts and results.
4. Transparency – Consolidation results will be monitored and presented to interested parties. Lessons learned will be actively shared with all participating institutions.
5. Maximize use of distance education. (University System of Georgia, 2011)

In January 2012, Huckaby recommended to the BOR the first phase, which included eight of the System’s thirty-five colleges and universities. Those proposed included Gainesville State College (Gainesville, GA) and North Georgia College & State University (Dahlonega, GA); Middle Georgia College (Cochran, GA) and Macon State College (Macon, GA); Waycross

College and South Georgia College (Douglas, GA); and Augusta State University and Georgia Health Sciences University (Augusta, GA). The BOR approved the recommended consolidations, and by August of 2012, the four newly merged institutions had new names and new mission statements.

The second phase continued soon after. In November of 2013, the merger between Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University was presented to the BOR and approved to begin in January 2014. This effort was certified as “complete” and the new Kennesaw State University began operating as a fully merged institution when classes began in fall 2015. In January of 2015, phase three began with a proposed merger between Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College. This announcement came as a surprise to many people because of the distinct institutional, cultural, and mission differences that exist between the two institutions. In January 2016, the BOR granted final approval to the creation of the new Georgia State University from the merger between Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College. Classes for the new merged institution began in the fall semester of 2016.

More recently during phase four, campus mergers have been completed or are in process between Albany State University and Darton State College, between Georgia Southern University and Armstrong State University, and between Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and Bainbridge State College. To date, the USG initiative has involved eighteen state sponsored institutions and may consider more once the merger between Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and Bainbridge State College is complete. The USG currently sponsors a total of 28 institutions with designations of state research universities (4), comprehensive universities (4), state universities (10), and four-year state colleges (10).

MERGING GSU AND GPC

Phase three of the USG initiative began in December of 2014 when the USG announced they were recommending to the BOR that Georgia State University (GSU) and Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) be merged. In addition to system wide efforts to be more efficient, reduce administration, and direct those savings into the academic enterprise, another stated major goal of the GSU-GPC merger was to increase student retention and graduation rates. Huckaby noted that a more specific goal of this proposed merger would be to double the existing graduation rate of GPC students over three years, which at the time of the announcement was sitting at six percent, and eventually the goal was to raise it to 20 percent.

At the time of the recommendation, GSU was in a strong position as one of four R1 institutions in the USG along with The University of Georgia, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Augusta University. Originally established in 1913, GSU has been described as “a vibrant twenty-first century university” located in the heart of the city of Atlanta, Georgia. It is the most comprehensive public institution in the Atlanta area, offering more than 250 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, with strong disciplinary-based departments and a variety of interdisciplinary programs offered across eight academic colleges.

In 2014, the year prior to the announced merger, GSU enrollment was approximately 32,000 students with 44% of GSU’s transfers coming from GPC. The institution’s first-year full time student retention rate was above 82%. GSU was one of the first universities to sign on with the Education Advisory Board (EAB) in 2011, and began the use of predictive analytics to track student progress towards graduation beginning in 2012. GSU received wide acclaim for this innovative and pioneering work. The institution had a somewhat symbiotic relationship with the city, offering economic impacts because of its location, but also benefiting by seeing increasing

enrollment as the city began to grow and flourish. The institution operated on a budget in excess of \$738M, had an endowment of \$186M, and boasted a variety of graduate degree programs and more than 250 baccalaureate degree programs in over 100 fields of study.

GPC, originally founded as DeKalb College, was an open access two-year multi-campus institution of the USG, with a curriculum specializing in liberal arts and sciences as well as preparation and certification in the professional fields. GPC had five campus locations in Alpharetta, Clarkston, Covington, Decatur, and Dunwoody. Between 2007 and 2011, enrollment at GPC had more than doubled from an enrollment of about 13,000 students in 2007 to over 27,000 students in 2011. The nation took notice and in 2011, GPC was identified as one of the top two-year colleges. By 2012, GPC's enrollment continued to grow and had nearly approached 30,000 students. During this time the institution was in discussions with Fort Gordon, a United States Army installation, to bring an additional 6,500 new students, which would have raised GPC total enrollment to approximately 33,500 students.

Despite this growth, the institution was quietly facing significant financial challenges beginning in 2011. Audits conducted in 2012 revealed institutional overspending in excess of \$16M and the institution facing a \$25M budget shortfall. Mired in a financial crisis, the school's once "rising star" president (Anthony Tricoli) was forced to resign, nearly nine percent of the staff was laid off (approximately 300 jobs), non-academic centers were closed, and the institution was sanctioned by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. While classrooms (e.g. faculty and instruction) were protected from the cuts, services that benefited students were either reduced or eliminated all together. As a result, the college saw dwindling enrollment numbers. By 2014, the year prior to the merger with GSU, GPC was the largest two-year associate degree-granting institution and the fourth largest unit in the USG, with just over

21,000 students enrolled. The institution transferred almost 3,000 students annually to four-year bachelor's degree programs within the USG, accounting for approximately one-fifth of transfers within the system. Graduation rates at the time were hovering around six percent.

The proposal to merge these two institutions was presented to the BOR in January 2015 for consideration and approval, with a recommendation to call the new institution 'Georgia State University,' and proposed President Mark Becker (who was the president at GSU) as the implementation leader and president of the new 'Georgia State University.' Ms. Shelley Nickel, then Executive Vice Chancellor for strategy and fiscal affairs at the USG, highlighted several opportunities the merger between GSU and GPC presented, while at the same time acknowledged some of the challenges that would present during the change process. These opportunities and challenges are highlighted in Table 3. The proposal was approved which authorized the formation of a Campus Implementation Committee (CIC) comprised of key stakeholders from faculty, staff, student, and administrative ranks. It also authorized the establishment of a formal reporting protocol on progress and key performance indicators.

Following the BOR authorization of the proposed merger, the two institutions began engaging the campus community and stakeholders in the process. This began with a series of town hall meetings, where it was announced broadly that the USG had formalized the appointments of GSU Mark Becker and GPC Interim President Rob Watts as co-chairs of the primary oversight committee. As co-chairs, their responsibilities included:

1. Receiving progress reports, information, and recommendations from the area Coordinators with primary oversight of functional and area specific OWGs.
2. Considering all inter-institutional transfers of personnel prior to the merger.
3. Remaining aware of and tracking conflicts of interest.
4. Reviewing capital projects for alignment with the new institution.

Table 3. Opportunities and Challenges of GSU GPC Merger

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a modern urban university that balances needs for access as well as research and public service • Creates opportunities for raising retention and graduation rates for associate degree seeking students with GSU's proven success in this area • Savings from eliminated duplicate positions and functions can be used to serve students • Further scales a nationally-recognized model for student success and retention for students from all backgrounds • Creates integrated pathways to degree spanning from initial general education to associate degree to bachelor's degree completion • Provides access and flexibility for students across the metro area • Provides opportunities to target high-demand bachelor's degrees to pockets of workforce need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blending of institutional cultures • Achieving efficiencies from seven locations will present operational challenges • Budget issues at GPC need to be addressed

These two leaders were also responsible for selecting and nominating individuals to serve on the CIC, with these recommendations later receiving approval by then Chancellor Huckaby in late January 2015. Following precedent from other USG mergers, the CIC's primary responsibilities in the GSU GPC merger included:

1. Overseeing the consolidation of GSU and GPC in keeping with a timetable that would allow The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) to approve the consolidation in December 2015 and for the BOR approval in January 2016, with full integration at start of FY16 or Fall Semester 2016.
2. Creating a new mission statement for the merged institution
3. Determining campus-wide functional units
4. Selecting and appointing representatives to co-chair OWGs.

The CIC's first meeting was held at the USG System Office on January 30, 2015. As part of the creation of the new Georgia State University, the merger progressed under a very

regimented timeline in order to align with the timeline for reviews established by SACSCOC.

Table 4 provides an overview of the significant benchmarks that transpired in this merger process. As the CIC solidified its responsibilities, OWG co-chairs were selected and appointed to their roles and the merger process began immediately.

Table 4. GSU-GPC Merger Timeline

January 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board of Regents approves consolidation.
February 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Georgia State President Mark Becker and Georgia Perimeter Interim President Rob Watts appoint members to the Consolidation Implementation Committee. Work begins on a new Mission Statement. The two presidents appoint representatives to co-chair the Operational Working Groups.
March 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational Working Groups develop work plans. New Mission Statement approved by the Board of Regents.
March to November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational Working Groups begin work on tasks. Consolidation Implementation Committee meets and approves recommendations. Accreditation Team works on Substantive Change Prospectus, due on September 15, 2015, to the SACSCOC.
December 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidation Plan submitted to the USG. Substantive Change Prospectus reviewed by SACSCOC Board.
January 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidation Plan reviewed by the Board of Regents.
Fall 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are admitted to the new consolidated institution called Georgia State University. Students receive financial aid. Payroll is operational for all.

THE “NEW” GSU

Nearly two years following the announcement of the merger between GSU and GPC, the new GSU admitted its first cohort in the fall of 2016. For the first time, GSU was able to promote itself as a robust, comprehensive, multi-campus institution in the metro Atlanta area. It was also able to boast itself as one of the largest institutions in the United States with more than 51,000 students from more than 170 countries, all 50 states, and from every county in Georgia. It

has since promoted itself as a national leader in graduating students from diverse backgrounds, as a national leader in student success, a variety of student clubs, services, and experiences including study abroad, internships, and athletic offerings. Academically, the new GSU offers over 250 degree programs in more than 100 fields of study, has more than 30 associate degree pathways, and boasts the largest online learning program in the state. There are more than 84 research centers, 72 study abroad programs, and nationally recognized programs in economics, law, and social work. Economically, the institution estimates a \$2.5 billion annual impact on the metro Atlanta area. What follows are the experiences of mid-level administrators who were tasked with making the institution what it is today, and the issues that emerged during the process.

THEMES

In the section that follows, I describe the lived experiences of these mid-level administrators by presenting the emergent themes from this research. The data revealed that GSU-GPC participants experienced three phases of merger implementation. Seven themes also emerged that help answer the research questions posed in this study. During the first phase of implementation, identified as Ideal vs. Reality, participants experienced both optimism and trepidation during the first few months following the announcement to merge. An ideal vision for the implementation process was communicated to these leaders but was complicated by communication issues and the inability to work collaboratively through the process.

The second phase, identified as Cause & Effect, revealed that as the difficult work of implementation began, the process became an exercise in the assertion of authority, which created a hostile and tenuous environment for the participants. And while one might assume that

organizational stratification and positional identity between two distinct institutions could be a contributing factor to the hostilities that emerged, the data did not offer any evidence to support this argument. It did show that other contributing factors had influence on creating this scenario. Consequently, significant staff and cultural issues emerged among participants from both institutions. The third phase, identified as A House Still Divided, emerged following the “completion” announcement. This phase is ongoing and participants remain active in reflection exercises and remediation activities to rectify decisions that were made during the second phase.

In the sections that follow I employ a generous use of quotations from these leaders, because their own language provides the rich description to each theme and also tells their lived experiences. Throughout the narrative that follows I use language that conveys natural generalizations that most accurately reflect the perspectives of these administrators. They should be taken as a whole. When necessary, and to convey an emphasis on a point, I will use words such as all, most or many. I tried to select the quotations that most accurately reflected the perspectives of these leaders and that best represent the emergent themes.

Ideal vs. Reality

The findings as presented in this section cluster three thematic findings from my research. Together, these findings suggest that there was a clear distinction between what leaders believed would be the ideal process for this merger, and the realities of what transpired. To help introduce this section, the first theme presented emphasizes that an “ideal” process for merging was articulated by the USG and institutional leaders, and provides some clarity to RQ1. It reveals that there was an attempt to provide some structure and guidance to the OWGs during implementation work. The second and third emergent themes I introduce fit into the ‘reality’ side of the equation and offer clarity to RQ2. These themes reveal that the change management

strategy was poorly executed, particularly around communication and best practices being integrated from both institutions while forming the new institution.

Theme 1: An Attempt At Change Management (Ideal)

Not long after the formal announcement of the GSU-GPC merger, President Becker, Interim President Watts, and Ms. Nickel met with various stakeholders and communities from each institution to answer questions, assuage concerns, and provide clarity about the decision to merge. They each advanced the idea that the merger between GSU and GPC was a step in the right direction for the state system, the institutions, the students, and campus stakeholders. At the conclusion of the first town hall held at GSU, each leader offered a closing statement about the significance of this merger, attempting to offer an optimistic vision of the change and pitching it as a “special” opportunity. President Watts stated:

Very few of us get a chance in the course of our careers in higher education or in the university system to work on something new. We inherit a program, a department, an institution, and make changes around the margins and edges to try and improve it and then hand it on to the next generation. But as Shelly (Nickel) and Mark (Becker) have said, this is a chance to reimagine something new that the System doesn't have right now. To create a research university that also has an access mission. We get the wonderful opportunity to be on the ground floor of that. To shape that and not have it handed to us. The people in this room have an opportunity to shape what that looks like and that's a rare, rare opportunity in higher education. Things mostly run on inertial forces. This is not going to be run on inertial forces. This is going to be run on creative decisions made by some of the very people in this room about what this will look like and how this will function better for students. This is a great opportunity for us all.

Ms. Nickel, echoing what Interim President Watts stated, while acknowledging the challenges that will come with a massive effort like this merger. She counseled the participants:

Have fun with this. This is a lot of work. It is a great opportunity for you to really be part of a solution, to be part of something new. Take advantage of it! Don't sit on the sidelines and jump in.

Closing out the meeting, President Becker reinforced these messages, offering:

This is something new, but it's not as if it hasn't been done in some way, shape, or form. Take Penn State. Premiere research AAU institution has had this kind of model for decades and decades. Shelly (Nickel) and I were both there. We've seen it work and work very well. It's been a very successful model. But the trick is we get to do this in the 21st century without having to adapt to what was done in the 20th century. So this is an opportunity as both my colleagues have said, we get to create the future! And that is a pretty special opportunity to have in one's lifetime in creating the future. We do it in who we educate. We do it in our scholarship. And now we also get to do it in creating the future of an institution that will have north of 50,000 students... You've got a special opportunity. I hope that you will all seize that opportunity and be part of creating the future.

This same message was reinforced with OWG co-chairs at each of the institutions during orientation meetings outlining OWG responsibilities in the merger. During the first meeting, hosted at GPC, Interim President Watts emphasized the importance of their roles and reminded them of how they should approach the challenges they would encounter in the process. Recounting what President Becker had messaged during several campus visits and during the introductory phase of the merger, he said:

President Becker has made several campus visits to Perimeter... and one thing he said at each visit is there is only one unacceptable answer in this whole consolidation process by either GSU or GPS and that answer is 'Well, this is the way we've always done it!'. That's the only unacceptable answer. This is a chance to think about doing things differently. Not just the way GSU has done things, not just the way GPC has done things. Think about doing things differently. And if we do not take the opportunity to do this, we will have failed both of our institutions, and our students.

Very few people get this chance to think about doing things differently. Think about best practices. Think about what the standard is nationally in higher education. Think about what would work better, not just what we are doing now at either institution, but what would work better. This is our chance. If we do things right, this is a generational impact, and we have that chance.

To celebrate this change, and to encourage the campus communities to rally behind the chance, efforts were made to celebrate the decision and to generate positive momentum from the very beginning. Participant 3 from GSU highlighted one of these efforts to celebrate the change.

She stated:

I think the one thing that we did do, which I think was a good PR move and hopefully it was a good kind of welcome move, is we went to each campus really quickly, like within a day or two after the vote came on, and had a big celebration. We brought the marching band and we had cupcakes, gave out t-shirts that were Georgia State t-shirts to everybody, trying to welcome everybody to feel a part – like we're glad you're here kind of thing. And I think that was worth it for us. It was an expense and it was a lot to get the president and everybody around to all the places, but I definitely think it was a good thing to do.

The leaders shared that they were all very aware of the messages that were conveyed from the beginning from both the USG and the institutional leaders tasked with the implementing the merger. They reiterated that the message to bring the best from both institutions was welcomed and received well, and they also commented that despite the anxiety that was felt from this significant change, there was a feeling of energy from these meetings. Participant 1 from GPC commented:

The original kickoff was this great presentation, which was very much a conversation about how, you know, both institutions are great, strong and we're going to create a brand new strong, even better institution. That was the marketing part and that was great. And we were all on board, you know, we were – we've always been very focused on customer service, on continuous improvement, so they were speaking our language. We were ready.

