

HIGHER EDUCATION MERGERS:
THE ROLES OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

by

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(Under the Direction of Erik C. Ness)

ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities in the United States have faced extraordinary pressures in the past ten years due to economic strains, political challenges, and demographic shifts. These stressors on institutional viability have pushed some state systems of higher education and politicians to increasingly consider mergers as a strategy to reduce costs and increase educational attainment levels and meet workforce needs. However, the implementation of mergers remains an unusual and understudied change initiative. Using an embedded, single-case study methodology, this study expands on Tierney's (1988b, 2008) theoretical framework related to organizational culture in American higher education while drawing upon organizational communication theory and sensemaking theory to explore the overarching questions of how organizational cultures shape the merger process and change as a result of the process. Combining research on higher education mergers, organizational culture and communication, and sensemaking with interviews of institutional leaders and an analysis of relevant documents, this study provided a unique examination of the role of institutional culture and communication in higher education mergers. Significant findings emerging from the study underscored the disruptive nature of mergers and the importance of robust communication strategies to help

stakeholders understand the need for the change and reduce the level of uncertainty associated with change, engage stakeholders in the change implementation process, and envision future opportunities. The study also confirmed that, despite similarities among institutions of higher education, each campus has a unique culture that reflects its mission, leadership, customs, socialization, and ways of making decisions. These distinctive cultural elements have significant influence during the merger process, as community members make sense of the changing organizational structure.

INDEX WORDS: Merger, Campus culture, Organizational communication, Organizational change, Sensemaking

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ABJ, University of Georgia, 1989

MEd, Georgia Southern University, 2014

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2019

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December 2019

DEDICATION

To my friends and family who have sustained me in this endeavor, and, in particular, Bill, Kelsey, and Evan Maine – who encourage and inspire me with their infinite creativity, relentless determination, and bountiful love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many individuals who have provided wisdom and encouragement to sustain me over the course of my doctoral program, and each of them is a part of this achievement.

First, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Andrew Leavitt and the faculty, staff, and administrators at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, who graciously welcomed me to their community, sacrificed their time to talk with me, and openly discussed their experiences to make this study possible. I appreciate their trust and confidence in me and the opportunity to share their story.

I am indebted to Dr. Erik Ness for his direction and thoughtful guidance, which were fundamental to the successful completion of this dissertation, and to my committee members, Dr. Jim Hearn and Dr. Karen Webber. Each of you challenged me to think critically and provided insightful advice that helped me focus my research and improved my study.

Thank you also to Dr. Leslie Gordon and Dr. Charles Knapp for their leadership and coordination of UGA's Institute of Higher Education Ed.D. program. We benefitted from your mentorship, dedication, and sense of humor.

To my classmates in the "Fabulous Five" Ed.D. cohort, thank you for your enduring friendship. We have studied together, traveled together, cried together, and celebrated together. You enriched my experience in this program, and it was a tremendous privilege to share this journey and achievement with you.

I am particularly grateful to my colleagues at the University of North Georgia and President Bonita Jacobs and for your encouragement, support, and patience over the past two years. I am thankful to work with such an outstanding and committed group of professionals.

To my family and friends, thank you for believing in me, for understanding when I was absent due to the demands of school, and for your steadfast encouragement.

Finally, to my husband and partner through thick and thin, Bill Maine, thank you. You have always been my most enthusiastic cheerleader, and I could not have accomplished this without your unwavering support; I love you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Context.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Research Questions	4
Significance.....	4
Dissertation Structure.....	5
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Introduction.....	6
Higher Education Mergers: An overview	6
Definitions and Types of Mergers	8
Implications for Organizational Culture	9
Managing the Change Process	12
The Role of Communication in Change Management and Acculturation.....	17
Theoretical Framework.....	21

Summary	35
3 METHODOLOGY	37
Purpose and Significance.....	37
Design of the Study.....	38
Research Questions.....	39
Case Selection.....	40
Data Collection	41
Data Analysis	44
Researcher Bias and Assumptions.....	45
Conclusion	46
4 THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN OSHKOSH	47
Restructuring the University of Wisconsin System.....	48
The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Campuses.....	52
Thematic Findings	59
Conclusion	85
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	86
Review of the Study.....	87
Findings.....	89
Recommendations.....	96
Limitations and Areas for Future Research	99
REFERENCES	101
APPENDICES	
A IRB APPROVAL VIA LETTER OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION.....	117

B	SITE APPROVAL	118
C	RESPONDENTS	119
D	INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	120
E	INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS.....	121
F	STUDY CONSENT FORM	122
G	RESEARCHER IDENTITY MEMO	124

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Two Main Disciplinary Foundations of Organizational Culture	24
Table 2: A Framework of Organizational Culture	26
Table 3: Summary of Campus Characteristics.....	59

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework	28
Figure 2: A Model of Implementation Communication Strategy Selection, Stakeholder Concerns, Assessments, Interactions, and Outcomes	32
Figure 3: Model of Employee Sensemaking Needs and Leader Sensegiving Modes Across Four Change Phases	34
Figure 4: Wisconsin High School Graduation Trends, 2001-2034.....	49
Figure 5: Map of the University of Wisconsin System Restructuring.....	51
Figure 6: UW Oshkosh Restructuring Implementation Workgroups	67
Figure 7: UW Oshkosh Restructuring Roles and Responsibilities	69

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Context

Since 2000, there have been more than 100 mergers or acquisitions among postsecondary institutions in the United States (Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, & Jacobs, 2019). Mergers have generally occurred in response to external pressures related to funding constraints, market forces and enrollment shifts, or political and government influences. With these pressures unlikely to change and a precedent of successful mergers among public universities in states like Georgia and in the private sector, industry associations like the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, experts from The Pew Charitable Trusts, and news outlets like *Inside Higher Ed* have reported that more institutions will explore mergers as a strategy to improve their market position, increase efficiencies and improve performance (Busta, 2019; McBain, 2012; Quinton, 2017; Seltzer, 2017; Unglesbee 2018).

The process of consolidating two or more higher education institutions through a merger represents significant organizational change that often results in complex, multi-campus organizations, combined academic departments and support units, and new ways of communicating and conducting business. These changes can produce concerns related to organizational identity, altered organizational structures and processes, job security, and stability potentially lead to ambiguity, loss of productivity, faculty and staff turnover, enrollment declines, and diminished alumni and stakeholder support. If mergers continue to be an essential

change strategy, colleges and universities, institutional leaders need an increased understanding of managing change in ways that mitigate those risks and enhance opportunities for success.

Much of the existing research on higher education mergers has come from the wave of mergers in the Australian, British, and European education markets from the 1980s to the early 2000s, and those international scholars have focused primarily on organizational structure, changes in identity, and governance (Harman & Harman, 2003; Cartwright, Tytherleigh, & Robertson, 2007; Frölich, Trondal, Caspersen, & Reymert, 2016). There is a great deal of research related to mergers in corporate settings, where scholars have studied market shifts, operational changes, and marketing strategies, and they have also placed a heavy emphasis on the “human side” of mergers – understanding organizational culture and the importance of effective communication in managing change processes (Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Burke, 1988; Millet, 1976). For example, in their research related to corporate mergers and acquisitions, Buono and Bowditch (1989) wrote:

The full potency of organizational culture can be seen during a merger or acquisition when two disparate cultures are forced to become one...organizations that may appear to be highly compatible on the surface and that seemingly should be able to achieve valuable merger synergies can have underlying cultural differences that seriously threaten their integration. (p. 142-143)

Statement of the Problem

There is a growing body of literature in the United States surrounding the exploratory process postsecondary institutional leaders should undertake if a considering merger (Millet, 1976; Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs, & Ladd, 2017; Seltzer, 2018). However, given that higher education mergers are disruptive to operations and organizational identity, are often

vigorously contested by stakeholders, and typically involve considerable human costs, it is surprising that there is so little research about: 1) how higher education organizational cultures impact mergers, 2) how organizational cultures are shaped by consolidations, or 3) effective strategies to lead and manage mergers. This dissertation aims to fill that void through a case study that expands on Tierney's (1988b, 2008) theoretical framework related to organizational culture in American higher education while drawing upon organizational communication theory to explore the overarching questions of how organizational cultures shape the merger process and change as a result of the process.

This research was grounded in organizational culture theory and a framework developed by William Tierney, who approaches the study of organizational culture from an interpretive perspective. In his overview of organizational culture in American higher education, Tierney (1988) noted, "An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, action, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level" (p. 3). His subsequent framework features six facets that contribute to an institution's culture: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. Through these elements, he argued, institutions define their purpose and identity, develop a sense of belonging, and inspire loyalty among employees, students, and alumni. Building upon that research, Tierney (2008) indicated the importance of communications and cultural norms in the success of organizational change. He noted, "People come to believe in their institution by the ways they interact and communicate with one another. Cultural norms surrounding such key issues as how decisions get made by whom, who is privy to information, and how information gets conveyed plays a key role in facilitating or impeding organizational change" (p. 28).

As noted, the research on corporate mergers, as well as the literature related to organizational culture by Tierney and others, points to the importance of communications in helping organizations and their actors develop meaning and identity through such significant change. Thus, this research also drew upon communication and sensemaking theory to understand how individuals and institutions use information and adapt during organizational change.