Despite some concern and uncertainty with how the process would unfold, they felt that there was authenticity in the messages being shared and that leadership was behind the process being equitable and inclusive, despite the differences that existed between the two institutions.

To support this massive change effort, the institutions dedicated resources to help facilitate the process as it moved forward. Participants identified two significant investments. The first were communication channels and platforms that would funnel information to the campus communities. The second included change specific resources to help these leaders and

their teams proactively understand, manage, and deal with the fallout from the change. In the first town hall meeting hosted at GSU, the senior leadership panel of President Becker, Interim President Watts, and Ms. Nickel was asked about the importance of communication during the change process, and what plans would be made to communicate with the campus stakeholder groups as the merger unfolded. Ms. Nickel affirmed the importance of communication in the merger process and responded:

One of the lessons learned from the previous consolidations is, number one, leadership matters. The leaders you have here today on this stage are very important but all of you are leaders as well. The way you behave and talk about consolidation makes a difference to the people around you. But the second lesson that we have learned is communication is so very important. *You cannot over communicate how this is unfolding and how decisions are being made.* I think the presidents have already established a common website for information to be disseminated. This town hall is a good example of starting off on the right foot by giving people the opportunity to ask questions and get answers. So, communication really is one of the most important things to a successful consolidation.

The institutional level leaders were very intentional about hosting in-person sessions with the various campus constituents at each of the locations, which gave OWG co-chairs and other campus stakeholders opportunities to ask questions and seek clarity on the decision to merge. But, recognizing that the impact from these messages get lost as time passes, the institutions created a website (consolidation.gsu.edu) that would serve as a medium and repository of information during the merger. Participant 3 from GSU commented:

There was a website set up for the consolidation, press releases, and a lot of internal communications. There were public forums, town hall meetings at all the campuses. The website was up and running immediately and new materials were posted on there regularly. I think the content and having people know where they could go to get the information was really well coordinated and Perimeter had the same. People had channels to ask questions and submit things. I think people felt like they were heard. You know, sometimes you feel like those things go into a black hole probably. But we did give people a lot of opportunities. I think that was important.

Visitors to the consolidation.gsu.edu website could find a variety of information regarding the merger including a full overview of the process, the timeline, the substantive change prospectus submitted to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), approved recommendations, committee structures, committee responsibilities, operational working group rosters, recommendations, resources, FAQ's and news or updates about the merger. In an effort to provide access to those who were unable to attend open town hall sessions, recordings of the events were also made public.

Email and other software technology emerged as the other main communication venue for OWG co-chairs and other campus stakeholders. It was also the preferred method for these leaders to collaborate, work together, and distribute information. Reflecting what many participants identified as a viable communication option, participant 12 from GPC stated:

We distributed a lot of email to people to let them know what was going on. We did this because in the absence of information they start making things up and the old rumor channel begins and then people start making stuff up and people start panicking. So you've got to keep those lines of communication open, you've got to keep pumping information. Even if it's the same information, as long as they know it's coming down and they hear it from you, it just calms them a little bit so they don't start doing stupid things and they keep focused on the mission instead of other things or making up gossip or rumors.

Participant 8 from GSU, echoed these comments and shared:

We were very purposeful on distributing information via e-mail and via the website, via the forums that they held and things of that nature. From a big picture, we tried to make everybody aware of what was going on, verbally, written, however else we could.

In addition to a commitment to communication, the institutions were also intentional in trying to establish online and in-person transition assistance. On the consolidation.gsu.edu website an entire resources section was dedicated to helping these co-chairs manage and adjust to the changes that they experienced. For example, a listing of change and transition workshops

emphasized topics around leading change, transition management, engaging disengaged employees, thriving during the transition, and managing stress. There was even a workshop session on the popular *Who Moved My Cheese* book, which was aimed at helping the campus stakeholders adjust to and cope positively with the change. Furthermore, change management professionals recorded and posted micro-learning videos on these topics, and the campus community members could access additional online learning courses at their discretion without cost via popular online learning platforms like Lynda.com. Participant 14, a GPC leader closely connected to this effort commented:

The institutions did try to prepare people for the change because we knew there were going to be duplicate positions. One was going to be the higher level and one was going to be the subordinate if the GSU leader decided to take on an assistant, but that wasn't a guarantee. For example we developed training and we developed a video, which is still on the GSU website under the consolidation information. We tried to put some – do some change management just to help people get ready for the consolidation and prepare mentally for it.

Recognizing that online resources would not be sufficient for everyone, a transition resource center was established to provide support and assistance to employees that were most heavily impacted by this decision, including some OWG co-chairs. While the numbers impacted by the merger were relatively low, the institutions still felt an obligation to these employees. Participant 2, from GSU provided clarity on this service:

In the Georgia state government, you cannot pay any severance package. That's a state rule. So instead of a severance package, we provided 90 days of work so that the employees could get paid and we had a transition center. So we developed a program for participants that could come to the center three to four days a week. We offered counseling, employee assistance, employee relations, benefits, people from the Georgia Department of Labor, and for unemployment benefits and what benefits were available for them. We had people come from the Small Business Development Center to talk about starting a business. We had resume writing, interviewing, and mock interviews. We had a rich curriculum. We did computer training and we looked at their LinkedIn profiles. We provided probably more direct services than an outplacement center. And for more upper level management positions we had an executive recruiter coming to help them. The

change management effort that was attempted was important, because one of the things in going through this type of transition is you want to make the employees feel like someone is caring for them.

As was mentioned previously in this study, the GSU-GPC merger was the third phase in a multi-phase consolidation process for the USG. The GSU-GPC merger was at an advantage in their process because they had the opportunity to learn from those other institutions. Participants interviewed for this study shared that they had a very clear understanding there was an expectation these leaders would reach out and engage their counterparts at those other institutions. Perhaps because of the proximity of the institution, the Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic merger was the most frequently cited by participants. There were also some notable similarities between these two mergers and President Becker encouraged that GSU and GPC co-chairs look to them. Participant 11 from GPC noted:

President Becker pushed hard for us to learn from the feedback from the Kennesaw State consolidation. I was able to listen to Kennesaw State's president at the time talking about how they could have done things better and how on the back end they tried to make sure that people were consistently involved on both sides and making decisions together. But they kind of found that towards the end of their process. President Becker and the USG wanted that to not be the case for our consolidation.

Participant 3 from GSU added:

We were getting feedback from other universities who had gone through a Board of Regents consolidation, so we were looking at the ways they had done it. They provided us with task lists of what this committee's task will be, for this section, and then we discussed what the different tasks were. We reviewed other institutions task lists but we could choose to put them onto our task or not. I believe it was more like 'here are reference materials from the other consolidations', and Kennesaw having just happened was a big one that we were looking at. From then, it was a discussion of how are we going to make all this happen and then working forward.

Participant 4 from GSU provided additional insight into how that process was adopted at the OWG level, stating:

We went through the process of getting to know each other and then it was in very short order that we started putting together these operational working groups to decide, you know, and I think it was based on a template of working groups that had occurred at other universities, Kennesaw being the most recent one. So yeah, we adopted those and for the most part, followed suit with the ideas of where things fell and what should be grouped together to talk about identifying that a few of those things didn't align as well as with what our two institutions did and how they've come together. But the framework worked well enough. What we received from my recollection was certainly adequate to get you going down the right path and starting the right conversations.

The final change management strategy that emerged bubbled up organically from the participants of this study and that involved recognizing the importance of building a relationship between co-chairs, and the functional units that were going to merge. While my research did not uncover in any formal directive or guidance from USG or institutional leaders about building relationships across institutions, the co-chairs recognized this would be crucial and initiated those efforts as the merger proceeded. Participant 4 from GSU shared:

I personally took the time to go to the other campuses and intentionally host meetings on a variety of campuses to try and make everyone feel like their home was an important home for all of us. So when we had the day where we announced the overall org charts, we did that on multiple campuses so that people could go and feel good that, you know, this wasn't just downtown telling all of you how it's going to be, this is all of us working together.

Participant 6 from GPC shared in this effort and commented:

The things that I tried to do for my area, the people that reported to me at that time, I had a change management retreat because I thought it was very important. And again, every manager didn't do this. Some managers did, some managers didn't. I thought it was going to be important for me to help my leadership team understand the dynamics of what may transpire, what may be coming to us, and for them to make decisions in their best interest to try to minimize the conflict. And I had started working on that at the very beginning of the announcement of the consolidation, having meetings with them monthly and then finally it culminated in a retreat.

For some OWG co-chairs this effort came more natural to them either because of professional association connections, or there was a personal relationship that had been established between

the two prior to the merger announcement. For example, Participant 12 from GPC noted:

We met or at least talked quite a bit. We were part of the same professional groups and so forth. So we already kind of knew each other from prior interactions. And so we had a great working relationship. So we openly communicated with each other.

As anticipated, a lot of disagreement and uncertainty surrounded the GSU GPC merger when it was first announced. However, the efforts made to inform the campus stakeholders and get OWG co-chairs off on the right foot appeared, at least in the beginning, to have a notable and positive impact on them. There was a general sense that despite the arguments that could be made about why the merger would be a bad idea, these leaders initially rallied behind the decision. And for a short time, they felt hope that things would proceed as envisioned. We learn in the next section, that not long after the process began, reality set in and things didn't unfold as planned and as a result, some significant issues emerged.

Theme 2: Communication Breaks Down (Reality)

Despite the efforts made by the BOR, the presidents, and the CIC, the most notable substantive issue to emerge for these mid-level administrators was the communication breakdown as the merger process began unfolding. Every participant in this study, regardless of previous institutional affiliation, acknowledged that communication was a significant issue throughout the merger. Generally, they conceded that more could have been done at both the institutional and USG levels to enable the dissemination of information across each campus.

Participant 2 from GSU, affirmed:

One of the things that didn't happen as effectively that could have happened was the communication. People like myself and others, we had to keep pushing to make sure there was more communication to the people. I think the communication area was not well executed. People have to know something, we've got to encourage the people. So the communication aspect was not as it

could have been implemented from the beginning. It could have been better. It got better toward the end, but the number one reason why changes fail is because of people feeling in the dark about things. I think going through this change, the whole ‘how we communicate with them’ or ‘what’s going to happen’ was poorly executed.

Participant 3, also from GSU supported this notion stating:

I don’t think the university did necessarily a good job of communicating. I think there could have been a better job done keeping people informed when you have so much concern. I think that’s the hardest thing. And I’m not sure how you do it well, but I think that should basically always be top of mind and be the first priority, to make sure that the people involved are treated very well and know what is happening.

One notable comment was alarming to me as the researcher, given that both institutions were publically funded state institutions. It uncovered this notion of transparency in this process.

Participant 1 from GPC, who held a more prominent position at the former institution, lamented:

There was very little that came to the executive team at GPC, which was surprising. I would have thought that the executive team would have heard more about some of the details about the projects of the consolidation, the details about where we were, what the status is, what things had been decided. When we asked about things, we would be referred to the consolidation webpage that was on the Georgia State website. We would be told all the information is there that is shareable and there was not very much information that was shareable. Some of the minutes were very nebulous. So we would look. But it just surprised me that I was not a little bit more aware of some of the ins and outs of the details.

Participants from the former GPC, frequently commented about being ‘left in the dark’ about what was happening. Several shared stories about arriving to a monthly CIC meeting only to have their GSU counterpart forward suggestions to the panel for recommendation that had never been discussed or mentioned in previous OWG meetings. Surprised by these comments, I dug deeper to understand what the participant meant by ‘nebulous.’ In comparison to public records from other USG campus consolidations, the meeting notes, agendas, and approved recommendation documents made available to the public contained very little or no information that would offer insight about “the ins and outs of the details.” The information available in these

documents contained only short anecdotal recommendations that were advanced for further consideration and approval. There appeared to be a breakdown of communication within OWGs and across the board where implementation happened in isolation and without general agreement among parties.

Perhaps it was this sentiment that communication was poor and information was withheld that was cause for the most notable of the concerns raised. Co-chairs felt that smoke and mirrors were put up from the very beginning about the ideal merger process, how it should unfold, and what the leaders really wanted to see happen. These participants emphasized the articulated desire from both the USG and institutional leaders to make a brand new institution that incorporated the best from both. This opportunity excited them. They felt a sense of privilege that they were asked to serve on these committees in their role. However, having the hindsight to see what really transpired during the merger, they noted the distinction between what was communicated and what actually happened. Participant 6 from GPC commented:

I think something that probably would have aided the process, helped people be more comfortable and on board with the process is if they had just been very candid and up front at the beginning. You know, if you tell people what you're really going to do, and I know that for political reasons and just really just trying to minimize any possible public outcry or even outcry from students and faculty and staff, I think sometimes people kind of paint the picture that they think people want to see. But I think that if they just would have said, at this point, 'Georgia State's going to take over Georgia Perimeter College.' Not get in front of people and say things like we're going to take the best of both institutions, which maybe that's what you thought you wanted to do. I think if you had told people Georgia State's going to absorb Georgia Perimeter and you're going to be the two-year college at this institution, instead of trying to make people believe that you were going to really try and figure out how to consolidate these two totally different institutions, I think that that might have made the process go a little easier.

Participant 7 from GPC echoed these concerns:

My chief issue was the lack of communication. And not that we had to know everything that was going on or what the thinking was. But just the fact that there was absolutely no communication. I think they could have easily said we are

working on whatever and we will, actually, I think they did say, you will know something by this date. I think they did say something like that but then they didn't make that date. And there was no explanation why they didn't make that date, what date they were going to move it to. But that was really what I thought was terrible.

I was surprised by the vacuum that we operated under. So much so that when the other consolidations were announced and if someone came and talked to me from one of those institutions and asked me what was my experience, I would say my advice to them was find another job right now. It definitely left a very bad taste in my mouth.

Participant 11, also from GPC echoed what participant 6 shared, stating:

I believe being more up front about the consolidation at the time would have been helpful for people. When you hold information, it's just the wrong approach. It's really important to get that information out in a consistent manner and across the board if possible.

I was curious to better understand why participants felt that communication was lacking when a robust website had been created to inform the campus community. I asked whom they felt was responsible for communicating progress on the merger and who was responsible for the distribution of information. The common response I received was that the president (Becker) had primary oversight for communicating. Participant 11 from GPC said:

I personally believe the Georgia State University president knew earlier on that this was going to happen because it was obvious in our CIC meetings that that president was in charge. We already knew we had an interim president. I believe he had more time to prepare. But it would've been nice on the institutional level that we get the information as soon as possible and people weren't kept holding, waiting for so long to get information. But just letting people know so that you can cut down on some of the fear. The uncertainty might still be there but at least people can kind of prepare their minds for what's going to happen. So I think that that would have been nice.

Participant 2 from GSU agreed with this notion of the president being the primary voice for the change process, claiming:

Communication has to come from the president's office. The message has to come from him and the push for people to feel that they're engaged in the process. The messages should come out through the communications office, which

receives information from the working groups. So as things got filtered up through them and their process, those updates should have come from the president.

Participant 1, from GPC, agreed sharing:

I think communications should have been ongoing from the very beginning. It was fairly clear that Dr. Becker was going to be the president and it didn't come from Dr. Becker. So anything from Dr. Becker, 'this is where we are, this is the progress we've made, this is very exciting, these are the things that they're sort of discussing' so that people felt a part of the process, I think it would have helped a bit more.

Despite the creation of a web page, I asked the OWG co-chairs if they felt any sense of ownership to communicate their progress to their constituents. These participants pushed back and affirmed that their role did not include a directive to engage in communication related activities. Rather, they surmised that it was the role of the president, university communications, and the CIC to keep the campus informed of what was going on in the merger. Participant 1, from GPC, commented:

OWGs weren't given the charge of communicating what they were doing. I think it was more 'okay, you've got this piece, what are we going to do with it?' The [OWGs] were segmented into small, little subgroups, just to tackle one small piece to make decisions about. They didn't have a communication team or strategy for communication that I'm aware. I know they didn't have a team. I just don't think they had a strategy for communication. If they did, they did not utilize it.