Research Questions

Based on the presumption that each institution of higher education has a culture that is specific to its organization, structure, environment, rituals, and leadership, this research addressed the following questions:

1. How do existing organizational cultures shape the merger process, as perceived by senior institutional leaders?
2. How do organizational cultures change during and following the implementation of institutional mergers?
3. How do institutional leaders use communication and change strategies manage the change process, reduce conflict and anxiety, and support acculturation into a single organization?

Significance

Of the post-secondary institutions that merged between 2010 and 2017, nearly half involved at least one public institution (Quinton, 2017). Since then, more public institutions and systems have initiated or announced plans for mergers, many of which involve consolidations of two-year community colleges with four-year institutions (Busta, 2019). These types of mergers are typically driven by state policies and goals, such as reducing costs or increasing completion

rates, and face significant challenges due to their different missions, structures, identities, student populations, and faculty (Busta, 2019; Quinton, 2017). This case study focused on a merger between a public four-year institution and a two-year institution with different missions, structures, identities, and student populations to construct a better understanding of the change management and communications strategies related to shaping institutional culture.

Continued research into higher education mergers and the factors that support their success is significant as they are likely to continue to grow in number. The findings from this study contribute to the body of scholarly work about institutional mergers and provide valuable and practical recommendations to communications professionals, institutional leaders, and policymakers seeking to understand how to manage and lead institutional mergers in the future.

Dissertation Structure

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of mergers in higher education and some of the factors that contribute to their success or failure, as well as a gap in the research related to higher education mergers. In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature and the theoretical framework that informed this research. In Chapter 3, I outline the research design for the qualitative case study. Chapter 4 contains the findings of the case study. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of findings relative to the literature, along with recommendations for policymakers and institutional leaders and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter is designed to provide a review of literature and research related to mergers and consolidations among institutions of higher education, including the reasons behind higher education mergers, the challenges associated with mergers, and opportunities to improve on the change management process. The review of the literature includes the following sections: a historical overview of mergers in higher education, definitions and types of mergers, insights from research relative to corporate mergers, and implications related to organizational culture and identity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of relevant theories for exploring and understanding the complexities of organizational culture and change resulting from mergers.

Higher Education Mergers: An overview

While regarded by many as an unusual phenomenon, mergers in higher education are more common than one might think, and a review of the literature revealed that higher education has a long history of mergers, in the United States and internationally. In the United States, mergers date back to 1830, and there have been more than 100 mergers since 2000 (Azziz, Hentschke, B. Jacobs, L. Jacobs, & Ladd, 2017). Of those mergers, about half have involved at least one public institution of higher education (Azziz, Hentschke, L. Jacobs, & B. Jacobs, 2019). From an international perspective, higher education mergers and consolidations have been occurring in many countries—Australia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, South Africa, and

others—regularly since the 1970s and 1980s (Harman, 1989, 2002; Locke, 2007; Puusa & Kekäle, 2015; Rowley, 1997; Skodvin, 1999).

In the United States, mergers between private colleges have been used primarily to avoid closure of financially weak institutions, to combine single-sex institutions into coeducational institutions, or to build institutions with a broader or stronger array of academic programs (Martin & Samels, 1994; Millet, 1976). In the public sector, typically state colleges and universities have combined to form regional, multi-campus institutions (Azziz et al., 2017; McBain, 2012). Eastman and Lang (2001) noted that the state, because it controls funding and resources, plays a critical role as a driver for mergers of public, not-for-profit institutions.

In the United Kingdom, mergers date to the late 19th century, and the focus has been on absorbing small, specialized institutions into larger, more comprehensive universities to meet enrollment-based funding incentives. In Australia, mergers were implemented in three waves: between 1960 and 1981, the first wave of mergers combined small, specialized institutions to form larger institutions or to become part of universities; the second wave, from 1981 to 1987, was initiated by the government, which had controlled funding for all public higher education since 1974; during the third wave, from 1987 to 1991, institutions searched for merger partners to meet the government's new funding eligibility requirements based on enrollment size (G. Harman & K. Harman, 2002). In Finland, mergers were designed to create a more competitive system of institutions and respond to national economic pressures (Ursin, Aittola, Henderson, & Valimaa, 2010).

Mergers have also occurred in the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, New Zealand, Asia, South Africa, and Eastern Europe. In most cases, these consolidations were geared to address fragmentation by combining small, specialized institutions into larger colleges and universities

(Eastman & Lang, 2001; Skodvin, 1999). In Hungary, where the government was interested in eliminating duplication and achieving greater efficiencies, mergers were established on a geographic basis, rather than mission alignment (G. Harman & K. Harman, 2002).

Definitions and Types of Mergers

As evidenced in the preceding overview, mergers are referenced by a variety of terms, and they are often used interchangeably. The following discussion is intended to provide clarity among some of the distinctions and the perspective that will inform this study.

For the business world, Burke (1988) defined mergers as two or more companies combining to form one and used the term acquisition for situations where one larger, more powerful company assumed the assets, products, or management of another company. In her work related to higher education, Harman (2002) used the terms ‘merger’ and ‘amalgamation’ synonymously and adapted a definition from Goedegebuure (1992) as, “an amalgamation of two or more separate institutions that surrender their legally and culturally independent identities in favour *[sic]* of a new joint identity under the control of a single governing body” (p. 94). Similarly, Millet (1976), who served as the first chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents, defined merger as the appropriate label, rather than acquisition, when the following outcomes are expected from the consolidation process: a single board of trustees where two previously existed, a single chief executive officer, a single support service structure, and consolidation of comparable instructional departments.

G. Harman and K. Harman (2003) further identified various types of mergers in higher education, to include the following: voluntary and involuntary, consolidations and takeovers, single-sector and cross-sectoral mergers, two-partner, and multi-partner mergers, and similar and different academic profile mergers. Cross-sectoral or vertical mergers, such as those between

two-year and four-year institutions, were viewed as the most complicated due to their un-complementary, unequal or diverse missions, roles, cultures, and, sometimes, funding streams (Harman, 2002; Quinton, 2017).

For this study, higher education mergers will be generally defined as two or more colleges or universities that combine to form a single institution with one governing body, one chief executive officer, one administrative support system, and integrated academic programs. The term merger may be used interchangeably with consolidation.

Implications for Organizational Culture

When two independent organizations merge, they not only combine their physical assets, they also combine their employees, their customers, and their operational structures, systems, and policies. Even in the most harmonious situations, such significant organizational changes affect individuals and the organization as a whole and can factor heavily into the success or failure of a merger. If the merging units are very different in mission and culture, the success of the merger faces an even greater risk (Quinton, 2017).

The literature surrounding corporate mergers and acquisitions is prolific and pays particular attention to the importance of organizational culture. In their research related to corporate mergers and acquisitions, Buono and Bowditch (1989) wrote:

The full potency of organizational culture can be seen during a merger or acquisition when two disparate cultures are forced to become one...organizations that may appear to be highly compatible on the surface and that seemingly should be able to achieve valuable merger synergies can have underlying cultural differences that seriously threaten their integration. (p. 142-143)

Similarly, other scholars have noted that corporate mergers face a high rate of failure, around 50 percent, and that cultural differences—which include communication failures, divergent objectives, incongruent business models, political rivalries—are the most commonly cited reason (Habeck, Kröger, & Träm, 2000; Risberg, 1997).

Using a cultural ambiguity framework theorized by Martin and Meyerson (1991) to examine the role of ambiguity and communication in cross-cultural mergers, Risberg (1997) postulated that, while merger and acquisition research has discussed the unsettling effect of ambiguity and uncertainty in mergers, they “are still often interpreted from a perspective dominated by the advantages of similarities rather than the acknowledgment of differences.” (“Ambiguity, uncertainty and communication,” para. 8).

While the literature relative to mergers is clear that organizational culture is a factor that affects the success of mergers, the study of organizational culture is complicated by its many interpretations and its close relationship to organizational identity. Schein (1992), whose work focused on corporate mergers and acquisitions, described the culture of a group as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to these problems (p. 12).

In his overview of organizational culture in American higher education, Tierney (1988) noted, “An organization’s culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, action, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level” (p. 3).

Building upon the work by Schein (1992) and Tierney (1988b), Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley (2005) described institutional culture as “the shared beliefs, values and assumptions, and ideologies that bind a group together” (p. 6). They included in their definition many of the commonly used attributes of culture, including tangible symbols, language, narratives, and practices. They stated, “At universities and colleges, institutional culture conveys a sense of identity (who we are), facilitates commitment (what we stand for), enhances stability (how we do things here), guides sensemaking (how we understand events) and defines authority (who is influential)” (p. 6). However, they argued that higher education administrators should also examine the uses of institutional culture, to include encouraging stronger institutional affiliation, engagement, and loyalty.

Organizational cultures, including campus cultures, are socially constructed and dynamic in that they are shaped by members’ interpretations of internal and external actions and events (Locke, 2007; MacDonald, 2013a; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Tierney, 1987 and 2012). Key events in the life of an institution create an environment in which identity issues are likely to emerge. These events include organizational formation, the death or departure of a founder, achievement of the organization’s reason for being, rapid growth, retrenchment, and a merger or divestiture (Albert and Whetten, 1985; MacDonald, 2013).