Not only were there concerns about who was responsible for communicating merger progress, participants also felt there was never a clear communication strategy behind the merger itself or how progress would be shared. Participant 2 from GSU, who played a more prominent role in the merger and participated in several capacities throughout the change, offered this perspective saying:

The breakdown is this, what is the most effective way to communicate with people? Are people going to tag the website and go out and see if there are updates, or are we going to have a general newsletter? And then there's another

issue, how you communicate with people at the multiple campuses? Perimeter has one way and Georgia State had one way, and everybody didn't have the same email addresses during the transition. Everybody didn't have a Georgia State email address. So how do you send out that through your newsletters or do you create a special newsletter that says there's some updated information on the consolidation, go to the website? Perhaps some of those campus wide blasts – not too many – but you know, maybe quarterly or if necessarily, a monthly update on what's going on. See, that then allows people, gives them the option to go to the website to see it. We just never figured this out.

The lack of a communication strategy and plan how to scale information across the multiple campus locations created a notable level of uncertainty, and raised significant concerns among the co-chairs and those they led. When asked, they shared what concerned them the most was how the lack of a communication strategy impacted their people. Participant 9 from GPC shared, “The sharing of information in a nutshell could have been much better. It was a drip, drip approach, and it left a lot of folks in the dark.” Participant 10 from GPC echoed these concerns:

We didn't even know for quite some time who we'd be reporting to, what our titles would be. We actually learned our titles after the email conversion and saw some of our titles listed on the active directory in the email. There was never an organizational chart shared. There was very little done to share information and it seemed like a very secret thing as to what happened.

Participant 7 from GPC also shared these concerns. He recounted:

The hard part was just kind of a vacuum as to what's going to happen next, when it's going to happen, what jobs are people going to have. And that went on for quite a while even after I left Perimeter College seven months into the process.

The impact on individuals and their employment wasn't the only concern expressed by the participants. As the work of the co-chairs and their committees began, they shared they were never fully clear about what they were trying to achieve, what the desired outcomes were to be from the merger, and they weren't always sure about what they were to achieve in their role outside of completing a task list. Participant 4 from GSU commented:

If the university system had a vision for this merger, say a vision of saving money, or a vision of improving student performance, or a vision of increasing

enrollment, that wasn't clearly articulated upfront. There are sentiments now in the wind that the BOR might be disappointed with the amount saved through mergers. But certainly no clear indicators were ever put out there for us. I think just articulating those goals clearly would have been helpful. We've all been trying to be good stewards through this entire process.

While the merger began with the best of intentions in regards to communication, the initial efforts to push information out very quickly fizzled out. Because these OWGs operated in isolation from one another, they relied on a centralized source of information to keep abreast of the broader institutional changes that were happening. Unfortunately, the centralized medium established contained little if any useful information for participants. An organized strategy to feed progress updates to these co-chairs was never realized and was likely a contributing factor to transparency concerns, confusion, and may have paved the way for the issues that are addressed in the next segments of this chapter.

Theme 3: The Best of Both Not Considered (Reality)

Not long after the merger was announced and the town hall meetings concluded, orientation sessions were held for OWG co-chairs at each of the institutions. During these meetings, conducted by Dr. Peter Lyons who had been appointed by President Becker to be the point person for GSU in throughout the merger, OWG co-chairs were welcomed to their role and introduced to various stakeholders from the USG, CIC, and a consultant from KSU. This consultant was a faculty member at KSU and had played a leading role in many of the previous USG mergers. The leaders were introduced to the merger timeline, the expectations of their roles, and the tasks they would be asked to perform.

Dr. Lyons went on to counsel that despite the importance of the OWG co-chair role, specific decisions about the merger had already been made at the USG level and by President

Becker and Interim President Watts, making it clear that they would not have any say in these decisions. He shared:

There are some decisions that have already been reached. Some decisions like the new institutions will be called Georgia State University. The university president will be President Mark Becker. And there are other decisions that the Consolidation Implementation Committee (CIC) already have discussed and have worked upon around the mission statement. There are some decisions that President Becker has reached, which are not yet carved in stone, but are very clearly the direction that we are heading. This establishes some of the direction each of the committees will engage in, draws the size and shape of the container for the work each of the committees will do, and the decisions that will need to be made.

These leaders were then introduced to the organizational structure of the new institution, which showed that the existing GPC structure would be placed as a unit within the existing GSU structure as “a new college to be,” but it did not include all of the individual GPC units. It also demarcated organizational reporting lines. GSU deans would continue to report to the Provost at GSU while VP’s of critical functions (e.g. finance and administration, media relations, advancement, athletics) would report directly to President Becker under the new organizational structure. Under this same “new” organizational structure, the “new college to be” would be led by a Vice Provost to be appointed, with a direct reporting line to the GSU Provost. All unit leaders in the “new college to be” would report to the Vice Provost. He also clarified that administrative departments and support systems would span all colleges, and these units would service the entire organization “unless there is a compelling reason not to” without elaborating further. Figure 6 illustrates the organizational structure shared to OWG co-chairs during these sessions.

As the meeting progressed, the OWG leaders were provided guidance selecting committee members to serve on their OWG, oriented on the tools and resources that would guide their work, including spreadsheets, webpages, task items, deadlines, and the individuals who

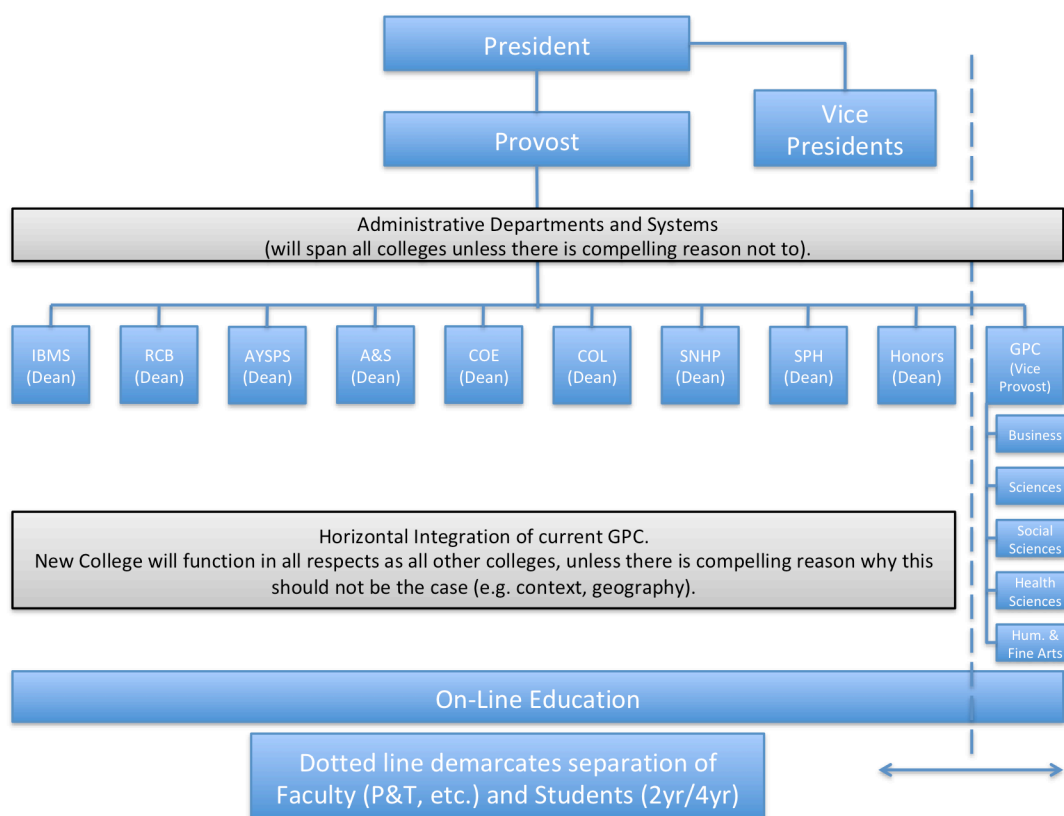


Figure 6. The New GSU Organizational Structure

Source: Figure reproduced from image shown during Working Groups/Committees meeting held Feb. 26, 2015 at Georgia Perimeter College

would support their work. They were also instructed on the limitations and parameters of their decisions, what they could and could not recommend to the CIC, and how their recommendations would be processed. In this same meeting, the USG consultant clarified to the OWG co-chairs what those parameters involved. She instructed:

If we receive recommendations from the groups that have anything to do with personnel, space, money, or structure, those will be remanded because those rest outside the purview of the committees.

The committees were then instructed on the workflow that each assigned task would go through for approval, including review to a Functional Advisory Committee (FAC), which would serve as a gatekeeper for recommendations, and then to the CIC for review and approval. More will be

said about the FACs below. The co-chairs were then encouraged to go forth and begin their work.

These parameters placed some notable restrictions on what the OWG thought they would have influence over in their role when they were initially asked to serve. Participant 6 from GPC lamented:

One of the things that they made a point of letting us know that the things that we did not need to discuss in our meeting were personnel, facilities, and finances. Those were things that we were told not to cover as we developed recommendations on how best to consolidate the respective areas that we were responsible for in our working group. So once we participated in that, it kind of gave us, you know, some idea of what we needed to focus our energy on in our meetings.

Participant 11, also from GPC echoed this comment, adding that these limitations would have a noticeable impact on how they operated in their function:

The thing that really impacted us was we weren't allowed to make decisions on things related to facilities, personnel, or budgets. There were concerns about budgets, what would happen to budgets, and who would make decisions about the budgets that we had. We were even told if we did make recommendations on these items they would not even be sent to the CIC for consideration but back to the group. We were concerned about these things and how they'd impact our ability to function the way we had or to keep existing programs or resources or services available for students.

Providing additional clarity, participant 7 from GPC offered:

We weren't allowed to talk about what the structure would look like. But we did talk about documenting what would need to be done immediately before the two institutions consolidated their financial system. And it was things like 'I came up with a schedule', I believe, and showed examples of the types of things that we'd need to include.

Seeking to better understand how the process worked I sought to understand more about the FACs, including what their role involved and who they were. While my research uncovered very little about their activities, I discovered that the FACs had primary oversight for a cluster of OWG with similar functions, or which fell under a specific functional or operational unit of the

institutions. The leaders of these FACs were appointed by President Becker and controlled the agenda of what was recommended to the CIC for approval. Most notable in my findings was that of the 26 OWG included in this study, a senior administrator employed by GSU prior to the merger announcement oversaw 23 of these committees. I was unable to identify the FAC leader for the remaining three OWG's. Table 5 provides additional clarity to the functional areas, the OWG name, the FAC senior administrator and their home institution prior to the merger.

Despite the message communicated to these OWG leaders encouraging them to find new approaches to how their units would operate, and to implement the best from both institutions, the decisions made at the USG and President level communicated a different message to OWG leaders. It appears from responses offered by the participants that the new organizational structure demoting GPC's position as an institution within GSU, most all leaders appointed to the FAC's being from GSU, and the established OWG recommendation approval process having to go through these individuals, set a precedent for how the process would unfold within the OWG's. Participant 1 from GPC shared:

It was being sold that we were going to take our time to look for the best of both worlds. What does Georgia State have to bring to the table? What are the strengths of Georgia Perimeter? And we're going to create this brand new institution. However, it became very clear soon after it started that that really was not the intent, or maybe it was the intent, but it did not seem to really be the truth.

From this perspective of GPC participants, the 'truth' was their co-chairs from GSU felt an obligation to lead out in the process, and in their mind, they had a model to follow that validated their approach. Participant 8 from GSU stated:

We had to make some decisions about whose policies we were going to go with. Are we going to update? Are we going to modify those policies? Georgia State was the lead in this because I think it came down to the fact that Georgia State's president was going to be, you know, the president over the consolidated institution, and so Georgia State was the lead as far as working through our group tasks, but we worked together from both sides.

Table 5. Functional Advisory Committees

Functional Area Committee	Operational Working Group (OWG)	F.A.C. Leader	Institution
Student Enrollment	Undergraduate Admissions, Transfer, Transient Policies, and Recruitment	Dr. Tim Renick	GSU
	Financial Aid	Unknown	Unknown
	Calendar and Schedule; Ceremonies; and Preparation of Merged Catalogues	Dr. Tim Renick	GSU
Advancement, Development, and Alumni Affairs	Alumni Affairs; Advancement Services; Fund Raising	Walter Massey, VP for Development and Alumni Affairs	GSU
Athletics	Sports, Scheduling, and Scholarships	Charlie Cobb	GSU
Diversity & Inclusion Programs and Activities	Diversity & Inclusion Programs and Activities	Linda Nelson	GSU
Economic Development and Community Relations	Government and Community Relations; Community Engagement and Economic Development	Dr. Robin Morris	GSU
Media & Marketing	Marketing Focusing on Promotion	Don Hale	GSU
Research and Service Foundations Operations and Integration	Research and Service Foundations Operations and Integration	Unknown	Unknown
University Foundations	University Foundations Operations and Integration	Unknown	Unknown
Legal Affairs Issues	Legal Affairs and Handbooks	Kerry Heywood	GSU
Auxiliary Services	General Auxiliary Services	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
Business & Finance	Budget	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
	Business Operations & Contracts	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
	Procurement	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
	Tuition & Fees	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
Facilities and Physical Plant	Campus Master Planning and Physical Plant	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
Human Resources	HR, including Position Descriptions and Salary Bands	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
Information Technology	IT	Phil Ventimiglia	GSU
Risk, Audits, Safety, and Security	Public Safety and Security and Emergency Planning and Communication	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
	Risk Management Audits, and Occupational Safety/Compliance	Jerry Rackliffe, Senior VP for Finance and Admin.	GSU
Shared Governance	Administrators Governance	Dr. Robin Morris	GSU
	Faculty Governance	Dr. Robin Morris	GSU
	Staff Governance	Dr. Robin Morris	GSU
Student Organizations & Student Life	Student Organizations & Student Life	Dr. Douglass Covey	GSU
Student Services	Student Services	Dr. Douglass Covey	GSU

Perhaps softening the tone of the perspective of GSU participants, participant 5 from GSU augmented participant 8's perspective sharing:

With any merger, the struggle is bringing these two worlds together as one. No one wants to give up what they are already doing. Everyone feels like what they're doing is the best. When you have to bring them together as one, oftentimes more than not, you may have to get rid of some things. Both sides thought 'what we're doing is the best' and they're thinking what they're doing is the best. Well, does that still work for us as a group? So some of the challenges we faced were around just trying to make sure whatever we both feel were the best, when we bring them together. We had to ask 'were they still the best for the overall organization?' What we were doing in this working group was to help improve what they (GPC) already had. And that meant they (GPC) had to change it, because we weren't going to do what they were doing. That would have actually set us back at Georgia State. The systems they were using were old and we spent a lot of time trying to demonstrate how long some of their processes took.

The participants from GPC were less tempered in their assessment of how recommendations emerged and final decisions were reached in their OWG. Collectively, it was apparent that very little was integrated from GPC's systems, processes or way of operating in the recommendations that were forwarded to the CIC, and ultimately adopted into the new institution. Participant 9 from GPC shared:

We're doing what Georgia State was doing initially. They took the information from the group and I would say that maybe they reviewed it. But in the end they would say 'Oh, okay, we're going to do it the way that we're doing it here at Georgia State', and so basically all of our current processes are handled the same as they way the process were at Georgia State. My process here might have been much better, but the decision was made to use the processes that were already used at the Atlanta campus. But if you speak to people, because everyone wasn't on the consolidation team, you might find a few people here or there that feel that it could have been done differently. I did not feel that it was just an exercise, but many of the things that we're doing are actually things that were happening at the Atlanta campus.

There was a general acknowledgement from both sides that in the beginning each party had a platform to share what they thought would be best for the new institution moving forward. In fact, all of the participants commented that as the merger was initiated, there was a

professional and cordial attitude within the groups and people were eager to work collaboratively through the process. Despite these initial attempts from the GPC participants, there was a general sense that fighting for those preferences was futile. Participants on the GPC side recognized that they didn't have a voice among FACs, the groups that would ultimately review or advance the recommendation to the CIC. Participant 10 from GPC commented:

During the consolidation there was always an attitude that in those implementation committee meetings, even though there was representation from Georgia State and Perimeter College staff, there just wasn't an exchange of ideas on the Perimeter College side.

When Perimeter College people tried to interject their ideas, they didn't go anywhere. And I had a little bit more knowledge as to conversations between the Perimeter College interim president and Georgia State's president. So I had a little more perspective as to ideas that the Perimeter College president tried to talk over with the Georgia State president. The kind of feedback he got was 'I don't really want your ideas. We're going to do what we're going to do' and obviously that creates hard feelings about the leadership of Georgia State concerning the consolidation. This was going on for the whole campus for Perimeter College. So there certainly was a feeling that we were the underdogs.

I'm sure there was some hard feelings associated with that, that we were relegated to that and it just felt like we had absolutely no input. No input was even wanted from us. That probably caused some hard feelings. But I've got to say that I think these Perimeter College folks really handled it very professionally given what they had to deal with.

Participant 7 from GPC echoed these sentiments noting:

Throughout the process there was probably a more protective attitude on the Perimeter side than the Georgia State side, because basically, we were molding into their ways more than they compromised into our ways. Our working group had a very task oriented list of items to get through. And even though I had never met these people, I felt they listened. But in the end, it was basically us conforming to their current process with some minor changes.

What was apparent is the GPC participants felt that they had much more to offer in the process, and could have really contributed in positive ways to the new institution, had they been heard.

Participant 16 from GPC commented:

I could have done a lot to help State reach their goals. But because they failed to even have conversations with me, they failed to learn what it was I knew even more, they just didn't want to do that, and didn't want to even hear some of the recommendations that I had to say. It was just in one ear and out the other.

In the next section, I elaborate more on a secondary finding that emerged from these actions. But to briefly note, because a full academic year transpired between the time these decisions were made and the interviews were conducted, the participants noted that their initial approach resulted in some missed opportunities to truly integrate the best of both and to become a new institution. More is said about this later on in the chapter.

Cause and Effect

In the previous section, I provided insight into the ideal and realities of how the process unfolded among OWG co-chairs. Before the merger was announced as “complete” the participants identified a transition that happened, or rather a “shift.” This shift dealt specifically with the co-chair relationships moving from an expected equal standing between peers to one where dominance was asserted. In this section, I elaborate how this unfolded and present three additional themes from my research. These have been clustered together under the grouping name ‘cause and effect,’ as the decision to assert authority during the implementation led to fallout among stakeholders in the process.

Theme 4: Establishing the Alpha (Cause)

The fourth theme that emerged was this idea that dominance was asserted between the time the co-chairs were tasked with beginning their work (around February) until final recommendations had to be submitted to the CIC for approval (around late July early August), a period of about 6 months. While many of the participants went into the process feeling like they

would be working as equal peers, this changed soon after the process began. Positional and institutional status began to creep into the relationship, impacting the decisions that had to be made. During this transition, GSU co-chairs and the institution were identified as “the big dog” or the “alpha dog.”

In the previous section *Ideal vs. Reality*, I offered the idea that the institutional level organizational structure that was established to manage, review, and approve recommendations from the OWG’s set a precedent for how the merger process would unfold within these groups and the co-chair relationships. Participant experiences seemed to validate this and it seems to have set the stage for the sentiments of alpha dominance being established. A comment from participant 12 from GPC shared:

All of the really big decisions were made by GSU’s VP’s. And I think that filtered down to GSU co-chairs. That was my experience. At some point my co-chair kind of assumed responsibility and there was this, I guess what started out maybe as kind of equals eventually, turned into not being so equal.

Participants in the study experienced varying degrees of this assertion in power. For some, the shift began immediately while for others it took a little longer. Participant 15 from GSU shared:

When Dr. Becker was on that stage with the other college president there was no question that Mark Becker was in charge of the process. We probably were called co-chairs, but since I was in charge of the department at GSU I kind of felt like I was running the show. But I can’t argue with you, when the working group was set up, everybody was equal. I could be wrong, but at Georgia Perimeter College I think there was some kind of statement that the senior structure would follow Georgia State University. So even though we were co-chairs, I felt like I had leadership above the co-chair of my committee. When I got this additional duty of chairing this operational working group and knowing there was a lot of pressure here, I took charge. I didn’t want to bother anybody else if it wasn’t necessary, and I wanted to be in control of this, and we were already functioning as a combined unit even though it wasn’t official.

Others took a more tempered approach in how they navigated the organizational dynamic,

making efforts to be as involved as possible in the process. Participant 6 from GPC shared:

I think one of the key pieces was when as part of the working group process, when the individuals from Georgia State really kind of, and I'm sure it was based on a directive from individuals at higher administrative levels at Georgia State, for them to really kind of take the lead on the working group. Even though we were co-chairs, you know, I think that they really ended up taking the lead and they ended up being the ones that would submit the documents to the consultant running the consolidation. You know, my co-chair was the one who submitted the documents. I volunteered to do it. But I could sense that there was no point in me arguing with it and saying, oh no, I could do it. I mean, I did offer to. I don't mind doing it. I just want to let you know I'm okay with doing it. But there was a real sense of from those on the Perimeter side that the people on the Georgia State side were going to take the lead on it no matter what we said or did.

While participants noted they believed there was a 'statement' or 'directive' made by higher-level administrators instructing GSU co-chairs to assume a leadership role, my research was unable to uncover any official statement or directive that this was the case. It appears that there were assumptions made by co-chairs based on the messaging they received as noted in the previous section. While I was unable to uncover any official directive indicating an imbalance in the co-chair relationship, participants noted that there was a noticeable a shift that emerged as the process moved forward. Participant 11 from GPC shared:

As we started to get closer to certain deadlines, I felt a shift in the process. I feel as though some people heading the working groups decided 'I'm going to take these recommendations, do this work, and then present it to the CIC as this is what we're going to do because I feel that this is what's going to work and we're no longer working as closely together. I've heard kind of what your input has been and I've taken that into consideration but this is how it's going to be because at the end of the day,' I don't know, perhaps they found out that they would remain in the role and other people would be reporting to them so they felt a little more empowered to make those decisions. I think that there was a lot of that going on.

Another participant shared a similar experience of there being a shift as the time progressed.

Participant 14 from GPC commented:

After the work groups had made their recommendations up to the consolidation team, and we started having meetings afterwards to kind of, you know, finalize

and work through what the recommendations that were being taken forward, that's when things changed and we began to feel that you know, this is really where we don't really have much say. It wasn't collaborative anymore. We're kind of being told what's going to happen, and it started to be more clear of who was in charge and who wasn't in charge, and I think at that point people on, I know people on the GPC side started to get scared, and lots of people started looking for other positions and a lot did find other positions. I found another position, and one of the other directors found another position.

It was typically at this point in the conversations when participants started opening up about their experience. While the general sentiment from GSU participants was an attitude of "that's just the way it happened," and "things went well," it was a much more emotional experience for their counterparts on the GPC side. What was apparent is it wasn't emotional because of the change itself, but rather, how they felt their peers in the process treated them.

I had to encourage many of the GPC participants to open up about their lived experience. At the time these interviews were conducted, a full academic year had passed since the merger was finalized. In some cases, two years had passed from when the last time some of these GPC participants had made a contribution to the OWG process. Without exception, all wanted to make sure that what they shared would remain anonymous, clearly still tentative about expressing their thoughts about what they experienced. Once these participants opened up, what emerged was a feeling that GSU leaders asserted dominance as an "alpha dog" in the process, and the process itself was less a "consolidation" but more of a hostile take over. Participant 16 from GPC was highly emotional about his experience and shared:

From GSU's perspective I was a part of the old problem at Perimeter and being relatively new at Perimeter, they saw me also as a problem because I was pushing for things that they didn't particularly like at times. Now I'm an outsider trying to make some of the necessary changes at the school. So here's this outsider now throwing us under the bus, and the big dog now is looking at the outsider is throwing us under the bus, and the big dog is saying 'how come you let this happen,' 'how come you let that happen.' At Perimeter we weren't doing exactly the best job in the world. So that's how they came in.

Even though I was co-chair, it was only perfunctory in order to get the job done. We were quickly on our heels. Not just me, others. They were on our heels about individuals in our unit, their HR was quickly on our heels about things, and we were already with our backs against the wall trying to answer to lots of questions regarding our management.

Participant 16 continued, recognizing the monumental task that was ahead of the co-chairs to combine functional units, offered:

Georgia State had an awesome responsibility, granted. I mean their people were really the ones responsible for making all things Perimeter work for them. Now we were in meetings with them and we were helping them with that, but they felt an awesome burden probably from their bosses to get this done, but they also had the keys and they also had their own private meetings, so they knew where they were going before you know, the Perimeter folks did. So yeah, and I guess in that respect, you know, if you're the big dog at the table eating first then you also have the burden.

Once it became official, it got really strange, and not as strange for me as it probably was for a lot of the individuals around me. I had an idea of how this thing was going down. So I was not naive to that. You know, the big dog gets to eat first. I made sure that I reminded myself of that. There were some others who didn't quite understand that concept.

Others shared similar experiences about being subject to an "alpha dog." Participant 7 from GPC, was very emotional when sharing:

This kind of attitude and behavior from GSU people was going on for the whole campus for Perimeter College. So there certainly was a feeling that we were the underdogs. But and I'm sure that there were some hard feelings associated with that, that we were relegated to that and it just felt like we had absolutely no input. No input was even wanted from us. Let me tell you, I never felt so muzzled in my life. That probably caused some hard feelings. But I've got to say that I think these Perimeter College folks really handled it very professionally given what they were having to deal with.

Participant 1 from GPC, also acknowledged:

The transition could have been much smoother. If they would have just included people and make them feel like – I mean, the worker people, not the people who'd been tasked to be on the working committees who really weren't asked a whole lot anyway, because their Atlanta counterpart was usually sort of the one "in charge." And they were just there. It seemed like. Now, this is anecdotal, but that's what it seemed like. A lot of the co-chairs weren't really "co," it was that

there was an alpha dog on as the co-chair.

Unfortunately, this assertion of authority cast a dark cloud over the process that many believed would be inclusive and collaborative. While some were more vocal than others about their experience, the consensus among participants was that as the process unfolded it became less a “consolidation,” incorporating the best of both, but rather a hostile takeover. GSU participants recognized and acknowledged this perception and, in their minds, tried not to create a scenario where others felt this way. However, GSU participants carried on as if these sentiments were just a natural byproduct of the process. Participant 3 from GSU shared:

It’s a hard thing when you’re having two groups consolidate and generally, lots of time, one feels like one is taking the other one over, you know? I think that wasn’t what we ever wanted to do. We were very cognizant as we were talking about it, that we wanted to make sure it was inclusive and that we were trying to build the understanding. But ultimately, we were going to go and put Georgia State University’s logo on the Perimeter College signs and take away a lot of their things.

Participant 4 from GSU shared:

We have been very intentional in including Perimeter folks so it feels a little bit less like big brother coming in with a new edict every few weeks as to what they have to do differently.

Participant 8 from GSU added:

I think there was some resentment to an extent because you know, when you’ve got one institution that’s moving to the authority of another institution, I think there probably were some feelings of, you know, insecurity. Having to adopt and adapt to different policies and procedures and the way things are done, from the way they were doing it, caused some heartache and problems.

Participant 3 from GSU shared:

The gist of this consolidation was we were all going to become Georgia State University, a larger Georgia State University. I think most of the time, the Perimeter College folks are generous and kind and good and whatever, but I still hear from them at times, well, ‘when you took us over.’ There’s a lot of misperceptions still I think. I think there’s still a feeling that we took them over, like it was our choice to take them over.

As a rebuttal, the GPC participants saw things differently. They felt that their GSU counterparts did have some control over how the implementation could have unfolded, but chose not to.

Participant 14, from GPC offered:

At the first, during the very first meeting where they announced consolidation, what I heard, and what a lot of GPC employees heard was that, you know, we have a wonderful opportunity to consolidate and A plus B is going to equal C, and we're going to create a whole new institution. But by the end of it, it didn't turn out to be A plus B equals C. A lot of people felt that – I could probably get in trouble for saying this but people just started to feel like A plus B equals A.

Participant 1 from GPC offered:

They never really stopped to think how things might feel from our side, or maybe didn't want to, to know how it felt for this hostile takeover, which is really what it became.

While organizational, structural, and unintentional messaging from leaders at the institutional level and the USG appear to have had some influence in GSU leaders asserting power, three additional reasons emerged as to why they felt they had to assume a leading role in the OWG. First, GSU participants believed GPC had a history of mismanaging the institution and recent GPC financial challenges validated some of that belief. Participant 2 from GSU shared:

GSU's perspective was that Georgia Perimeter was being saved in this merger because their finances were down and everything. Georgia Perimeter, because of that financial situation, had gone through a major reduction in force before the consolidation. So people there were still hurting from that first major reduction in force. Georgia State always kind of came to the rescue to Georgia Perimeter, so there's been a friendly collaboration between the two because state institutions cannot close their books in the red. So Georgia State loaned Georgia Perimeter money to close their books in the black.

This acknowledgement didn't seem to be lost on the GPC participants. These individuals recognized that they were at a disadvantage and some of the historical financial challenges worked against them in the merger. Participant 16 from GPC commented:

One of the problems we had was that we were bleeding too much. We didn't show a good number of returning students or students who were getting the AA degree, and that was hurting us financially from the state level. And because of what GSU was doing, it seemed like they had to come in and rescue us.

A second rationale shared was that because GPC operated on a leaner budget, on top of the financial struggles previously identified, the institution was utilizing outdated systems and processes. GSU co-chairs believed that they had more to offer and were more advanced as a R1 institution. Participant 4 from GSU confirmed this, offering:

They had a lack of funding in almost every situation when it came to trying to do their jobs. I mean, they had to be expert penny pinchers, to the point of not being always able to offer the services that their students needed, their technology fee was maxed out, their budget, they were way understaffed for what they were trying to do. Part of the culture was when we came together, Georgia State is not by any means a wealthy university, but we did have more resources affordable in certain areas than our colleagues over there. So sometimes it was a culture of oh, you mean I can actually go chase that idea and get something done, you know, I'm not as constrained in every aspect of my job.

Participant 5 from GSU elaborated more on this, sharing:

I understand that for them it seemed like a takeover. If everything's being changed, what Georgia State is doing or has a better process for it, then, you know, where does our process fit in? That's basically what Perimeter people said. They would say 'Why can't we continue doing this? Why can't Georgia State use the process we use?' Well, we were a Research 1 institution. They were a two-year college. A lot of what they did really didn't speak to our world of people. As they began to grow and become a part of this big world a lot of what they had needed to change. We had to figure out how to encourage and persuade Perimeter people to look at it in a different way, other than the fact that something is changing for what you had or making sure that it doesn't look like we've just taken something from you. We wanted to help make them better. We wanted to help make their processes more efficient. We wanted things to be easy and simple for them to do and not have to spend a lot of time with processes.

The third rationale the GSU participants offered as to why they felt compelled to assert authority in the process was due in part to the student performance gap and the enrollment struggles GPC had been experiencing. The student performance issue was noted by then Chancellor Huckaby as justification for the merger, acknowledging that GPC recorded a six

percent graduation rate when the decision was made. GSU, on the other hand, had been nationally recognized for its role in student retention, persistence, and graduation utilizing predictive analytics to aid them in their efforts. Participant 3 from GSU shared:

Perimeter had financial issues and they had issues with enrollment and other things going on. So because Georgia State had been putting in a lot of different practices for student success, showing that students from all backgrounds could succeed, and had a very well documented process of what was done to make those goals, and how we have achieved those goals, I think they saw it as an opportunity to take some of the tools at this larger research university and put them into place at Perimeter. We have a large Pell grant group of students, we often serve students who have not typically – or maybe first generation students, who across the nation normally statistically don't perform necessarily at the same level. But we had eliminated that gap. So kids from all backgrounds were achieving and graduating at the same level.

The assertion of authority emerged in this case as participants discussed the organizational structure established to oversee the merger and the constraints that were placed on co-chairs. Some of these effects were lessened by pre-existing relationships within co-chair assignments, but all participants acknowledged this shift occurred. It was apparent that as participants shared their experiences, that this theme had more than organizational or role based impacts. For many, there was a significant personal burden being borne in the process for themselves and those around them. In the section that follows, I recount how those impacts were manifested.