Tierney (2008b), citing an anthropological metaphor from Clifford Geertz, noted that institutional cultures are webs of interconnected relationships, and the components of culture overlap with and connect, requiring one to examine the structure of that web, as well as interpretations of the web itself. He asserted that “a central goal of understanding organizational culture is to minimize the occurrence and consequences of cultural conflict and help foster the development of shared goals” (Tierney, 1988b, p. 5). Tierney (1988b) noted that the manners in

which the organization defines strategy and information are not fixed definitions irrespective of organizational type but instead revolve around cultural interpretations of what the actors have come to expect about “how we do things around here.” People come to believe in their institution by the ways they interact and communicate with one another. Cultural norms surrounding such critical issues as how decisions get made by whom, who is privy to information, and how information gets conveyed plays a crucial role in facilitating or impeding organizational change.

Managing the Change Process

By nearly all accounts, institutional mergers are disruptive and fraught with challenges. Mergers are disruptive to operations and institutional identity, are often vigorously contested by institutional stakeholders, and involve considerable human and financial costs. Burke (1988) highlighted this tension and noted that failed mergers are most often the result of a failure to manage the merger process. He wrote, “A merger is a process rather than an event and processes require planning, managing, and monitoring” to prevent failure (p. 22).

Regarding mergers and acquisitions, the business world and higher education have many similarities. However, the complexities of higher education institutions present different and significant challenges for consolidating institutions. In the realm of higher education, concerns related to organizational and social identity, altered organizational structures and processes, job security, and stability potentially lead to ambiguity, loss of productivity, faculty and staff turnover, enrollment declines, and diminished alumni and stakeholder support.

While institutions of higher education and corporate entities certainly share some attributes of organizational culture, there are several factors, particularly governance structures, stakeholders, decision-making processes, and funding models, that are distinctive to colleges and universities (Kezar, 2002). Change in higher education is notoriously slow due to the wide range

of stakeholders who compete for attention and resources. Also, colleges and universities tend to have many change initiatives occurring simultaneously at multiple levels – system, institution, or the academic or support unit. By contrast, change in business is relatively straightforward and almost always geared toward the bottom line of revenue (Kezar, 2009). Millet (1976) noted, “There is a price to be paid for a merger, and that price is change...Merger is an effort to accomplish change... And change never affects all persons involved equally, or necessarily improves the status of all persons” (p. 96). Similarly, Rowley (1997) stated, “...it seems that HE [higher education] mergers are much like mergers generally: costly, both before and after the event, and ‘messy’” (p. 261).

More than one study noted that the impact of change and the merger process resembled the process of grieving over the death of a loved one with those involved suffering distinct stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, before acceptance (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Zell, 2003). Schein (1985, 1990) explained the culture change process differently:

The change process starts with disconfirmation, which produces survival anxiety or guilt—the feeling that we must change—but the learning anxiety associated with having to change our competencies, our role or power position, our identity elements, and possibly our group membership causes denial and resistance to change. (p. 143)

It is likely that this sense of loss and grief is exacerbated by the context and conditions surrounding higher education mergers, which are generally associated with cuts in funding, enrollment declines, or other events that negatively impact the normal operations of the institution. To successfully shape the change process, institutional leaders must understand the context of change initiatives and the organization’s cultural attributes (Kezar, 2018; Thorp & Goldstein, 2018).

The literature surrounding higher education mergers indicated similar challenges and focused primarily on failures to communicate appropriately and manage the acculturation of the new institution. According to Harman (2002), the cultural dynamics of higher education at play in managing significant change like consolidation include role ambiguity and conflict, comparative values associated with teaching and research, reward structures, disciplinary and, institutional loyalties, and governance styles and structures. Kezar (2018) noted that campus communities might be skeptical about and resistant to some top-down change initiatives, such as restructuring and efficiency efforts, because they are incongruent with commonly held values, and she suggested that the most successful change leaders embrace resistance and encourage participation, communicate openly, and build trust. Millet (1976) noted that higher education mergers typically face substantial opposition from internal constituents, and while opposition did not thwart the merger process, it still resulted in prolonged hostilities. In providing guidance for future mergers, Millet cautioned, “The advantages of merger must be clearly articulated, and even then these advantages cannot be expected to be acceptable to all faculty members, to all students, to all alumni, to all staff” (p. 51).

In England, there were some 200 higher education mergers in the 1970s and 1980s. Rowley (1997) conducted a survey of institutions in England that merged between 1987 and 1994 and found that 90 percent of the higher education mergers she studied were successful, according to respondents’ perceptions. The success rate noted in Rowley’s study was, perhaps, skewed by the fact that the mergers implemented in England during that time primarily were incentivized by the government and institutions received additional financial support in many cases as a result. Nonetheless, her survey had a response rate of 73 percent and provided 30 examples for analysis, through which she found that the three most common unanticipated

problems in mergers concerned administration, property issues, and institutional culture mix. While administration and property issues are primarily functions of structure and organization, institutional culture is a much more challenging factor in organizational change, due to the intangible human elements involved, which could include social identity and emotional reactions.

In a phenomenographic study of the merger of two academic departments within an Australian university, Dasbrough, Lamb, and Suseno (2015) explored employees' emotional responses toward organizational change to become more competitive in response to further potential public-sector funding cuts. With a sample that represented about 30 percent of the employees to be merged—half of whom were administrative and half of whom were faculty—the researchers conducted interviews soon after the merger had been announced, but not yet implemented, and then again six months post-merger. Based on their initial interviews, they categorized employees' understandings of the merger into three groups: an opportunity to look forward to, a threat to be carefully managed, or change as inevitable. The employees experienced the merger in different ways depending upon their understanding or perception of the situation. Interestingly, post-merger, all of the employees interviewed who viewed the change positively were still employed, while nearly all employees who perceived the merger as a threat or who viewed change as inevitable had left the organization. As a result of the inability to re-interview each of the original participants due to employee turnover following the merger, they conducted follow-up interviews with one representative person from each of the initial understandings. Not surprisingly, they found that the employees experienced a range of emotions, including calm, excitement, anxiety, frustration, and a sense of loss. Similar to other research related to organizational change, their study revealed that employees' emotions became

less intense over time, changing from “anticipatory emotions of hope and fear in the pre-merger stage, to realized emotions of happiness and sorrow post-merger” (Dasborough, Lamb, & Suseno, 2015, p. 588).

Regardless of the type of merger, a key consideration is what the desired end state is in terms of integration or acculturation of the legacy institutions. Marks and Mirvis (2011) suggested several end states to corporate mergers: cultural pluralism, cultural integration, cultural assimilation, and cultural transformation. Cultural pluralism occurs when the parent organization grants autonomy to the second organization; cultural integration is described by Marks and Mirvis (2011) as the “best of both,” when the leaders of the merged organizations select the most desirable values and beliefs of the two organizations and choose those they wish to carry over to the merged organization. According to Marks and Mirvis (2011), cultural assimilation is the most common end state, which results when a dominant organization absorbs a smaller, less sophisticated organization. In the final iteration, cultural transformation, the end state is indicated by “ending the old before embarking on the new” (Marks & Mirvis, 2011, p. 872). Unlike the other possible end states, both cultures are completely eliminated, and a new one is created. Essential to the success of this type of acculturation is the communication of the new values and beliefs by top management.

As in corporate mergers, there may be varying levels of cultural integration in mergers of colleges and universities. Rowley (1997) recommended, among other items, that institutional leaders considering a merger should decide early in the process the type of acculturation that will follow the merger: integration, assimilation, separation, or deculturation. Lang (2003) was more blunt in his assessment of acculturation possibilities for higher education mergers: one culture

can be allowed to dominate, two universities can allow a degree of autonomy within each, or the less dominant institution could face closure.

Unfortunately, there is minimal practical information about *how* to manage higher education mergers; the focus leans more heavily toward what to consider when planning a merger and how to negotiate with potential partners. Millet's 1976 case study of 10 institutional mergers in the United States provided resulted in a reasonably detailed checklist for institutional leaders considering mergers; however, its focus was mainly on private institutions, and it lacked practical management recommendations for the actual merger process. Azziz and colleagues provided overviews of higher education mergers from a leadership perspective, with high-level recommendations about factors that contribute to success, including a proactive communications strategy (Azziz et al., 2017, 2019).

The Role of Communication in Change Management and Acculturation

Literature related to corporate mergers and acquisitions points to the importance of robust communications strategies to unify different organizational cultures (Applebaum et al., 2000; Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Burke, 1988; Marks & Mirvis, 1997; Schrader & Self, 2003). Appelbaum et al. (2000) emphasized that communication is the most critical factor in the merger and acquisition process because it impacts employee stress levels and the adoption of a new culture. Similarly, Schein further noted that the way individuals “communicate, explain, rationalize, and justify what they say and do as a community” (p. 17) contributes to how they make sense of the culture. Marks and Mirvis (1997) went so far as to coin the term “merger syndrome” to denote a breakdown in communication characterized by increased centralization and decreased communication by management with employees, which is detrimental to addressing employee uncertainty during the merger process.

In contrast, there is limited research on the role of communications in higher education mergers, particularly as it relates to the acculturation process (Aust, 2004; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Risberg, 1997; Ursin, Aittola, Henderson & Valimaa, 2010). Aust (2004) argued that communication's significance relevant to organizational processes had been underestimated because it is typically viewed only as a variable of identity research. Reinforcing the connectivity between organizational culture, identity, and communication, Euske and Roberts (1987) noted, "Communication is the social glue that ties members, subunits, and organizations together . . . Without communication, organizations" do not exist (p. 42), (as cited in Aust, 2004, p. 516). According to Lewis (2014), the change literature that is most relevant to communication focuses mainly on information sharing and knowledge creation, soliciting input, stakeholders' attitudes, and management of negative reactions (p. 508). As a core element of culture and identity, it is critical for leaders to understand how the messages they employ during organizational change affect stakeholders.