Theme 5: Staff Impact (Effect)

The fifth theme to emerge came as a result of the assertion of authority mentioned in the previous section. Participants noted that with a significant change eminent, staff impacts would be anticipated. Participants shared that not only did uncertainty grow as the process advanced, but fear intensified leading to significant and lasting impacts on the OWG leaders and their

employees. The most frequent fear expressed was the impact this change would have on employment and individual livelihoods. Participant 3 from GSU shared:

I think there was a lot of fear. In a change, there's always a lot of fear about what's going to happen. Where am I going to fall? Where am I personally going to land? It's difficult for people to be tasked with working through something when they don't even know if their position is going to be in place. People didn't know if they were going to have a job, and so it's harder for them to dig in and keep working on a task for something they might not know what the outcome will be. There was definitely a lot of fear and confusion about how things would land.

Participant 7 from GPC, shared this observation:

The Perimeter College people on our working group really didn't know where their place was going to be in the new consolidated environment until extremely late, like right before the consolidation was going to take effect. And that to me was one of the unfortunate things about the whole experience, is that there was a tremendous amount of anxiety. Any time you mess with someone's job and livelihood, people who have worked at that college practically their whole career, to have to deal with that is such a stressful thing to have happen to you. And then to not know if you're going to have a place, or where that place is going to be. And for that to go on for months, I would say even a year. I just felt like it could have been handle much better from the Georgia State side really because they were making the decisions. Honestly, I guess because it went on so long, they dealt with it, but I just thought that whole thing was handled so poorly. It was just pervasive. All Perimeter people felt, you know, almost without exception that we were just not important. We were considered not important to the consolidation. I know that a lot of people felt that the path that Georgia State was taking was 'let's see how many people will leave due to the uncertainty'.

This fear, and the fallout from it caused the OWG co-chairs to have to deal with some of the unfortunate side effects. They feared that speaking out would put them at further risk of losing their jobs. Participants also expressed concern that it had an impact on their ability to offer unfettered perspectives about the change or how they might contribute the best they had to offer.

Participant 6 from GPC shared:

At the end of the day people began to realize that it was going to be what it was going to be. And making comments about it, particularly since there were so many unknowns at that time about who was going to have their job and how it was going to all play out, I think people were kind of apprehensive and really kind of afraid to really speak out like they would normally do if they felt very secure in the fact that they would keep their job.

The fear this change created led to employee attrition in many of the functional units and even at the co-chair level. While it was never really clear how personnel decisions were made, it was apparent that the limitations placed on these co-chairs around personnel decisions and what they were allowed to offer, caused their units to lose talented people. Participants also noted that in many cases these losses were of highly qualified employees who retained important operational or procedural knowledge about their functional units. Participant 12 from GPC shared:

My co-chair and I kept the communication going really well so things went really smooth as far as the transition goes. But we started losing people through attrition and jumping ship because they didn't, there was no written security in their job or whether they would have a job. Even though we had told them that there were plans for everybody in the department to move over, they're still, unless it's concrete, there were concerns whether they'll have a job. So that's always a challenge when you're going through this, that people are job scared and then so they start looking and then you start losing people and it starts to get stressful and really impact what we could do.

Participant 7 from GPC shared:

There was a feeling that the Georgia State folks intentionally kept people in the dark as a way of managing the attrition that might have come from that approach. And a lot of people did leave. But unfortunately, it was the people who had, you know, that were the best people because they could most easily find another job which I didn't think was a very good idea, to let your best people leave.

Of the seventeen participants interviewed for this study, five (30%) had left their positions at some point during the merger or soon after the merger was finalized.

Participants experienced very distinct outcomes regarding their employment status and the impact it would have on their titles and role depending on which institution they belonged to prior to the merger. None of the GSU participants interviewed for this study experienced any negative alteration to their position, title, or functional responsibilities. In fact, several commented that the only real change for them was that the merger invited an increased workload

and responsibility from taking on more people in their department. On the other hand, all GPC participants shared that they were demoted in position or title, relinquished to a lesser role following the merger, or would have been if they hadn't decided to leave prior to finalization.

Participant 13 from GPC shared:

My position would have changed had I not left. I would've been an associate director under my co-chair from GSU and I would not have the responsibility that I had at Perimeter. The level of responsibility would not be the same either. In fact, it would've been quite a bit lower. And then GSU didn't believe in telecommuting so that was one of my deciding factors is because I would have had to travel so far into the Atlanta campus. I had already been telecommuting one day a week previously, and they wouldn't allow for it. So I'd have to travel down there five days a week. Those two factors were the reasons why I left.

Of her experience, Participant 7 from GPC shared:

The role that they were going to put me in, although it certainly I'm sure would be a great role, it was more administrative and I was in a much higher position before the merger. I have a professional certification and graduate degree, plus many, many years of experience. I just felt like that it wasn't really a role that best suited my background and my interests. So I started looking at that point for another role.

Participant 11 from GPC shared:

So for instance, in my role, most of the people at Perimeter were directors. Since we were a multi-institution, multi-campus institution, we had multiple directors. Once we really found out our roles, which most of us found out by looking at Outlook after the mail consolidation, we became assistant directors. So basically, everyone at Perimeter got knocked down one notch administratively.

In some cases, these positional adjustments resulted in significant long-term career implications that would have to be accounted for or explained in future career pursuits. Participant 12, from GPC shared:

My role changed. My title changed. I took a major career step back. That impacted me greatly. As I think of moving forward, the explanation of that, it impacts me. I have to make sure that that's clearly stated on a resume and clarified for future employers.

While there were instances of GSU personnel being sensitive to the impact that these changes would have on their GPC counterparts, maintaining the title for a GPC leader meant that adjustments were made to accommodate this as positions and job titles were being sorted out. In these cases, GSU participants were the beneficiary. Participant 4 from GSU shared:

There were many times when the person from downtown just naturally assumed the role over the person from the other institution. I wanted to be careful about how we articulated agreements with our colleagues from GPC, because there were no guarantees and things didn't always happen as we thought they should. In my case, the person who was my colleague over there, after we met two or three times, she was incredibly gracious. She just kind of took the question off my hands and went ahead and said 'I know I'm going to come report to you and here's the kind of team I want to build.' But she did let me know that one thing she wanted to do, if possible, was hold onto her director title, because she had spent many years earning it and I agreed with her. She did and she did the work that deserved that level of title. But for that to happen, for her to keep that title, my title was upgraded and I got more responsibility.

Alterations in position or job title were not the only impact GPC leaders felt or had to adjust to from the change. In nearly all of the functional units, the systems, processes, policies and practices that became part of the standard operations for the "new" GSU were those already in place at the "old" GSU. As a result, GPC leaders were expected to adjust, adapt, learn, and conform to new ways of executing on their unit functions. In general, GSU participants maintained status quo in their day-to-day operations. Sharing specific quotations or examples from participants about the policies, software, procedures, systems, and equipment they mentioned would create a scenario where the participant could be identified, and so I have consciously determined to omit them from this study. However, it was apparent that GSU leaders and departments had to commit significant resources to bring their GPC counterparts up to speed on the tools, software, and manner in which they were conducting their business operations.

Theme 6: Cultural Impacts (Effect)

Prior to data collection, I assumed that there would be cultural effects given that the two institutions were very distinct prior to the merger. And that was the case as participants shared their experience during this transitory time. While I anticipated the greater impact to be on the participants from GPC, given that their institution was grafted in to GSU's organizational structure, both sides were impacted.

The first, and most obvious cultural impact identified by participants included the loss of identity and purpose, primarily for GPC leaders, a factor that was acknowledged by many employees at the former GSU. Participant 2 from GSU shared:

From the Georgia Perimeter side I do feel sad for them. Everything that belonged to them was taken away. If you think about identity, their colors were no longer prevalent. Their mascot was no longer there. They were in transition with their president, and everything that stood for Georgia Perimeter is now gone. They have nothing that bared their previous identity. And for many of the employees, that was hard. One example, the GPC men's head basketball coach, a winning men's basketball coach, wasn't invited to be part of the Georgia State basketball team. His whole identity, like so many others, was washed away. I mean, there are no more Jaguars, there's no more maroon and black and all of that kind of stuff.

That loss of identity went deeper than the loss of colors, a mascot, or a winning basketball team.

There was a sense that something more significant was no longer there. Participant 8 from GSU worked at GPC for many years before taking a role at GSU several years before the merger. He also shared that he had attended school at GPC and had family who connected with the institution. He shared:

To see it go away was very sad. I'm sure the people at Perimeter felt that way from a personal standpoint, as it was a place that they spent their career at. Even though it's still going to be there as Perimeter College, part of Georgia State University, it's still different and won't be the same.

Many others shared in these sentiments and described how it felt using words like “grief,” “loss,” “missing,” “sad,” and “different.” From several accounts, nothing was done to preserve the legacy of the institution, aside from retaining the Perimeter College name as an open access college in the greater organizational whole. Participant 14 from GPC lamented:

Anything that could have been done to recognize, you know, what GPC has done well, what GPC’s role had been in the community, what type of positive force they had been, which they truly were, there had been any recognition of that, that I think that would have helped a lot. I think people at GPC just felt like I’ve been here for 20 years and everything I did just disappeared.

Participant 11 of GPC shared a particularly vivid example of the lost identity and a sense of community following the merger. She shared:

Every year Perimeter faculty and staff would come together for kind of like an annual meeting. They would close all campuses and we would come together. We would all go to the Clarkston Campus and we would have a big meeting that would include a financial outlook update, enrollment update, and the president would get up and speak. They would add some school spirit, have the mascot come out, get everybody excited, have a funny video. We would do a history. It was making you feel as though you’re a part of something important and significant. We would honor our retirees and they would come back and receive their retiree gifts. They would get to speak and we would get to applaud and cheer them on as they would move on. It was like a rite of passage. I remember one guy came in tennis gear with a tennis racket and got up at the front and was volleying. You really got that there was a sense of community.

Afterwards there would be music and a barbecue. We would sit outside talking to everybody, seeing people from all the campuses that you only get to see every now and then because you’re in a different location. And then there were also functional meetings after lunch. People and retirees would be recognized, as would those who were receiving awards. It created a sense of community. But it was also a time where you felt there was a sense of appreciation for the work that you did.

After the merger, that event was discontinued. The very first all campus meeting we had after the consolidation was interesting. It was the administration of the new Georgia State University coming into the space with thousands of scared people. And the feeling that we usually had annually was not there. You had a lot of people in suits, something that was pointed out to me that I didn’t necessarily think about right away. I was thinking more of the suits; it’s like a power suit type of thing. It was different and the sense of community had been lost.

This example underscored the experience for many of the participants, and also so many others who identified with the institution. Several acknowledged that more could have been done to preserve the culture and identity of the institution, given that there were so many other things that these individuals had to give up and change.

In addition to the loss felt by those GPC participants, there were significant organizational culture differences that all parties had to adjust to. The merger created a multi-campus institution that GSU participants were not accustomed to, and the GPC participants were not used to having a centralized primary site, or as one participant named, “The Mother Ship.”

Participant 13 from GSU observed:

There were some things we had to adjust for that we weren't used to. For example, some of the operations we ran were different from having five, six campuses as opposed to just the downtown campus and the one in Alpharetta. They had the Alpharetta, Clarkston, Decatur, Dunwoody, and Lakeside campuses. And Lakeside campus is in DeKalb County but it's only staff out there, and then it's not a GSU owned building, in addition to Newton County. So with those campuses, as I mentioned just now, it went from, like I said, one or two however you want to describe it, mainly a Downtown campus, to now it's six or seven campuses depending on how you look at it.

Participant 4 from GSU also noted, speaking about the adjustments required for operational execution of his department, shared:

I have teams now that have people across all the campuses. And I would love to think that we had some amazing system where, you know, if we had a lack of people at one, we could rapidly redeploy people from another campus, but it is just too far to drive for most of those kinds of things. If you're having a classroom emergency on one campus, you cannot deploy from another campus. So you know, there are challenges like that that we weren't used to and we've had to adjust and plan for it. If we have to deploy someone, we have to budget for it now. Perimeter already had that going on. They already were used to it. But it was a new realization for the downtown campus that this is something you have to work with now.

Participant 10 from GPC offered additional insight about the adjustment this has been for her colleagues, even a few years post merger. She shared:

We were used to being a multi-campus institution. Georgia State was not. So there has been a big learning curve. There still is, you know. A couple of years out, there are still a lot of things they (GSU) plan that will be downtown only, whether it's planned by human resources or whomever. They're getting better, slowly, but especially things like staff recognitions and so forth, you know. A good example, not too long ago they had an ice cream thing for staff downtown. It's kind of like all the people at Perimeter were saying, well, what about us, you know. So it's slowly changing. But it's been a little bit of a challenge.

Participant 11 from GPC echoed a similar sentiment. She shared:

It's kind of difficult with a multi-campus university, to make sure everybody feels plugged in as well, you know. So it's really been interesting. We utilize technology a lot but it's hard when the meetings are always set at the Atlanta campus. If you want to get something done you have to go to Atlanta campus. We have to send all of our students to the Atlanta campus. We have a student who's hungry and they're homeless and they need food, we'll tell them to come to the Atlanta campus.

Adding to the complexity of these organizational cultural adjustments was that there were unique nuances and cultural differences between these various former GPC campuses themselves.

Participant 2 from GSU observed:

I think people assumed that everybody would say this is great, we're glad, we're one happy family. But one thing that emerged that the Georgia State people didn't realize is that each of the Perimeter campuses had their own particular culture. So it wasn't just one Georgia Perimeter culture, there were different competing cultures on all the campuses. And I don't think we really realized that. We thought it was like one Georgia Perimeter campus, but it was a Georgia Perimeter College with separate campuses, which acted like separate schools and Georgia State didn't anticipate that. They had different cultures in some of those different campuses and sometimes they were in competition with each other.

It was perhaps these differences that created another cultural adjustment for participants involving the behaviors of information sharing and consensus building. The participants noted that there were very different attitudes surrounding these consensus-building activities.

Participant 1 from GPC shared:

Now that we are merged, it's a whole different structure now and it's not interconnected very well. We hear about silos all the time and this is a very fragmented organization. It's a powerful one, and they've got some incredible initiatives, but it's not very inclusive. For example, people would be scrambling all the time for information going 'Did you know that?' Prior to the merger GSU had no mechanism for communicating with their campus constituents. We did. I would ask the people at the Atlanta campus, "How do y'all share information?" and the attitude was "Why do we need to know that? It's not our department". Nobody asked how do y'all communicate with each other, when they're not used to multiple campuses. So that was a big challenge. They're really trying to overcome these barriers and these obstacles that we could have prevented had it been a part of the conversation, but we never got that opportunity. Two very different cultures. When you've got different cultures, you've got to address that.

This attitude surrounding information sharing and consensus building as an important organizational value didn't seem to resonate as strongly with GSU participants as it did with their GPC counterparts. Participant 3 from GSU offered:

I think the interesting thing about Perimeter was they were a very open group of people who liked to build a major consensus and like have a lot of people involved in decision-making and I think we weren't used to that. I don't know how to explain it. So where we would be like okay, let's do this. They'd be like "okay, well, we're going to bring, this person, this person, this person, this person to the table" and we'd be like "well, that's a faculty member". Like why are they here? It was a definite culture change. They were quite successful in getting what they needed to get done, doing it their way, but just trying to merge those two ways of handling the process too was challenging.

Cultural difference also emerged around the difference in perspectives pertaining to participant roles in relation to the impact of the merger on students. Both expressed a strong identity around ensuring student success through the process, but there were notable differences about what student success meant. GSU participants viewed their role in student success, and the goal of their institution, as more of a tactical and process oriented responsibility focused on completion and student performance outcomes. This isn't to say these individuals didn't express care or concern about their students as people, but there was a sense that student success was more of a functional responsibility. GPC participants conveyed a much different sentiment. They

saw student success as almost a personal obligation and being in college was considered success. For GPC participants, there was a sense that their own professional success and identity was contingent on how “successful” these individuals were. These differences were notable in how the participants described the organizational perspectives on student success and how to manage that as the merger proceeded. Participant 4 from GSU shared:

When we started merging with Perimeter, the common vocabulary there was increased enrollment. At downtown, it was like “drive student success through the decrease in DFWs, which equals increases in retention, graduation and progression through your courses”. At Perimeter, it was “drive enrollment, get the enrollment numbers up, do anything you can to get more students in the classes, make more sections, make more times”, all of those kinds of things. The differences in vocabulary and the differences in initiatives related to benchmarks were astounding to us, and to them. There were a lot of heated discussions over what people were going to be held accountable for, and you know, what the differences were coming in. And then when you merge with another institution, you find out well, the goal has been moved. It’s like oh, they really don’t care about how many people we get into the class. It is really far more about how many people we get out of the class.