In a rare example of a quantitative study that attempted to connect the role of communications to organizational identity and values, Aust (2004) used content analysis to assess the development of a religious organization's identity. He defined organizational identity as "an organization's distinctive character discernible by those communicated values manifest in its externally transmitted messages" (p. 532). Using Value Theory, the premise of which suggests that people operate within a range of values and core beliefs are visible through physical communications (p. 524), and Rokeach's (1973) Value Survey as the basis for his study, measured the use and frequency of 36 distinct values communicated in the organization's published documents in its first five years of existence. This study is limited in its applicability and contributions to the understanding of organizational development because it only examined

the published elements related to organizational values; however, it points to the role of organizational leaders in using written language to communicate and reinforce organizational values as a means to shape internal and external comprehension of the organization and its mission.

Risberg (1997) noted that ambiguity, an element common in many mergers, by definition, is the lack of or insufficient information and communication. She asserted that ambiguity about organizational leadership, purpose, experience, and understanding, could be alleviated through communications that considers the meanings, values, and assumptions that are a part of the merging organizations' cultures. She further emphasized the importance of early and consistent communication to manage organizational change like acquisitions, as many stakeholders form their opinion about the acquiring organization early in the process, and a lack of information and communication can lead to ambiguity and complicate the merger.

In the context of organizational culture, Tierney (2008b) noted, "People come to believe in their institution by the ways they interact and communicate with one another" (p. 16), thus indicating the importance of communications and cultural norms in the success of organizational change, including how decisions get and made by whom, as well as who has information and how is it conveyed. This point, relative to higher education mergers, is clearly articulated in a study by Eastman and Lang (2001), who analyzed two Canadian postsecondary consolidations to articulate observations and lessons learned from the process, including several important considerations regarding the role of communication in higher education mergers and strategies for effective management. First, they noted that a merger "complicates already complex patterns of communication because sources of official communication – and some of their 'audiences' – change with changes in institutional structures" (p. 187). The authors highlighted that in one of

the mergers, while the unpredictable nature of the merger process made detailed communication planning difficult, institutional leaders found it useful to identify strategic constituencies and appropriate vehicles for communication with them. Second, they recommended communicating early and regularly, even when answers to questions and concerns are not yet available (p. 191). The authors acknowledged that while communication in a climate of uncertainty carries some risk, a lack of communication resulted in anxiety and skepticism. Two other relevant recommendations from Eastman and Lang (2001) were to be sure stakeholders learn about merger developments from the leaders of their institutions, rather than other sources, and to be sure to use clear language and avoid minimizing potential changes, such as the possibility of layoffs. These final recommendations point to the value of trust, integrity, and leadership during organizational change, which returns full-circle to Tierney's framework (1988b, 2008) for organizational culture and the development of trust through communication. Tierney (2008) wrote, "...organizational trust occurs through multiple and overlapping conditions. Face-to-face interactions; communicative frameworks; and organizational processes, structures and actions" (p. 38).

That position is reinforced by Lewis (1999), who analyzed questionnaires from 89 respondents who had been involved in change implementation in a variety of organizational sectors. The goal of the study was to learn how leaders communicated with internal stakeholders when implemented planned change and to ascertain if and how leaders connected communicative actions with change process outcomes. She found that the most commonly used means of disseminating information were face-to-face channels and that change agents or top management were the primary providers of information. Presumably, this approach pointed to a desire by management to ensure consistent messaging and direct communication nearer the top of the

organization. Not surprisingly, implementers perceived this method of communication as having the most significant degree of success on planned change efforts. However, Lewis' study highlighted two additional points important to change implementation and communication: 1) line supervisors, who likely have a significant influence employees and the degree of uncertainty they may be experiencing, were rarely used as part of the change communication strategy, and 2) channels for soliciting input were not used as frequently as channels for disseminating information.

Finally, the importance of the role of communicators is reinforced by one of Aust's (2004) findings: "those who are responsible for constructing and transmitting [the organization's] external messages...form a collective voice by which the organization is known. In short, the values communicated by these parties embody the organization's identity" (p. 530). Tierney (1988b), addressing the information and leadership elements of organizational culture, frames it this way:

The challenge for the organizational leader turns less on collecting and disseminating perfect data so that everyone will view the information in a similar manner and more on how to build an organizational culture that incorporates multiple viewpoints and calls upon cultural symbols, rituals and communicative processes to highlight organizational goals and overriding ideologies. From this perspective, trust develops through the ability of individuals to communicate cultural meanings rather than rational facts (p. 33).

Theoretical Framework

In the body of literature surrounding higher education mergers, theoretical approaches vary greatly depending upon the aspect of mergers under study, including resource dependence (Goedegebuure, 1992) and social identity (D. van Knippenberg, B. van Knippenberg, van

Monden, & de Lima, 2002). However, as the process of consolidating two or more higher education institutions through a merger is, at its essence, organizational change, this study will focus on organizational culture theory, while also drawing from the fields of change management, sensemaking theory, and communication theory to conduct a case study to understand how mergers affect organizational cultures.

Organizational culture theory.

The organizational changes associated with higher education mergers typically result in complex, multi-campus organizations, combined academic departments and support units, changes in professional roles, and new ways of communicating and conducting business. Each of these factors presents challenges to existing individual and organizational understandings of identity. Organizational culture is a significant variable for institutions implementing change strategies (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). When mergers force two or more disparate institutional cultures to become one, the change can be more daunting. Harman and Harman (2003) wrote, “A particular cultural challenge for higher education leaders is to manage the merging of divergent campus cultures into coherent educational communities that display high levels of cultural integration and loyalty to the new institution” (p. 38).

There are numerous perspectives on what constitutes organizational culture, but most researchers agree that organizational culture is the ‘normative glue’ that binds an institution together through its accepted means of conducting business, its traditions and rituals, and its shared beliefs, values, and expectations regarding organizational life (Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Schein, 2010). Further, Schein (2010) proposed that culture operates on three distinct levels: observable artifacts, the symbols that are visible in the organization; values,

which are the norms employees feel are essential to the organization; and basic underlying assumptions.

A complicating factor in studying organizational culture is that it is considered “both a product and a process” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 243). This is reinforced by Whetten (2006), who cautioned that in the study of organizational identity, it is essential to distinguish between two different meanings of culture: first, the characterization of organizations as cultures and organizational identity as the self-referencing aspect of organizational culture, and, second, culture as a distinguishing quality or property of an organization through which it sets itself apart from others (p. 227). Because organizational culture is multi-faceted, there are different theoretical approaches to its study, as delineated in Table 1 below.

Cameron and Quinn (2011) noted that studies of organizational culture stem from two main disciplines: anthropological, which asserts that organizations *are* cultures, and sociological, which emphasizes that organizations *have* cultures. Further, they outlined two approaches within each of those disciplines: the functional approach, which states that culture emerges from collective behavior, and the semiotic approach, in which culture exists through individual interpretations. The essential distinctions, according to Cameron and Quinn (2011), are whether culture is defined as an attribute of an organization or whether culture is used to describe organizations. They stated that the functional, sociological perspective dominates the study of organizational culture.

Table 1: Two Main Disciplinary Foundations of Organizational Culture
(Cameron & Quinn, 2011, p. 168)

	<i>Anthropological Foundation</i>	<i>Sociological Foundation</i>
<i>Functional Approach</i>		
Assumption	Organizations are cultures	Organizations have cultures
Focus	Collective assumptions	Collective behavior
Observation	Subjective factors	Objective factors
Variable	Dependent (understand culture by itself)	Independent (culture predicts other outcomes)
<i>Semiotic approach</i>		
Assumption	Culture is reality	Culture makes sense of reality
Focus	Individual assumptions	Individual cognitions
Observation	Participant immersion	Participant observation
Variable	Dependent (understand culture by itself)	Independent (culture predicts other outcomes)

Cameron and Quinn (2011) used the Organizational Cultural Assessment Instrument (OCAI), based on the Competing Values Framework, to assess and interpret organizational culture. The OCAI measures focus on internal focus and integration, flexibility and discretion, stability and control, and external focus and differentiation to place organizations within four organizational culture types—hierarchy (control), market (compete), adhocracy (create), and clan (collaborate) of the Competing Values Framework. Higher education research that is aligned with this paradigm is that by Bergquist and Pawlak (2008), which uses an Academic Cultures Inventory to delineate six cultures of the academy: the collegial culture, the managerial culture, the developmental culture, the advocacy culture, the virtual culture, and the tangible culture. Like the Competing Values Framework, their concept is that each of the cultures has an ‘opposite’ from which it draws its distinctiveness, but each references the other for its purpose, identity, and shared perspectives (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008, p. 8). Each of these approaches attempts to identify cultures around those characteristics and organizational purpose shared by its members, which, in turn, assists institutional leaders in managing organizations and affecting

change. This typological approach to describing organizational cultures in higher education applies pre-defined elements to place institutions in broad categories, and, while it provides convenient labels to reference the culture of an institution, such an assessment does not account for institutional subcultures and paints an unrealistic and incomplete picture of an organization (Cai, 2008; Smerek, 2010; Tierney, 1987).

In contrast, the interpretivist perspective promotes a dimensional exploration of organizational culture that explores the multiple facets of an organization to interpret the various perspectives that contribute to an organization's culture (Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Tierney, 1987, 1988, 2012). The interpretivist approaches the study of organizational culture through a sociological lens and views organizational culture as dynamic and amorphous, and its construction is based on how its members interpret or make sense of decisions, events, and communication (Tierney, 2008a, p. 9). In his overview of organizational culture in American higher education, Tierney (1988b) noted, "An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, action, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level" (p. 3).

A proponent of the interpretivist perspective, Tierney developed a theoretical framework, as shown in Table 2 below, with six facets that contribute to an institution's culture: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership (1988b, p. 8). Through these elements, he argued, institutions define their purpose and identity, develop a sense of belonging, and inspire loyalty among employees, students, and alumni.

Table 2: A Framework of Organizational Culture
(Tierney, 1988b, p. 8)

<i>Environment</i>	How does the organization define its environment? What is the attitude toward the environment? (Hostility? Friendship?)
<i>Mission</i>	How is it defined? How is it articulated? Is it used as a basis for decisions? How much agreement is there?
<i>Socialization</i>	How do new members become socialized? How is it articulated? What do we need to know to survive/excel in this organization?
<i>Information</i>	What constitutes information? Who has it? How is it disseminated?
<i>Strategy</i>	How are decisions arrived at? Which strategy is used? What is the penalty for bad decisions?
<i>Leadership</i>	What does the organization expect from its leaders? Who are the leaders? Are there formal and informal leaders?

This qualitative case study was conducted through the interpretive theoretical lens provided by Tierney's framework and explored each of the elements relative to the organizational change associated with the merger. These six interrelated, yet distinct, elements were central to the deductive coding used for my data analysis and the interpretation of my findings. An understanding of each factor provides a nuanced picture of an institution's culture.

Environment.

One of the complicating aspects of a merger is the change stakeholders experience in the physical environment. For example, the institution shifts from a single-campus entity to a multi-campus organization, personnel may shift from one location to another, and there are typically changes associated with signage and identity elements. However, there may also be changes in the non-physical environment, such as the sense of collegiality and social interactions.

Mission.

An institution's mission is one of its defining characteristics. The mission guides the institution's focus, helps differentiate the institution from its peers, and serves to attract students, faculty and staff who share the same interests. When institutions merge, they must unite under a joint, shared mission. One of the points I will be studying is how the merging institutions develop consensus around a new mission and articulate it to stakeholders.

Socialization.

As institutions merge, individuals must determine how to navigate a new social and organizational structure. The process of socialization for existing and new members of the institution can affect their level of success in adapting to new norms.

Information.

Information—including who holds it, what is deemed important, and how it is controlled and disseminated—is a powerful tool in managing and shaping organizations. During times of organizational change, the importance of information increases exponentially, and this element is central to my research.

Strategy.

Tierney's theoretical framework references strategy as a decision-making structure or the basis for how work gets done within an organization. In the context of mergers and particularly those in higher education, traditional decision-making processes change. For example, new teams may be put into place to focus on various aspects of the merger, and the pace of decision making may be accelerated in contrast to lengthy, deliberate committee processes. As such, strategy, planning and decision-making are vital elements to study in higher education mergers.

Leadership.

For any organization, leadership at both formal and informal levels plays a vital role in leading change. My study explored the formal and informal leaders in the merger, the challenges they faced, and how they were effective.

While Tierney's framework relative to organizational culture theory was foundational to this study of the change process associated with higher education mergers, I also drew upon both organizational communication theory and sensemaking theory to inform this study. These are significant additional dimensions that warrant exploration, and the nexus of these three factors shown in Figure 1 provided the richest description of the roles of culture and communication in institutional mergers.

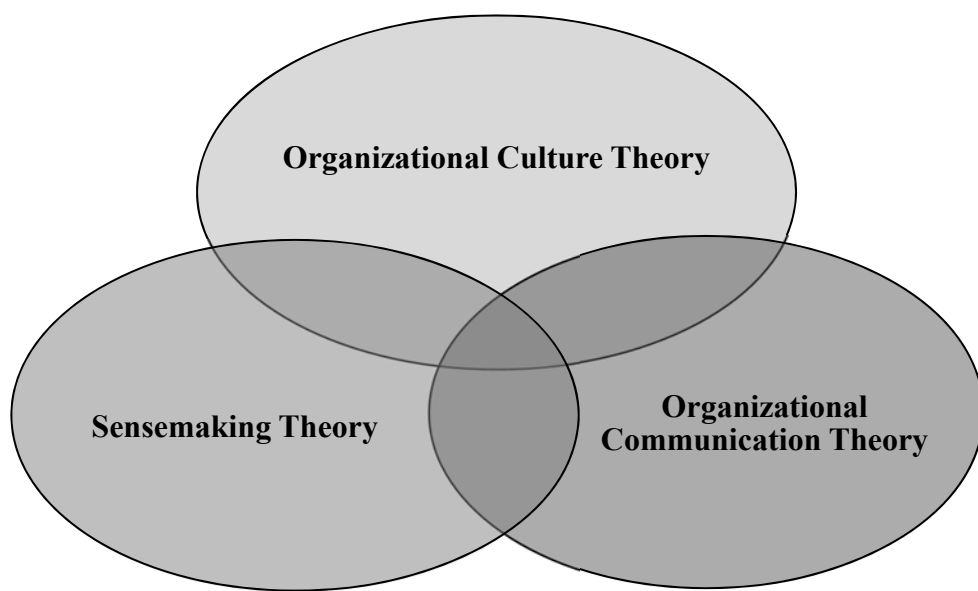


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Organizational communication theory.

Communication is a critical element of Tierney's framework, and literature related to corporate mergers and acquisitions points to the importance of robust communications strategies to unify different organizational cultures (Applebaum et al., 2000; Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Burke, 1988; Marks & Mirvis, 1997; Schrader & Self, 2003). Following is a discussion of pertinent research related to organizational communication theory and its relevancy in supporting organizational culture change, such as higher education mergers.

Appelbaum et al., (2000) emphasized that communication is the most critical factor in the merger and acquisition process because it impacts employee stress levels and the adoption of a new culture. Existing research shows that communication that is credible and symbolic can promote successful organizational change by helping individuals cope with uncertainty, and participate in and understand the organization's future, thereby, increasing engagement in and loyalty to the organization and its culture (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Lewis, 1999; Locke, 2007). Building upon his previous research, Tierney (1988b) indicated the importance of communications and cultural norms in the success of organizational change. He noted, "People come to believe in their institution by the ways they interact and communicate with one another" (p. 160). Thus, cultural norms surrounding issues how decisions are made and by whom, who is privy to information, and how information gets conveyed can facilitate or impede organizational change.

This foundational understanding suggests that change agents and institutional leaders be aware of how to most effectively communicate during the various stages of the change process. Lewis (1999, p. 45) argued that "communication process and organizational change are inextricably linked processes" and that research focus has been on issues like design, adoption,

and user response rather than the implementation process itself. There are two complementary organizational communication theories that are relevant to this particular study of higher education mergers: an institutional theory of organizational communication and a stakeholder theory of organizational communication.

Lammers and Barbour (2006) conceptualized the institutional theory of organizational communication that adopts a sociological perspective of communication in institutions, which they defined as “constellations of established practices guided by enduring, formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations” (p. 357). In this sense, higher education organizations are part of an institution that has observable and relatively consistent behaviors in a variety of settings and, as a result, has generally accepted rules of conduct. They identified six interrelated elements that contribute to a broader understanding of institutions:

- Institutions consist of observable routines and practices that are consistent in many settings.
- Institutions are manifested in beliefs, representative of cognitive and emotional decisions, and choices that individuals make.
- Institutions involve actors/individuals who represent those beliefs and are established associations of people.
- Institutions are enduring and characterized by a low rate of change.
- Organizational communication is often formalized, written, and archived.
- Institutions reflect a rational purpose, and communication is relevant for how things get done (Lammers & Barbour, 2006, p. 363-364).

Among the fundamental tenets of their institutional theory of organizational communication, Lammers and Barbour (2006) posited that (a) communication sustains organizations, (b) communication aligns organizations with institutions, and (c) institutions organize through formal communication. While Lammers and Barbour view institutions as independent of any single organization or aggregate of organizations, the institutional theory of organizational

communication contributes to a greater understanding of the context of higher education as an institution while positioning the case study organizations as the unit of analysis.

At the organization level, Lewis' study of stakeholder theory relative to organizational communication and change implementation offers an important framework for consideration. In her earlier research on the challenges of change implementation from a communication perspective, Lewis (1999) found two common recurring issues—employee engagement in the change initiative and management's communication of the change initiative. Lewis (2007, 2011) subsequently theorized that formal and informal communication processes and organizational roles, including internal and external stakeholders, are central to change implementation and outcomes. Her model, as illustrated in Figure 2, outlines four components of implementation communication related to change: (a) precursors to implementation communication strategy selection, (b) implementer strategy choices and enactment, (c) stakeholders' concerns, assessments, and interactions concurrent with and in response to implementer strategies, and (d) observations after implementation has begun (Lewis, 2007, p. 181).

Figure 2, as shown below, highlights the interplay of many factors that influence communication and change strategies, and it acknowledges the critical role of stakeholders in shaping change process outcomes. Thus, organizational communication in the context of a change initiative is complex and should encompass much more than the traditional concept of a communication plan that focuses on dissemination of information to identified audiences through select communication channels.