Participant 1 from GPC offered this perspective saying:

We we’re running into some cultural differences of not being very clear on what is the mission and that’s always been our mission is to be an access institution. They were always trying too hard to get the data of quick turnaround of getting people through the system, getting them from start to finish in a timely manner. When you consider some of the Perimeter students have English as a second language and may need more learning support, that conflicts with those objectives.

GSU participants largely viewed their role as just a cog in the wheel within the larger institutional machine with the end goal being focused on numbers. GPC participants, on the other hand, viewed their roles in student success as more familial and relationship based. Participant 14 from GPC commented:

Most of the people who worked at GPC really were invested in student success. We had a wonderful group of people. We’re like one big family. A lot of us had been there 15, 20 years. We’ve had you know, a lot of experiences together, but we all knew that we were there to make the students successful.

And Participant 6 from GPC added:

Many of the people on the Perimeter side were concerned about their jobs and what this would look like, but for many of us on the Perimeter side, we wanted to make sure our students didn't get lost in all of this. Positions come and go, titles come and go. Of course, we all want to keep our jobs. None of us want to be unemployed. But at the end of the day we definitely want to make sure that we were protecting and looking out for our students in this process.

The cultural impact theme is important to this study because it highlights that both institutions in the merger experienced adjustments in the process. While participants on the GPC side largely adjusted to identity based changes, GSU participants were challenged with organizational and operational factors they hadn't previously dealt with. Despite these differences, it was discovered that there were shared concerns with the impact these changes would have on students, and community constituents who had some prior affiliation before the merge. It was perhaps an awareness of these adjustments that led to an acknowledgment that the process would be ongoing for several more years. I highlight this in the next portion of this chapter and capture how these participants made adjustments to these discoveries.

The Merger Continues

Mergers are complex organizational changes that have significant and long lasting impacts on those who experience them. Unfortunately, it also takes a long time before new social norms and relationships are recognized, and a new organizational identity is established. In general, the literature on mergers generally agrees that it can take in excess of ten years for a new identity and new norms to form and to operate as one integrated whole. The GSU-GPC merger was no exception. The theme presented in this section highlights that the merger is still very much alive at the new GSU from both organizational and interpersonal perspectives. In this

section, I present the evidence of this by bringing to light the differences in perspectives regarding the outcome of the merger. I also present evidence by leveraging the language that participants used to describe how they viewed the process and how they currently see the new institution. I conclude the section by sharing statements from the participants of this study that confirm they are still very much merging and trying to discover their new identity.

Theme 7: A House Still Divided

Nearly two years following the announcement that the GSU GPC merger was “complete”, the merger was still ongoing in the mind of the participants. This theme emerged through the differences in attitudes expressed by these participants describing how the merger unfolded. It also emerged in the language and word choices participants used. Participants also shared that there were some regrets with how the original processes was implemented, realizing that some of the practiced that were first adopted weren’t always the best decisions for the new institution and its stakeholders.

The first indication that divisions still exist among these leaders was reflected in how they described the process as they reflected back on what transpired and what could have been done differently. As indicated earlier in this chapter, GPC participants felt that the event constituted a hostile takeover. These same participants also shared that they felt the process was rushed, and as a result, efficiency and effectiveness were impacted. Participant 1 from GPC shared:

There was a strong push to just get it done. It doesn’t matter what happens, just get it done so we can check off the box. And to get it done as fast as we could, it meant we had just to adhere to the Georgia State's way of doing things. There wasn’t a lot of time for discussion. And there wasn’t a lot of time to really look at best practices, which is what we had been pretty much told would be the process.

Participant 5 from GSU echoed this sentiment. She shared:

I wish we would have had more time. That would have given us more time to plan and prepare some of the nuances that people might have been feeling coming from another organization. And then we would have had more time to talk about what needs to happen in the working groups as we're moving forward to merge. We could have had some pre-meetings and pre-planning sessions before actually moving forward. Unfortunately, once our working groups were started and created we were told that we are merging and we need to move forward fast. So I think if we would have had a year or two in advance, preparation and planning, that could have been a great help. We would have had some real time to lay things out, talk through them without trying to hurry.

Very quickly into the interview process, it became apparent that there were significant differences in the experiences of participants in this study. An indicator of this was the word choices and language the participants used to describe their overall perceptions of the implementation experiences. As I listened to their stories, it quickly became evident that for many, the experience of having gone through the OWG process and the merger itself was still very fresh in their minds and their experiences very distinct. The use of descriptive words and phrases to describe their experiences during implementation was distinguishable based on the institution the participant came from prior to the merger.

The first interview I conducted in this study was with a participant from GPC. As I listened to the narrative she offered I was anticipating that subsequent interviews would echo some of her sentiments. I anticipated that I would hear that participants felt the process was “strained” or “interesting.” Or that everyone I interviewed would feel in some way as though they were “unsure” or “uncertain” that this merger would materialize the way the USG and President had envisioned. This was disconfirmed during the second and third interviews I conducted, both participants from GSU. I was surprised when both shared that while some challenges did exist during implementation, they felt that overall, things went “smooth,” the

process was extremely “positive,” and people were “excited.” Compare and contrast some of the statements shared below. Participant 3 from GSU recounted:

I think all the people involved on the committee felt very positive about the process and tried their very best. I think there was some fear, you know, in a change, there’s always fear about what’s going to happen. I mean, there was some angst, obviously, but from my perspective, I think most people felt excited and that this was like a good fit, that it was just like wow, Georgia State is growing more.

Participant 8, also from GSU augmented this response sharing:

It went very well. We were very fortunate. We had a good group and we had a lot of people working very hard, so for the most part it went well. I can’t say that we met all the exact target dates to the ‘T,’ and there might have been some factors in there that slowed us down, but we did meet our targets, and not saying we met all the exact dates, but we met our requirements close to those dates. I think it went very well, and think it was a combination of the fact that people were working very diligently that in their own areas and together. I think it was a good feeling of productivity throughout the process. What we did was efficient, the way we did it was very efficient, and we were able to accomplish our task in a timely manner and meet our ultimate deadline.

Participant 15 from GSU, highly enthusiastic about sharing his observations of the implementation, his experience, and the role he played, shared:

I thought there was great communication throughout the process. From my experience nothing went wrong, and everything seemed to be stronger in this much larger institution that in many respects is singular, having the two-year and four year. To my knowledge there were no major hiccups in this consolidation, which says it must have reflected what I viewed as very strong leadership throughout, lots of different leaders made this happen. What Georgia State has done and did during the consolidation to me is highly impressive. They did one incredible job as this process unfolded, and I was there and was a part of it.

Contrast these perspectives with those from the following participants from GPC.

Participant 3’s experience with what Participant 1 offered:

We now have this huge institution. Some incredible kudos to the state of Georgia, we now have one of the largest universities in the country, but the process has been painful. The process could have been so much easier, I think, without so much collateral damage to the employee spirit and the morale of staff and faculty, which directly impacts the students. Like it or not, yeah, they’re still here, they’re

still taking classes but we've made it an obstacle because we don't have the information we need and people are working under very stressful situations.

And Participant 16, from GPC, who was very emotional throughout his interview shared:

One of the main challenges we faced was transparency with the consolidation process. Be transparent. Even though you know there are some people who will jump ship early on, so what? So what? So what? What are you going to use them and then spit them out? And then after you spit them all out and you realize that you need more employees that you fired, you're going to hire them back? You know, just to keep them around, just to pick their brains, just to figure out the process so that you can downgrade them or get rid at them. And that's actually what happened. They were either downgraded or they were fired. This wasn't really a co-chair as much as it was, you know, a coup de etat. We're trying to find out as much as we can from the inside so that we can determine where we want to go next. Just be transparent about the process. Let's have honest conversations.

Discovering these distinctive narratives early on enabled me to ask participants as they were interviewed to share with me the words they would use to describe the process. Table 6 provides a compilation of the vivid words used by participants to describe how they viewed the implementation process. Other words highlighted in this table were gleaned from the data as it was analyzed and coded.

Table 6: Words and Phrases used to describe the merger process

Georgia State University Participants		Georgia Perimeter College Participants	
Caring	Professional	Absorbed	Ruse
Disciplined	Seamless	Animosity	Scared
Easy	Smooth	Collateral damage	Strained
Efficient	Speedy	Futile	Taken away
Few hiccups	Straight forward	Swallowed up	Terrible
Impressive	Successful	Interesting	Traumatic
In the fold	Timely	Muzzled	Uncertain
Logical	Unbelievably positive	Odd	Unsure
Positive	Very well organized	Painful	
Productive	Went well	Perfunctory	

Descriptive words weren't the only language indicator delineating the reality that these two institutions were still very much merging. Former institutional association had bearing on

the perceptions of participants and was a contributing factor in the identity-based divisions that still existed. I frequently heard participants repeat phrases such as “at Georgia State” or “at Georgia Perimeter” followed by the use of the pronouns ours/theirs, yours/mine, we/they, and us/them. Confirming this insight, Participant 4 from GSU offered:

One of the things we have been working on so hard is to stop saying thing like “we” and “they.” I grew up on the downtown campus. I’ve worked here for over 20 years, so Georgia State downtown is still very much the “we” in my world. During those 20 years I knew the folks over at Perimeter College. We’d have meetings from time to time. So “they” were the “they”. And you know, when we come together, we are all now one people, and I have to remember that. Even referring to the people who work at the campuses out there are not a “they” in my world anymore. We are working together as Georgia State to solve problems. I still catch myself in meetings with people around the table referring to “we” and “they” and “them” and “us” and I try to catch myself.

Participant 3 from GSU echoed this sentiment, sharing:

I do think there is still a little bit of an ‘us verses them’ feel, particularly from Perimeter folks. I feel like sometimes the downtown people forget about the Perimeter people or we will be talking about Georgia State and what they really mean is the downtown location instead of thinking about the whole six campuses now. People are starting to work well together. I think it’s still a work in progress. There is still chatter like “when Georgia State does this” and people have to be reminded we’re all Georgia State. Or another example, when people say “downtown has made us do this.” Unfortunately, you’ll still hear things like that.

Other phrases like “the other side of the fence” or “the other side of the house” were also frequently used in the interviews to draw distinction between parties and illustrate the divisions that still exist between these leaders. Participant 11 from GPC shared:

We were encouraged not to use language such as main campus and satellite campuses anymore. We were encouraged from the beginning not to do that and yet that language keeps coming out of people. It was how people thought of it. And it wasn’t necessarily just the Atlanta campus employees. They weren’t the only ones saying that. It was also Perimeter campus employees saying that because either they assumed that’s how things would be or they had already started working in their working groups and they felt that that was what would happen. I would say the CIC had several conversations reminding people to remind their teams and tell their employees to be sure not to use that language and

be sure to be innovative and think of something new and think of this as a new institution, not one institution swaddling another. We understood that. Unfortunately, I don't feel that message trickled down the way it should have. I believe that people heard that instruction but I just believe that they ignored it. The sad part about that is I still believe people feel as though the administration wanted it that way.

Participants acknowledged these divisions still existed and commented that the merger was an ongoing process they were still trying to reconcile. The participants shared that they anticipated the merger would be a lengthy process, recognizing that it would take many years before the new Georgia State University would be considered a single institution with a unifying identity. Participant 10 from GSU shared:

Consolidation is still happening two years out. I mean, we're still working through processes trying to streamline. It isn't like once the board says you're consolidated that you're consolidated. Not anywhere near that. We're still trying to, I guess, adapt that multi-campus philosophy overall. So we're still trying to really fully embrace it and engage that multi-campus philosophy, where whether it's from a student perspective or staff perspective that services are offered everywhere equally.

Participant 2 from GSU added:

I think things are better now from both ends. They're better. It's going to probably take another year for them to be complete, but I think they're better. I think the Georgia Perimeter people are starting to feel part of the main campus and like we are – like our employee development and wellness is making a point to go out there and do some of their things on each of the campus to make everybody feel a part of it. They're getting better.

As participants reflected back on the experience they went through, and considered some of the challenges they were currently dealing with in their roles and their functional units, it became clear that the implementation decisions these leaders made initially may not have been the best for the institution moving forward. Participant 11 from GPC shared:

The consolidation is still with us. It's been two years and it's still not settled down. The organization is still in flux but it's getting better. There are some positives. I mean, I think this institution will eventually be a powerful institution, we've just got to get over these hurdles and I don't see that happening for two to

three more years, easily. It's going to take a while, because we're talking major hurdles still.

The major hurdles identified were those processes, procedures, or systems that were adopted from the “old” GSU that didn’t necessarily work for the needs of the “new” GSU. Participant 9 from GPC elaborated:

The merger is still very much ongoing and it's going to take probably about four or five years of working through all of the kinks in every area before we are truly able to move forward as one individual university. I think that you have to really work out kinks and see, well, we're going to try it this way, and then you find, well, it's just not working, and so we're going to have to walk back the process or change it all together.

Walking back through some of those processes involved re-evaluating some of the choices made during the initial merger phase. This time around participants felt that included doing things how many felt they should have been done in the first place, which included integrating the best from both institutions. Participant 14 from GPC offered:

In the last year there have been a lot of instances where people said they told their counterparts at Georgia State in the beginning “you need to do it this way” or “you need to consider this.” Now they are taking those things into consideration. It has been fairly pervasive across the board. More listening would have probably helped. I think the focus was on getting it done and not on getting it done in a way that really incorporated everybody’s perspectives, ideas, thoughts, all of that.

Participant 1 from GPC supplemented this sentiment, and expressed hope that this merger can still unfold into the institution GSU was envisioned to become:

Our differences are just now starting to work their way out. I think the main thing I have seen is the staff at the Atlanta campus has finally opened their appreciation for some of the things that we have done. I think if they had gotten to know the Georgia Perimeter folks, there would have been more of an appreciation for how much Perimeter was doing with so few people. So I think there has been a growing appreciation for both sides as we've gone on, and I see the staff reaching out more to each other.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Three merger phases and seven primary themes emerged from this study. In the first phase I identified that there was a stated ideal for the GSU-GPC merger communicated by the USG leaders and institution presidents. This ideal process constituted a “special” opportunity for leaders to have a “generational impact” as they created a “new” institution. It was communicated this would be possible as OWG co-chairs incorporated the best that both institutions had to offer. Unfortunately, the implementation was mired in communication challenges that created transparency concerns and confusion in the process. Additional constraints imposed on co-chairs created a scenario where they didn’t incorporate the best from both institutions as the implementation concluded.

In the second phase a noticeable shift created an environment where the merger became a “hostile takeover”. Assertions of dominance by GSU participants lead many participants from GPC to feel fear and concern about what the future would hold for them. This uncertainty caused many to retreat from the implementation process. It also uncovered many cultural adjustments that both sides would have to adjust to as they continued to work through the process.

These realizations uncovered the third phase of the merger, which continues today. Having time to implement some of their prior decision, I found that participants have had to re-work and adjust prior decisions that were made during the initial implementation phase. This has included many of the practices they originally discounted as outdated or not relevant.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I conclude with a discussion of the findings of my research. I begin by reviewing the experience of mid-level administrators from the functional units of the institutions where high duplication existed. By learning from the experiences of administrators who were tasked with implementation, we can gain a better understanding of the issues that surface during mergers and how they are addressed. This inquiry sought to discern what transpires during the implementation process at the individual level of analysis, and the factors that could have bearing on outcomes. Next, I discuss the theoretical implications of my findings as they contribute to the application of Normalization Process Theory in the context of higher education mergers. I continue with a discussion of the limitations of this study and conclude by presenting opportunities for future research. The two research questions that guided this study are stated as follows:

RQ#1: How did a critical structural change process, the merger of two distinctive postsecondary institutions, unfold among mid-level administrators in the affected institutions?