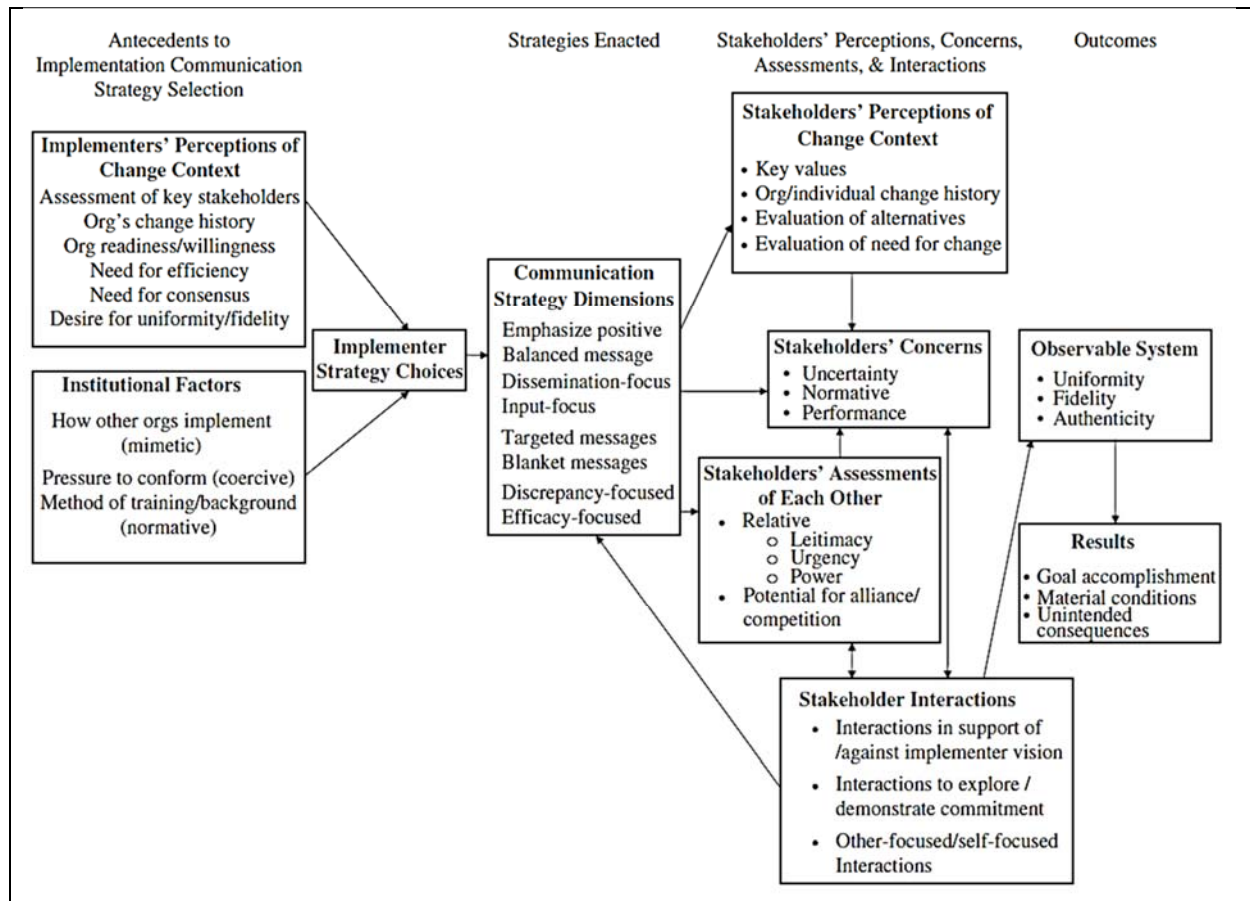


Figure 2. A model of implementation communication strategy selection, stakeholder concerns, assessments, interactions, and outcomes. Adapted from “An organizational stakeholder model of change implementation communication,” by L. Lewis, 2007, *Communication Theory*, p. 181.

Sensemaking Theory.

Sensemaking refers to the process of identity formation as emergent and evolving during episodes of profound change that require people to rethink existing understandings and construct new meaning, and, as part of that process, people are drawn to identify with a culture out of need for stability and consistency (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Schein, 2004). Kezar (2018) discussed the sensemaking process as a concept from the social cognition theory of change and as a strategy for leading second-order change that results in deep, transformational change that is able to challenge long-held assumptions and organizational

culture, in contrast to first-order changes that are characterized by minor adjustments. Because individuals' sense of identity is developed through social construction and change is reflected through socially constructed values and symbolism, sensemaking is critical to cultural change processes. Kezar articulated the idea very simply, "Often, when we are making changes, we have to help people to make sense of and understand the change to move forward." (p. 84). She further described that sensemaking occurs when people attach new meaning to familiar concepts and practices or when they develop a new language and concepts to describe a transformed institution (p. 87). Higher education mergers require leaders and members of the organization to reexamine their roles, structure, and processes. This dynamic reframing of the organization also requires stakeholders to understand changes to its mission, as well as how the organization interacts with and responds to its stakeholders. Manning (2018), reflecting on the complexity and ambiguity typically found in higher education institutions, further expounded on sensemaking as opportunities for interpretation, clarification, and learning that demand critical thinking and deep reflection (p. 71).

Other scholars more directly point to the significance of communication in the process of sensemaking and note that sensemaking assists organizational members' ability to process and interpret information to understand or make sense of what is going on, communicate with one other, derive meaning from their interactions, and complete their tasks (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Locke, 2007; van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). Importantly, sensemaking is a synergistic process between organizational members and its leaders, and employees' needs and leaders' responses vary during different phases of a change process (Kraft, Sparr, & Peus, 2018). As shown in Figure 3, at the beginning of a change process, there may be heightened levels of uncertainty or insecurity, and organization members have a greater need for reassurance. Leaders may provide

stability by being receptive to and addressing concerns. In the preparation phase, employees may need guidance, and change leaders can support sensemaking by building an environment of trust that engages employees in discussion and ideation. During the implementation phase, when employees may be experiencing frustration, successful leaders respond with balanced messaging that acknowledges the negative aspects of the change initiative while highlighting the positive dimensions. As Kraft et al. (2008) illustrated in this model, the interaction between employee sensemaking and leader sensegiving can support positive change attitudes that help the organization advance through the change process.

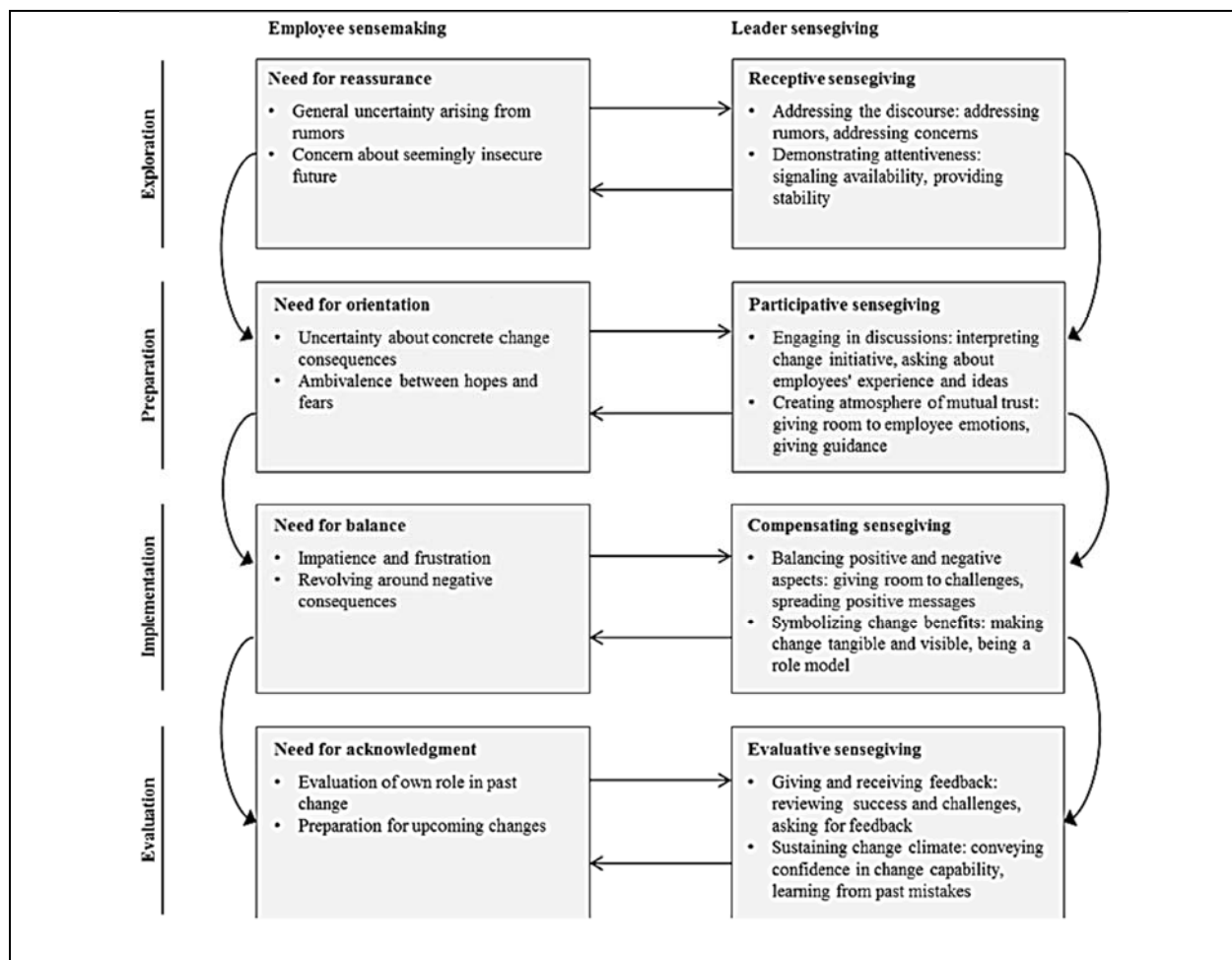


Figure 3. A model of employee sensemaking needs and leader sensegiving modes across four change phases. Adapted from “Giving and making sense about change: The back and forth between leaders and employees,” by A. Kraft, J. Sparr, and C. Peus, 2018, *The Journal of Business Psychology*, 33, p. 81.