RQ#2: What substantive issues emerged during the merger between mid-level administrators in the affected institutions, and how were those addressed?

The setting for this qualitative case study was the Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College merger in the University System of Georgia. Mid-level administrators asked to serve as a co-chair on an Operational Working Group were the targeted participants. In some

cases, a few participants also served as a committee member of another working group or in a higher capacity at the institution during the transition. The GSU-GPC merger was the third phase of the USG's broader "consolidation" agenda and was selected because of the distinct differences that existed between the two institutions. Because of these differences, I anticipated significant issues would emerge between these leaders and these differences would offer the greatest insights into my research questions. This case study involved participant interviews, observations of public meetings about the merger, and an analysis of OWG documents and other print resources.

The findings presented shed light on how this process unfolds and how these individuals make sense of and give meaning to the tasks they are asked to perform in these transitions. It also seeks to explain how these leaders came together to complete their charge, uncover the operational work they engaged in as they adopt new practices, and how they assessed the impact of these efforts on themselves and others around them. In the GSU-GPC case, mid-level administrators experienced three distinct phases of merger implementation. I found that communication was a major barrier throughout the implementation phase. This had significant impact on productive and meaningful activities that would incorporate the best from both institutions. I also found that an assertion of authority emerged from the GSU side in the process, creating a scenario where collegiality and collaboration essentially disappeared. Two years post implementation, the merger was still very much alive and participants were still figuring out the best processes for the future. Finally, the study found some support for the application of Normalization Process Theory to help explain the implementation process.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first research question in this study sought to understand how a critical structural change process unfolded among mid-level administrators during the merger of two distinct post-secondary institutions. Mid-level administrators experienced three distinct phases during the implementation of the GSU-GPC merger. In simple terms, there was a brief initial phase where both trepidation and optimism was present immediately following the merger announcement, a tense middle phase, and an ongoing remediated ending. The second research question sought to identify the issues that emerged that might have affected the merger outcome, and how they were addressed. In the section that follows I provide clarity to research question one, by discussing the three phases in greater detail. I also answer research question two by identifying the issues that emerged during each of the three phases identified.

During the first phase of the merger implementation, there was a mix of trepidation and optimism expressed by participants in this study. The trepidation came from concerns around the goodness of fit between the two institutions, the significant differences in missions, and what this change would mean to individuals and their jobs, especially in duplicative positions. These concerns emerged despite a history of collaboration that had existed between the two institutions. In response, evidence of an unstructured change management effort emerged. Institutional and system leaders attempted to communicate an ideal vision about the merger, presenting it as a “special” opportunity to create a “new” institution, with “generational impact” if OWG co-chairs worked together and incorporated the best that both institutions had to offer. These efforts were loosely supported with communication platforms and change management resources to facilitate the process. In the beginning, the opportunity to innovate, elevate the profile of the institution,

and to be a part of something “special” resonated with participants and created some initial positive momentum for the process.

A significant breakdown of communication was identified as the most pervasive issue during the merger. Participants cited the lack of a communications strategy from the top as a primary issue, creating significant transparency concerns. In response, co-chairs resorted to owning what they could by relaying the limited information they had. Instead of being able to provide productive progress updates, much of their communication activities were geared towards assuaging concerns, limiting the spread of rumors, and preventing people from doing “stupid stuff.” Incorporating the best practices from both institutions also never materialized during this phase. I anticipated that at some point in the research a process of accountability would emerge to ensure this happened, but one never emerged. In contrast, the organizational structure established for the new GSU and implementation structure incorporated little or no GPC representation. This appears to have established a precedent that filtered down to OWGs and throughout the merger process. I found no evidence to support the argument that the best of both institutions were incorporated in this process of “creating something special.” What emerged was a larger version of the old GSU.

The second phase began just a few short months into implementation when leaders acknowledged a shift where collegiality and collaboration diminished or disappeared, and was replaced with hostility and dominance. Three contributing factors can be attributed to this shift. Previous financial mismanagement scandals at GPC in the years leading up to the merger announcement created a perception that the institution needed saving. This merger appeared to be another scenario where GSU leaders believed they had to rescue GPC. Second, OWG co-chairs were prohibited from discussing or making recommendations to the CIC pertaining to

staffing, organizational structures, or finances within their functional units. And third, OWG's were operating within a compressed six-month timeframe to complete their assigned tasks and submit their final recommendations. These factors limited the ability of these administrators to discuss, deliberate, study, or evaluate the best possible options for implementation. OWG deliberations became less about what was best for the new institution moving forward, and more about convincing each other why their way was better than the other.

As a result of this shift, two significant issues emerged. GPC participants experienced staff impacts, in the form of fear, loss of professional identity, and demotion in position and title with significant alterations to day-to-day job responsibilities. Many sought new opportunities outside of the institution, and those that chose to stay still harbored sentiments of displeasure with their new arrangement. Alternatively, GSU participants remained in their roles, and in some cases received a promotion. Most commented that the only significant change they experienced was "more work." Cultural impacts were felt on both sides. For GPC participants, institutional identity and saga of the institution "just disappeared." GSU participants had to adjust to life as a multi-site institution. This presented significant challenges in how these leaders operated, allocated resources, and resolved day-to-day challenges in their units both during implementation and post-implementation. While participants from both former institutions commented that things have progressed in dealing with the challenges of being a multi-site institution, there was still a lot to be desired.

Despite the USG declaration of completion, participants confirmed that they were "still very much merging." This third phase confirms that these complex change processes can take years to fully integrate as earlier decisions are re-considered and new organizational and social norms are established. Descriptive language, words or phrases were the first indicator that

delineated the difference in experience for participants and also highlighted factions that still exist among combined units. Participants have continued to seek out collective and individual ways of dealing with these factions, and the institution has made more formal attempts at addressing these lingering divisions.

At the time the interviews were conducted, the new GSU had just completed its first full academic school year. Participants shared that that first year allowed them the opportunity to implement some of the decisions they recommended to the CIC for SACSCOC review. In many instances, these leaders acknowledged that some of the practices they adopted during implementation were insufficient for their new operations. In response, they were active in re-examining their previous decisions, evaluating what was working, what wasn't, and were reconsidering many of the GPC practices that had been previously overlooked. The changes being reconsidered in this third phase pertained to processes, procedures, or systems that they had previously overlooked during phase two.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to our understanding of how implementation takes place at the micro-level of analysis in the context of a merger between two distinct post-secondary institutions. To achieve this purpose, this study leveraged the Normalization Process Theory (NPT) (May et al., 2009). This research also answers the call to explore the application of NPT in overcoming the problem of embedding change to the field of education (Wood, 2017). While there is no one singular best approach to implementation during a merger, examining the how and what of these processes help us to better understand some of the more general behaviors that can either derail, or support integration and optimization of merger outcomes. In this case,

studying the implementation through the NPT lens was insightful, but also posed some challenges. For example, participants were recalling past activity, meaning the data were often individual rather than group recollections. In addition, so many different players, divisions, and units completed different parts of the implementation process and were influenced by a myriad of contextual and relational factors.

NPT is a theory of implementation from sociology, largely employed in healthcare. It focuses on what people, both individuals and groups, do rather than what they believe or intend as they seek to implement, embed, or integrate a new complex intervention. What happens at the individual level of implementation can have bearing on the outcome of the merger. While many studies on mergers focus on the impetuses and outcomes from these decisions, they are insufficient to help us understand how these outcomes come about. Like all theories, NPT is built around a set of four constructs that represent human processes that happen in the real world: coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, and reflexive monitoring (May et al., 2009).

Coherence

Coherence is the sense-making work that people do individually and collectively when they are faced with the problem of operationalizing some set of practices. It also involves the beliefs, behaviors, and acts that are able to hold the new practice together and make it possible to share and enact it. My findings affirm the presence of coherence, more specifically in the components of communal specification (people working together to build a shared understanding of the aims, objectives, and expected benefits of the new practices) and individual specification (where individuals work to do things that will help them understand their specific tasks and responsibilities around a new set of practices). This happened at two levels for administrators. The first level included co-chair engagement with system and institutional leaders in open and

collaborative public town hall and training meetings to seek clarity around the aims, objectives, challenges, and expected benefits that could be realized through the merger. These discussions included communicating an ideal collaboration process and how this merger created an opportunity to create something new and special. The message was that everyone would benefit in this decision because it elevated the institutional status for both.

At the co-chair level, leaders worked together to review and identify the specific nuances around their OWG in comparison to a defined list of responsibilities provided to them by the USG. Individuals also acknowledged reaching out to administrators at other USG institutions who had previously experienced a merger to learn from their experiences. Participants acknowledged the individual nuances within each of their units including contracts, grants, policies, logistics, equipment, timelines, community partnerships, and relationships that would need to be considered and addressed. These individual factors emerged during preliminary meetings between co-chairs, and as they engaged their committees in their efforts.

Cognitive Participation

Cognitive participation pertains to the relational work people do to build and sustain a community of practice around a complex intervention. While there were some manifestations of cognitive participation throughout the merger, the reality of what transpired in this space left a lot to be desired. Leaders willingly accepted the invitation to serve as a co-chair, citing a sense of responsibility to ensure the desired outcomes were realized. At the cognitive participation level of implementation, participants need to identify strategies and actions that will be taken to drive initiatives forward, even when things become challenging. This includes more complex organizing, and re-organizing, to ensure that the goals and objectives are carried out in a

collaborative fashion. It also involves participants constantly re-assessing the value they can add and collectively defining actions for participants to sustain the effort and remain engaged.

I found very little evidence to support a rich level of cognitive participation. In fact, I believe in most OWGs the exact opposite happened. Many participants acknowledged that they were in co-chair relationships, and at least during the onset of OWG work, most felt like it was an equal relationship. However, it was clear that when the first indication of disagreement or difference emerged, the work no longer became collaborative, and an assertion of authority became the norm. GPC participants frequently commented that they felt their insights and contributions were often not acknowledged, and in some cases they were excluded entirely from decisions that were forwarded for consideration. Where professional relationships existed between co-chairs prior to the merger, there were indications that those relationships were strained and impacted by this process. Several began questioning the value they added and several sought new employment before things were finalized in their OWG. GSU participants, on the other hand, shared that they felt a sense of obligation to lead out in these processes, and wanted to “take charge” because GSU leaders were clearly directing the merger process. Completing the task became more of a priority than creating partnerships. Outside one co-chair’s experience, there was scant evidence on either side that would confirm the presence of an organized effort to ensure cognitive participation throughout the implementation process among OWGs.

Collective Action

Collective action is the operational work that people do to enact a set of practices in a complex intervention. Elements of interactional workability of solutions, building accountability, the division of labor to complete tasks, and resource allocation are particularly salient in

collective action during implementation. My research confirmed mixed support for the presence of collective action during co-chair implementation efforts. Interactional workability of solutions considers how solutions are being evaluated as they out in everyday practice as they are operationalized. Participants confirmed that there were conversations in their effort around the systems or processes they would use in the new institution, but many of those could be more accurately described as persuasive conversations. Rather than focusing on how these new systems or processes would be integrated into the new institution and addressing the scenarios they may encounter as they do so, participants shared that much of their time was spend on “convincing each other” why theirs was better than the other.

I found no evidence to support any efforts in the OWG process to build in measures of accountability necessary to maintain confidence in the sets of practices recommended to the CIC, and by which these functional units would operate post merger. What emerged was GSU practices were mostly adopted and forwarded as final recommendations that would be the standard operating procedure in the new institution. While some of the OWGs were small and narrowly defined in their responsibilities, many of them were larger in scope with many subgroups requiring a division of labor allowing for specialization of focus and expertise. Resource allocation was evident in the time many GSU co-chairs and their respective divisions spent on up skilling, or re-skilling their GPC counterparts on new systems. These efforts included examples such as training on new software systems to manage HR related functions, financial transactions, operating call centers, or training on more complex policies used at GSU.

It’s probable that the USG imposed restrictions on what OWG co-chairs could recommend (finances, organization, personnel), and the narrowly defined list of task they were given, had some bearing on the level of collective action within these groups. Much of the

activity in this space occurred during the eight-month period between the merger announcement and when final recommendations had to be submitted to the CIC for final approval.

Reflexive Monitoring

Reflexive monitoring is the appraisal work that people do to assess and understand the ways that a new set of practices affects them and others around them. In this stage of implementation, people are purposeful and intentional in creating systematic processes to collect information from a variety of sources in order to evaluate the worth of a set of practices. Reflexive monitoring also involves reconfiguration or the modification of practices, or to change practices all together. Evidence of reflexive monitoring did not emerge during the initial implementation phase of the merger (phase one). There was, however, evidence to support informal processes of reflexive monitoring that emerged in phase three, but were largely based on experimental trial and error. GPC practices, largely overlooked when final recommendations were made to the CIC, were once again being re-considered by these functional units with some GSU leaders acknowledging more consideration should have been given to these practices during phase two.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Several findings from this research can help guide mid-level administrators, institutional leaders, and state higher education agency leaders contemplating a merger. Mid-level administrators tasked with implementation will need to acknowledge the timeline required for full integration and implementation, and be prepared to sustain their activities over extended periods of time. As we learned in this case, mergers take time to fully integrate and these factors should be considered during planning and implementation stages. This effort can be sustained by

integrating practices that strengthen and sustain professional and collegial relationships among peers and units.

Mid-level administrators must allocate the appropriate time on the front end of a merger implementation phase in designing and planning a unit implementation strategy. This could include clarifying roles, responsibilities, communication strategies, rules of shared governance conduct, and dispute resolution processes. Consideration should be given to allocating time to test decisions and establish metrics to evaluate implantation progress against stated outcomes. Establishing accountability measures ensures that the process moves in the desired direction towards stated objectives. They also provide a framework for offering explanations or justifications about how decisions are reached, and could require supporting evidence to justify recommendations. A neutral and unbiased external third party should be considered to help leaders establishes these practices or to assist with mediating differences when they arise. This may include subject matter experts in OWG functional areas or external consulting firms.

Establishing a clear communication plan will be paramount as implementation moves forward and should be considered a foundational task for all committees and working groups in a merger with a master plan developed by the institutions communications office and the president. For public institutions undergoing a merger, transparency is a value that must be incorporated into planning and implementation activities. In the GSU-GPC case, publically available records of the working group deliberations were scant, and those that were available contained little if any beneficial information to understanding the implementation process. A clearly defined communication plan should delineate critical stakeholder groups, the issues they are to communicate, how information will be disseminated, how records will be maintained, where

information can be accessed, and the frequency of communication. Public institutions may also want to consider making implementation working group meetings open to the public to ensure full transparency of the process.

With clearly defined accountability measures and communication plans in place, system and institutional leaders may consider limiting the restrictions placed on administrators during implementation, which may hinder creativity and innovation. If system and institutional leaders insist on delimited restrictions, expectations of idealized implementation processes and outcomes should be tempered accordingly. The OWG deliberations in the GSU-GPC merger seemed to have navigated away from answering the question “what’s best?” and instead focused on “who’s is best?” While it’s possible that these restrictions were put in place to minimize conflicts and tension, they also likely had significant impact on the long-term outcomes of the merger.

At the organizational and system level, merger leadership structures should be representative of the change desired. If leaders decide a merger is the best path forward, the leadership structure to navigate the change should reflect this. The same holds true for an effort in other forms of institutional conjoining. In the case of GSU-GPC, the message was to integrate the best of both institutions, reflective of a true consolidation. However, the opportunity to integrate the best that both institutions had to offer was nullified by the organizational leadership structure that was established to navigate the process. This misalignment created a scenario of incongruence between stated and actualized outcomes. In somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the imbalance of power filtered down to OWGs resulting in an institution that did not reflect the best that both had to offer.

While the desire to call a conjoining of institutions a more politically palatable name has traditionally been preferred in higher education, this practice may prove to be counterproductive

during implementation and beyond. This practice creates confusion, feeds mistrust, and can ultimately derail good intentions. Leaders should consider the benefits that can be realized during implementation and sustaining long-term integration of best practices from offering full transparency around institutional intentions up front. Call it for what it is. Then be generous with offering clarity about the desired vision for the future of the new institution, and support the change by over communicating progress and small victories. This approach could prove beneficial in sustaining positive momentum when issues arise, as they are sure to happen.