Similarly, Johansson and Heide (2008) highlighted that communication is more than a tool that leaders use to disseminate information or to navigate and lead organizational change. They argued that “sensemaking is a social process that occurs through communication” (p. 294) and referenced an interpretive perspective of organizational communication advanced by Putnam (1983), who theorized that members of an organization construct reality and meaning through their words, symbols, and actions. According to Putnam, stories, myths, rituals, and language used are part of the process that constructs organizations and are not merely representations of organizational meanings (as cited in Johansson & Heide, 2008, p. 294).

In conclusion, sensemaking is connected to elements of Tierney’s theoretical framework, in that institutional presidents and other leaders are charged with communicating vision and strategy, which helps members of the organization understand and interpret changes they are experiencing (Kezar & Eckel, 2000, 2008).

Summary

With existing literature on mergers and change management focused primarily on the corporate world of mergers and acquisitions and educational institutions outside the United States, there is limited research on mergers in American higher education and how those mergers manage such significant change. The narrow body of literature on mergers taking place between American colleges and universities tends to focus on the following themes: factors that should be evaluated by institutions considering a merger, guidelines for measuring the success of higher education merger processes, and the impact of mergers on institutional culture (Ribando & Evans, 2015).

The body of knowledge narrows further when examining the impact of mergers on institutional cultures of merging public colleges and universities. This literature review indicates

that in mergers, institutional culture may be both a variable and an outcome. This study is focused on a singular, yet profound, component of institutional culture—information and its role in contributing to or impeding successful cultural integration.

A common thread in the literature surrounding institutional cultures and both corporate and higher education mergers is the importance of communication and information. Because the higher education environment is so complex and nuanced with subcultures, and because stakeholders interpret events and actions in a multitude of ways, it is critically important for leaders navigating the complexities of institutional mergers to have more substantial knowledge of the role and significance of communications in managing change and understanding the dynamics of organizational culture.

While Tierney's (1988b, 2008) framework has not been explored relative to higher education mergers, his emphasis on communications as a means to understand organizational culture is congruent with the concept of sensemaking and organizational change. This proposed case study is an opportunity to expand on Tierney's theoretical framework related to organizational culture in American higher education while drawing upon the related theories of communication and sensemaking to explore the overarching question of how organizational cultures change in the merger between a public four-year institution and a two-year institution with different missions, structures, identities, student populations. The goal of the study is to construct a better understanding of the change management and communications processes related to joining different institutional cultures through higher education mergers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study was to construct a better understanding of the roles of communication and culture in higher education mergers. Since 2000, there have been more than 100 mergers or acquisitions among postsecondary institutions in the United States, and it is expected that more institutions will explore mergers as a strategy to improve their market position and increase efficiencies (Seltzer, 2017; Unglesbee 2018). Most of the existing research related to mergers is limited to the operational aspects of corporate mergers and acquisitions (Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Burke, 1988; Marks & Mirvis, 1997), the exploratory process institutional leaders should undertake if considering mergers (Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs, & Ladd, 2017; Martin & Samels, 1994; Millet, 1976; Seltzer, 2018), and higher education mergers that occurred in the Australian, British, and European markets from the 1980s to the early 2000s (Harman & Harman, 2003; Cartwright, Tytherleigh, & Robertson, 2007; Frölich, Trondal, Caspersen, & Reymert, 2016).

Since 2010, nearly half of the mergers in higher education in the United States involved at least one public institution (Quinton, 2017); most notable among was the effort by the Board of Regents of the University of System of Georgia beginning in 2011 that has since reduced the number of state colleges and universities in Georgia from 35 to 26. More recently, public institutions and systems in Connecticut, Kansas, Vermont, and Wisconsin have initiated or announced plans for mergers, many of which involve consolidations of two-year community

colleges with four-year institutions (Busta, 2019). These types of mergers are typically driven by state policies and goals, such as reducing costs or increasing completion rates and face significant challenges due to their different missions, structures, identities, student populations, and faculty (Busta, 2019; Quinton, 2017). With higher education mergers becoming increasingly common as a response to political, financial, demographic, and programmatic challenges (Azziz et al., 2017, 2019; Seltzer, 2017; Unglesbee, 2018), the organizational change that occurs through that experience offers a substantial opportunity to study critical aspects of organizational culture theory.

There is a gap in the literature regarding how higher education organizational cultures are impacted or shaped through consolidations and, in particular, how institutional leaders leverage communication strategies and processes to manage change. This dissertation aims to fill that void through a case study that expands on Tierney's theoretical framework related to organizational culture in American higher education while drawing upon organizational communication theory to explore the overarching question of how organizational cultures change in the merger between a public four-year institution and a two-year institution with different missions, structures, identities, and student populations.

Design of the Study

The goal of the study was to construct a better understanding of the change management and communication processes related to joining different institutional cultures through higher education mergers. With that emphasis, a qualitative research approach was most appropriate for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative research as applied research “undertaken to improve the quality of practice” (p. 3) and to understand “how people interpret their experiences” (p. 6). Within the qualitative research approach, I chose to conduct a case

study to gather and understand the perspective of various stakeholders involved in an institutional merger. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). Yin (2018) posited a two-part definition that encompassed the scope and features of case studies. Elements of his definition of a case study included an “empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (‘the case’) in depth and within its real-world context... and it relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (p. 15). Further, Yin (2018) noted that when a researcher’s questions are focused on “how” or “why,” they are seeking explanatory information, and case studies are one of the preferred research methods, with experiments or histories being the other two. For this research, a case study presented advantages over the other two methods, as it offered the opportunity to collect and analyze multiple forms of evidence, it was focused on a contemporary phenomenon within a bounded system, and it was aligned with a constructivist or interpretive theoretical framework.

This study allowed in-depth analysis of the organizational changes experienced in real-time during an institutional consolidation to: (a) understand how those changes are similar to or different than corporate mergers, and (b) understand how institutional leaders can effectively manage such organizational changes.

Research Questions

Based on the presumption that each institution of higher education has a culture that is specific to its organization, structure, environment, rituals, and leadership, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do existing organizational cultures shape the merger process, as perceived by senior institutional leaders?

2. How do organizational cultures change during and following the implementation of institutional mergers?
3. How do institutional leaders use communication and change strategies manage the change process, reduce conflict and anxiety, and support acculturation into a single organization? Existing literature related to corporate mergers and acquisitions indicates that communications and leadership play vital roles in the perceived success of organizational change and to merging organizational cultures. The purpose of this question is to explore how communication processes and organizational culture support or impede acculturation and the success of a higher education consolidation.

Case Selection

To conduct this research, I used an embedded case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine organizational culture and communication at multiple campuses engaged in an institutional merger to create a newly consolidated single institution. Yin (2018) asserted that one rationale for a single-case design is that it provides the opportunity to study a common situation that could provide insights that contribute to a theoretical interest; he further described the embedded single-case design for a qualitative study as appropriate for building upon or challenging theory. This case study's multidisciplinary conceptual framework sought to build upon organizational culture and communication theories, as well as sensemaking theory, which focuses on organizational change, leadership, and communication. While U.S. policymakers and institutional leaders have increasingly turned to higher education mergers as a management strategy in the past 20 years, implementation of mergers remains an unusual change initiative, and the use of this theoretical framework to study mergers is novel.

I chose to study the University of Wisconsin System, as it began the process of merging its 13 two-year community colleges with its seven four-year institutions throughout the system, creating multi-campus regional institutions in 2018. Consequently, the timing of the study allowed me to conduct interviews and collect data as the institutions were still experiencing transition and assimilation. Additionally, the ongoing implementation of the restructuring offered rich material for review and an opportunity to observe the experiences of community members during the restructuring process. More specifically, I studied the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh based on the following criteria: (a) it represented an unusual case involving a merger of three institutions—most higher education mergers are between two institutions, and (b) the chancellor who is leading that merger was involved in leading a merger in another state while serving in a previous role. Given the rarity of higher education mergers, it is unusual that an individual might be involved in leading more than one merger over the course of their career. Using the embedded case study methodology described above, the consolidated University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, as an institution, was the primary unit of analysis, and the three individual campuses were subunits of analysis to study how the distinct culture and communication practices at each campus shaped the merger process.