State agencies and independent institutions considering a merger should dedicate significant attention in providing clarity about the goals, desired outcomes, performance metrics, and other variables that can be used to measure and report progress overtime. In the GSU-GPC merger, mid-level administrators were looking for a guiding “north star” to guide their process. Systems and institutional leaders could do more to define what each identified opportunity would look like once the implementation process is finalized and establish progress benchmarks for several years into the future. This would provide benchmarks that could be reinforced during implementation while allowing for adjustments over time as best practices become institutionalized.

Finally, leaders should give significant consideration to the time allotted towards the planning and implementation phases of a merger. In the GSU-GPC case, the process felt rushed for many of the administrators involved. Outside of meeting a pre-determined substantive review deadline established by the external accrediting SACSCOC, there was never any justification or reason offered as to why the process needed to move so quickly. State and institutional leaders contemplating a merger should consider feasibility studies and proper planning exercises to be an integral part of the process. Doing so may allow for greater sense-making exercises, input from

various stakeholders enhancing buy-in, and sufficient time for leaders to tool and re-tool practices as they work through the implementation process. Given the complex and oftentimes sensitive nature of the changes that will transpire, the extension of an implementation timeline seems likely to contribute to more favorable long-term outcomes.

LIMITATIONS

This research is a case study on the implementation experiences of mid-level administrators between two distinct postsecondary institutions and was limited in scope to the newly merged Georgia State University. While there were several other institutions impacted during the USG restructuring, this study carefully examined the experiences of these professionals at only one of the consolidations in order to create a rich, detailed description of their lived experiences. This merger occurred between two state sponsored institutions that were governed by the same policies, laws, and organizational limitations set forth by the USG. In certain situations, this facilitated the process of merging for some of these units. However, because of these similarities, the findings that are presented in this study may be limited in their explanatory power for other mergers, including those between public and private institutions. And while these two institutions were sponsored by the same state government entity, they were significantly different in their size, scope, mission and structure. Institutions manifesting more similarities than differences pre-merger, may not encounter the same challenges faced in this particular case.

Another limitation of this study is that it only focused on the administrative units of the institutions in the merger. It intentionally did not include the experiences of academic college leaders and faculty members. These were left out because I was only interested in understanding

the implementation experiences of leaders in functional units where high duplication existed. In the GSU-GPC merger, the academic units were very distinct, which in my assessment, left a lot of room for flexibility and negotiation between co-chairs in those OWGs and would merit its own research study. Certainly, as I will comment below, several participants in this study suggested that the faculty experience was quite different from their own, and those differences merit exploration in future research. In addition, this study examined only one level of the organization during the merger, between co-chairs of OWGs. There were other organizational levels that were also involved in the implementation of the merger that were not considered here, namely the work of the CIC, FACs, and at the president and executive level.

As with many qualitative studies, this research was conducted among a small pool of participants with a defined scope. While a significant effort was made to gather data from co-chairs from all the functional units in this merger, there were still a handful of departments and leaders not represented in this study. This limitation, and the findings herein, cannot necessarily be applied to other settings or other mergers. However, the findings of this study can be used to better understand and explain the experiences and perceptions of the participants involved in this research.

Another limitation to this study was that the primary source of data came from interviews with participants who had experienced significant change. In some cases the change had significant personal impact on the individual interviewed, which can lead to some biases. Many of the participants were asked to recall discussions, decisions, and feelings from the process that had happened in the past. In some cases, it is possible that the time between the activities of implementation and when they were interviewed may have led the participants to forget some of

the finer details. This time gap could have caused these participants to potentially reframe their true lived experiences.

While time poses some limitations, it was also a factor in considering that these two institutions were still very much merging. This was indicated and highlighted in the previous chapter as an emergent theme. While two years had passed since the merger had been declared “complete”, these leaders were still in the process of reconciling differences between the two institutions. In some cases, these leaders were re-doing some of the work they had previously done after realizing some of the best practices were not implemented. In this light, the ongoing changes invite the possibility that there were still issues to emerge that had not yet been experienced by these leaders. Mergers in any organization can take years, and even decades to finalize. It’s possible that these leaders were still in the inchoate stages of implementation and not enough time had passed to uncover all the potential issues they may continue to face.

In several instances during interviews, participants were initially reluctant to share their true feelings about the merger as they experienced it. On several occasions, participants sought affirmation that their anonymity would be preserved, leading me to believe that some participants withheld experiences because they were afraid of retribution, were too difficult to share, too sensitive, or for some other deciding factor. The possibility of being identified may have limited what was offered during data collection.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The advantage of focusing on a research topic that has received little attention is that there are several potential avenues to pursue for future research. As higher education continues to face mounting challenges, the level of interest and consideration that mergers receive from

institutional leaders and their sponsors will continue to increase. While the findings from this study demonstrate the importance of understanding the experiences of those tasked with the implementation, more inquiry is still needed to better understand what happens after the decision to merge has been made. More research is needed to understand the implementation process and how this critical phase may influence the long-term outcomes of the merger.

The first opportunity for future research rests in the fact that most studies have focused on the impetuses and outcomes of a merger. Very little has been done to help us understand the implementation phase of a merger and what transpires during the in-between. There just simply isn't enough data to make definitive conclusions about the best ways to proceed in these situations. More research is needed simply to build the data pool of evidence to support best practices of implementation, to identify pitfalls leaders should avoid, and to understand the behaviors that drive and sustain positive outcomes. While significant changes like a merger can be scary for many, they don't need to be painful and destructive. As interest in merging institutions increases, a more detailed blueprint for the best way to execute on these decisions is necessary. These blueprints must move beyond the tactical checklist of to-dos, and incorporate the contextual, behavioral, and relational factors, and the organizational support systems that drive and sustain the activities that will yield positive desired outcomes.

A ripe research opportunity exists by studying the experiences of faculty in this space. This is especially true for institutions with very different missions. In this case, many of the faculty members at Georgia State University were Ph.D.'s with strong research preferences in their work. While there were many faculty members at Georgia Perimeter College with Ph.D.'s, there were still a large percentage who were not. A passion for teaching was the motivator for many of these faculty members. Additional research on these individuals will help us cast light

on how these differences are reconciled. Can both co-exist simultaneously at both institutions? If so, what are the benefits? And what are the costs to doing so? Furthermore, additional research may shed light on how academic agendas are determined, what disciplines persist and what ones are dissolved. It may also cast light on how tenure decisions are made when incongruence exists in faculty profiles, and the factors that are considered when determining who stays and who goes.

Third, this research study focused on one level of analysis within an institution experiencing a merger. However, the implementation spans across multiple layers of the organization. Institutions may organize themselves in a variety of ways during the implementation phase. These different organizational models create a variety of exciting opportunities for researchers. In the GSU-GPC merger, and all USG consolidations for that matter, the system dictated the best way to implement the change. This structure created opportunities to understand implementation at the CIC level, the FAC level, and also the president and executive levels. It begs the question: did the leaders at these organizational levels experience similar issues during the implementation phase as their colleagues in an OWG? If so, why? And if not, what distinguishes these experiences? And why? How did they interact with one another during implementation? And how were differences reconciled between them? Many possibilities exist here.

Another avenue of research disregards the organizational levels of analysis and instead focuses on one individual unit within a merger. Such an analysis would involve a deep dive into one OWG or functional unit with a comprehensive collection of data from OWG co-chairs, committee members, and other employees from both institutions impacted by the change. Coupled with this perspective, researchers might consider a longitudinal analysis of the

implementation process as it unfolds. As this case study confirmed, the merger was still ongoing for the participants in this study. Many expressed that it would take a few if not several more years to work through the process. Working collaboratively with these units may allow for more rigorous and robust processes for data collection and analysis. Using this data, researchers may be able to draw more definitive conclusions around the practices that consider reconfiguration of practices and how those are sustained to yield favorable merger outcomes over time.

Finally, while mergers between public and private institutions are somewhat infrequent, there are signs that more are being considered. Researchers who are able to pursue a deeper understanding of the implementation process in any context of analysis between a public and private institution are likely to find exciting evidence emerge. Research is needed in this space to understand how institutions with different institutional sagas, values, and stakeholder groups, among other differences, come together during implementation.

CONCLUSION

The future state of higher education is at a crucial tipping point. In response, institutions are seeking out the best ways to respond while still providing their constituents the value they seek. Mergers and consolidations among post-secondary institutions have observed increasing level of activity and support in response to these challenges over the past decade. These significant changes can be expected to have substantial impact on what post-secondary education will look like into the future. The efficacy of these outcomes will be contingent upon the activities faculty, staff and administrators engage in during these processes. Mergers cannot be completed in isolation, nor can any individual stakeholder group own and run the process. As the number of mergers increase, governing boards, stakeholder groups, presidents, and executive

leadership teams will be required to lean on multiple constituents in the process. Mid-level administrators are one key stakeholder group and we are just beginning to understand their level of impact during implementation and sustaining integration.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Script:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. As I mentioned in my invitation, I am very interested in understanding your experience as a manager/leader and your role in the GSU/GPC merger. Everything we discuss will be kept confidential through the use of a pseudonym so your answers will remain anonymous. The interview will take about 45-60 minutes. I'll use a personal recorder in order to be able to go back and transcribe our discussion. Please let me know if you need a break at any point in time.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. To begin, will you please share with me the role you played in the merger between GSU/GPC? How did you get involved? What tasks were you required to perform?
2. From your experience, will you please tell me a little about how the consolidation process unfolded among the operational working group (OWG) you participated in?
 - a. How often did you meet? What were those meetings like?
 - b. Did the process go the way you anticipated it to go? Why or why not?
 - c. What actions did the OWG have to undertake?
 - d. What processes did the OWG incorporate?
3. Where there any external issues that emerged that may have affected the merger outcome?
 - a. What were they? How were those addressed?
4. Where there any internal issues that emerged that may have affected the merger outcome?
 - a. What were they? How were those addressed?
5. Were there significant surprises as the process moved ahead?
6. Did conflicts emerge among units and institutions, and how were those addressed?
7. Have there been any tensions or conflicts that have persisted since the merger was made official, or have they all been satisfactorily resolved?
8. Before the merger, you worked with (GSU or GPC), correct? How did the merger impact you? How did it impact your role with the institution?
9. Of course, hindsight is always 20/20, but in retrospect is there anything that could have been done better at the institutional level during the merger process? Why?

- a. Do you think your view on this is widely shared?
10. Is there anyone you know that played a similar role as you in the merger that you think I should talk to?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to add that perhaps I didn't ask you about, but that you feel is relevant?

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<<Date>>

Dear <<Insert Name>>,

I am a PhD candidate at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia with research interests in higher education consolidations. I am writing to request your participation in my dissertation research dealing with the recent consolidation between Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College, which was one of many recent higher education consolidations in the University System of Georgia.

The general purpose of this dissertation research is to better understand the experiences of employees who were tasked with implementation of the consolidation effort. I am contacting you because you have been identified as someone who served as a Co-chair or committee member of an operational working group, or served in another critical leadership position during the consolidation. These individuals and their experiences are the target audience for my dissertation research. Specifically, I would like to better understand two questions:

1. How did a critical structural change process, the consolidation of two distinctive postsecondary institutions, unfold among managers and leaders in the affected institutions?
2. What substantive issues emerged during the consolidation process, and how were those addressed?

This work will expand our knowledge of how a complex change process unfolds in a higher education setting.

If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would like to conduct an interview with you during the month of May or June 2018. The interview will not take more than one hour of your time and you can choose how we conduct the interview. ***I can conduct our interview via videoconference, over the telephone, or in person and as soon as May 29th, 2018.***

If you choose to participate, reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal individually-identifiable information in your research record private and confidential. With your permission, an audio record of our conversation will be saved to help me remember what was said during our interview. The audio file will be destroyed once it has been fully transcribed. While conducting the study, only my faculty adviser and I will have access to the audio files and transcripts. All information will be stored in a locked file or password-protected computer in my home office. Of

course, you understand that your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled including your employment or employment evaluations. No foreseeable risks or discomforts are expected. There may also be no potential benefits for you personally from this study. However, the potential benefits to research on this subject may include a better understanding of higher education consolidations.

If you would be willing to make the time to participate, I would be truly grateful since your perspective will add tremendous value to this study. If you already know you would like to participate and want to schedule a formal appointment, or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone at (208) 557-8017 or by email at aklemme@uga.edu. Otherwise, I will reach out to you via email or telephone to check on your interest in participating and will look to schedule an appointment and answer any questions you may have at that time.

Additional questions, concerns, or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, 200 D.W. Brooks Dr. Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-5969; E-Mail Address ovpr@uga.edu. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. James Hearn, Professor and Associate Director, Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. He can be reached by email at jhearn@uga.edu or by phone at 706-542-8729. Again, thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Adrian K. Klemme
PhD Candidate
aklemme@uga.edu
(208) 557-8017

APPENDIX C

STUDY CONSENT FORM

University of Georgia Consent Form

Mid-level Manager Experiences During A Merger Between Two Distinctive Postsecondary Institutions

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, You can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator

Adrian K. Klemme; Ph.D Candidate, Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-6772, 208-557-8017, aklemme@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand the experiences of mid-level managers and leaders who were active participants in facilitating a merger between two very distinctive postsecondary institutions. The intent of this case study will be to focus on the experiences of those individuals who were tasked with the implementation of the consolidation between Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College as part of their role leading or serving on an operational working group committee, or in a similar capacity. I am interested in better understanding how the change process unfolded, what processes were employed, how expectations formed and changed, and what actions were taken to deal with these challenges. Furthermore, it seeks to understand if there were any significant surprises as the process moved forward, if conflicts emerged and how those were addressed, or if any noteworthy tensions or conflicts have persisted, or if those have been resolved.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to...

- Participate in one semi-structured interview with me. The interviews will last about an hour, and will be scheduled with you in person when possible, or via telephone or computer video conferencing should we not be able to meet in person. Interview questions will be related to your unique experience as part of an Operational Working Group during the Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College consolidation.
- Pending your approval, interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Risks and Discomforts

I have identified the following potential risks associated with this research. Please refer to the Privacy/Confidentiality section below for an explanation of steps taken to minimize these risks.

- You will be asked to reflect upon your professional experiences and relationships. No foreseeable risks to participants are anticipated, as methods of data collection are non-obtrusive and innocuous.
- Should you feel uncomfortable with the interview, you will be allowed to skip to another question, or discontinue the interview.

Benefits

This study seeks to understand the experiences of leaders and mid-level managers in a higher education merger between two very distinct institutions. As more and more states consider mergers between higher education institutions, this research will expand upon the understanding of how managers and leaders experience a change, how the process unfolds, and how they make sense of the change. It adds to a very limited and small literature base about the process of change in higher education mergers. The information gained from this study may help to inform implementation process for other states and institutions also currently considering a merger.

Audio/Video Recording

To fully capture your response and be certain I do not minimize your experience during the Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter college consolidation, I intend to record our interview. The recording will be stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study. However, audio/video recording is optional for participants.

Privacy/Confidentiality

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed. I will not disclose your identity in the write-up of the findings. The written reports and other records will use pseudonyms.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRG) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION



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Human Research Protection Program

REVIEW OF INFORMATION ITEM

July 12, 2019

Dear Dr. Hearn and Mr. Klemme,

On 7/12/2019 the IRB reviewed the following information item(s): *Request for final approval letter for STUDY00005762*

This information is in regard to:

Type of Review:	Reportable New Information
Title of Study:	Mid-level Manager Experiences During A Higher Education Merger (STUDY00005762)
Investigator:	James Hearn
Co-Investigator:	Adrian Klemme
IRB Submission ID:	RNI00000157

The co-investigator provided copies of correspondence from HSO staff member, Brooke Harwell, dated 1/31/18 at 4:08 p.m. that indicated that the study was approved and research could begin. However, the correspondence on the portal record indicated that the research could only begin after the site (Georgia State University) provided authorization for the research and a copy was given to the UGA IRB.

This IRB determined that the proposed project met criteria for Exempt determination and that the co-investigator has provided all of the required documentation to conduct the study. This letter should be accepted in place of a final determination/approval letter for the project.

Please let us know if you need additional information.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Fowler, Director, Human Subjects Office
University of Georgia

cc: *Convened committee as an information item*

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