Data Collection

I used a variety of methods to collect data —interviews, document analysis, and observation—to ensure a comprehensive investigation of the case and to support construct validity through triangulation. UW Oshkosh Chancellor Andy Leavitt was receptive to the case study as an opportunity to document aspects of the work conducted by members of the three campuses toward consolidation—what he often referenced as a “joining.” After receiving approval from Chancellor Leavitt to conduct the case study at UW Oshkosh, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 institutional leaders to elicit and explore participants’ experiences,

insights, and meanings related to the merger process. As suggested by Maxwell (2013), I pilot-tested an interview guide with a colleague in higher education who has experienced a merger and whose professional role is similar to those I planned to interview. The pilot test ensured the questions were designed appropriately and provided to opportunity to make necessary revisions to maximize effectiveness. The pilot test also provided me the opportunity to examine any assumptions I had about the acculturation process associated with mergers. The individual participants were selected using the following criteria: (a) they were campus leaders from each campus who were closely involved in leading the merger process and communicating with key stakeholder groups, and (b) they were willing to engage in reflection on the challenges and effectiveness of organizational culture and the restructuring process (see Appendix C for a list of respondents). I worked with staff in Chancellor Leavitt's office to confirm the identity of individuals in these roles and to schedule an on-site visit to UW Oshkosh, where I visited each of the three campuses and conducted semi-structured with 14 individuals, including Chancellor Leavitt. An additional interview was conducted later by video-call. Each of the interviews averaged one hour each in length and included open-ended questions (see Appendix D for sample interview questions) to provide opportunities for participants to introduce new or unique information and to support validation and triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). I recorded 12 of the interviews and promptly transcribed those recordings for detailed analysis. Two of the participants asked not to be recorded, and, in those cases, I took notes during the interviews and typed those notes with my observations at the end of that day.

In addition to interviews, I gathered a variety of publicly available documents, publications, news articles, speeches, and videos that contained information relevant to the restructuring process and that gave insight into the institutional culture of the campuses.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe documents as a valuable resource in qualitative research in that “because they generally exist independent of a research agenda, they are nonreactive...They are a product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world” (p. 183). Many of the documents I collected were available through the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and University of Wisconsin System’s websites, which detailed the restructuring processes and include meeting minutes, announcements, timelines, frequently asked questions, and planning documents. Additionally, some documents were available online through the institution’s accrediting agency and Wisconsin and national and local news outlets. The documents included published institutional information, news articles, and speeches, websites, and documents prepared specifically for the restructuring, accreditation documents, and strategic plans. There were also some printed materials, such as university magazines, that I was able to obtain during my site visit. Yin (2018) noted that the most important use of documentation in case study research is “to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 115). Examination of the documents prior to the interviews enabled me to explore themes related to campus culture and organizational change.

Because this case study involved an institutional merger in real time, I had hoped to have an opportunity during my site visit to observe a meeting of a consolidation implementation committee or institutional leadership group to collect additional data relative to the culture of the institution. While that observation was not feasible, my data collection did include watching or listening to a number of presentations and speeches that were published online. These presentations were generally situated around the “opening day” ceremonies at each campus during which the faculty and staff gathered to receive updates from campus and institutional

leaders. Like the other documents I collected, these presentations provided real-time insight into the restructuring process.

Overall, internal validity was supported through triangulation—the use of multiple methods of data collection to compare observations and data from various sources to examine relevant information to confirm emerging themes and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, the multidisciplinary theoretical approach to my research strengthened the case study's construct validity (Yin, 2018) and aided in analyzation and interpretation of the data as a means to construct an understanding of the consolidation process and the cultural changes members of the institution experienced.

Data Analysis

Study data consisted of interview transcripts from in-person interviews and a range of other documents, including transcripts of speeches and presentations, materials from the UW Oshkosh and UW System's restructuring websites, and local news articles. Documents were analyzed prior to and following the interviews. I organized and analyzed the interview transcripts and documents in a database supported by MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. Using MaxQDA, I analyzed the data using a deductive approach to identify elements of organizational culture relative to Tierney's six facets of institutional culture: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. However, consistent with my constructivist framework to interpret participants' experience, I also conducted inductive, open coding to identify patterns in their responses and the other data. Not surprisingly, deductive and inductive coding processes occurred simultaneously as a component of data analysis. Finally, I used the constant comparative approach and axial coding to group the

codes into broader categories and themes, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The resulting themes informed and provided the structure for the discussion of my findings.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

My research is based on the assumption that each institution of higher education has a culture that is specific to its organization, structure, environment, rituals, and leadership and that in the course of institutional mergers, organizations experience some changes in their structures and cultures. An additional assumption, based on the literature review, is that communication processes help institutions and their actors construct meaning of organizational change and their culture. Before conducting this research, the public liberal arts university where I serve participated in an institutional consolidation. At that time, I worked as the chief communications officer; I currently serve as chief of staff to the university's president and, as such, am very involved in executive and institutional communications. These experiences contribute to my motivation for conducting this research. While it is possible this experience could present potential bias in this study, it also provides a heightened level of awareness essential to the scope of the research and an understanding of the issues associated with a university merger. This stance is supported by Maxwell (2013), who noted that while researchers have often viewed experiential knowledge as a bias that should be eliminated from the design, it should be viewed as an asset that can be an essential source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks. This experience may be particularly important for qualitative research, where, as Maxwell (2013) stated, "the researcher is the instrument of the research" (p. 45). Maxwell's recommended strategy for assessing the effect of an individual's experience on their research is the inclusion of a researcher identity memo. Before conducting the interviews for this case study, I engaged in

critical reflection of my own biases and wrote such a memo to explore the assumptions and expectations I bring to this project through my previous experience (see Appendix F for memo).

Additionally, my previous professional relationship with Chancellor Andrew Leavitt at UW Oshkosh, who graciously welcomed me to his institution, could pose a threat to validity. He generously provided me access and his openness enriched this study. I worked to honor this generosity and honesty through accurate and balanced assessment of my research and findings. Careful attention to researcher reflexivity and use of member checks, peer review, and triangulation of data were essential in managing the benefit of access against any potential threat to validity.

Conclusion

Continued research into higher education mergers and the factors that support their success is significant in that they are likely to continue as institutions respond to internal and external pressures to strengthen their programs, market position, reputation, and financial viability. Combining research on higher education mergers, organizational culture and communication, and sensemaking with interviews of institutional leaders and an analysis of relevant documents, this study provided a unique examination of the role of institutional culture and communication in higher education mergers. This study will contribute to the body of scholarly work about institutional mergers and will provide valuable and practical recommendations to communications professionals, institutional leaders, and policymakers seeking to understand how to manage and lead institutional mergers in the future.

CHAPTER 4

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN OSHKOSH

This chapter discusses how the chancellor and senior leaders at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh have approached the cultural and communication challenges of consolidating a four-year institution and two two-year community colleges as part of a system-wide restructuring. The case study was developed from interviews with the chancellor, senior administrative leaders, staff, and faculty members at this Midwestern public university; analysis of institutional and system-level documents and websites; analysis of presentations and speeches; and analysis of news articles.

Case study interviews, analysis, and prominent themes are presented in an effort to provide insight for current and future higher education leaders. Study participants described their perceptions and experiences based on the semi-structured interview protocol that was designed to answer questions related to these three research questions: 1) how do existing organizational cultures shape the merger process; 2) how do organizational cultures change during and following the implementation of institutional mergers; 3) how do institutional leaders use communication and change strategies to manage the change process, reduce conflict and anxiety, and support acculturation into a single organization.

This chapter will follow a similar structure to examine how communication processes and organizational culture support or impede acculturation and the success of a higher education consolidation. The chapter begins with an overview of the University of Wisconsin System's restructuring initiative and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and its campuses, followed by a

thematic discussion of the experiences of individuals leading the restructuring within the institution.

Restructuring the University of Wisconsin System

In October 2017, Ray Cross, president of the University of Wisconsin (UW) System, launched an extensive proposal to merge the 13 UW Colleges – two-year community colleges – with seven of the system’s four-year universities. The move was set upon a background of deep and ongoing state budget reductions to higher education and political differences between former Governor Scott Walker, a Republican; current Governor Tony Evers, a Democrat; and the Republican-majority state legislature. In 2015, the Wisconsin legislature cut the UW System budget by \$250 million, and, while it approved a \$31.7 million increase in the budget for the 2019-2020 academic year, legislators continued a tuition freeze for the seventh consecutive year (Johnson, 2015; Kremer, 2019b; Seltzer, 2017). Additionally, concerns about current and projected enrollment trends undoubtedly played into the considerations surrounding the mergers. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2016) projected that the number of high school graduates in the Midwest, like many regions of the United States, would decline through 2032 due to declines in birth rates. For Wisconsin, in particular, the number of high school graduates from public and private schools peaked in 2009 and is projected to be only 61,900 by 2032, 4.5% fewer potential college students than the state produced in 2001 (Figure 4).

Mergers and restructuring are not new to the UW System. In 1972, the University of Wisconsin merged with the Wisconsin State University System, resulting in the University of Wisconsin System, which is governed by a single Board of Regents. The system comprises two doctoral universities, 11 comprehensive four-year universities, 13 branch campuses, and a

statewide extension program. Through the 1972 merger, the 13 branch campuses, which housed two-year general education programs, became the UW Center System. That system became the University of Wisconsin Centers in 1983 and was renamed again as the University of Wisconsin (UW) Colleges in 1997.

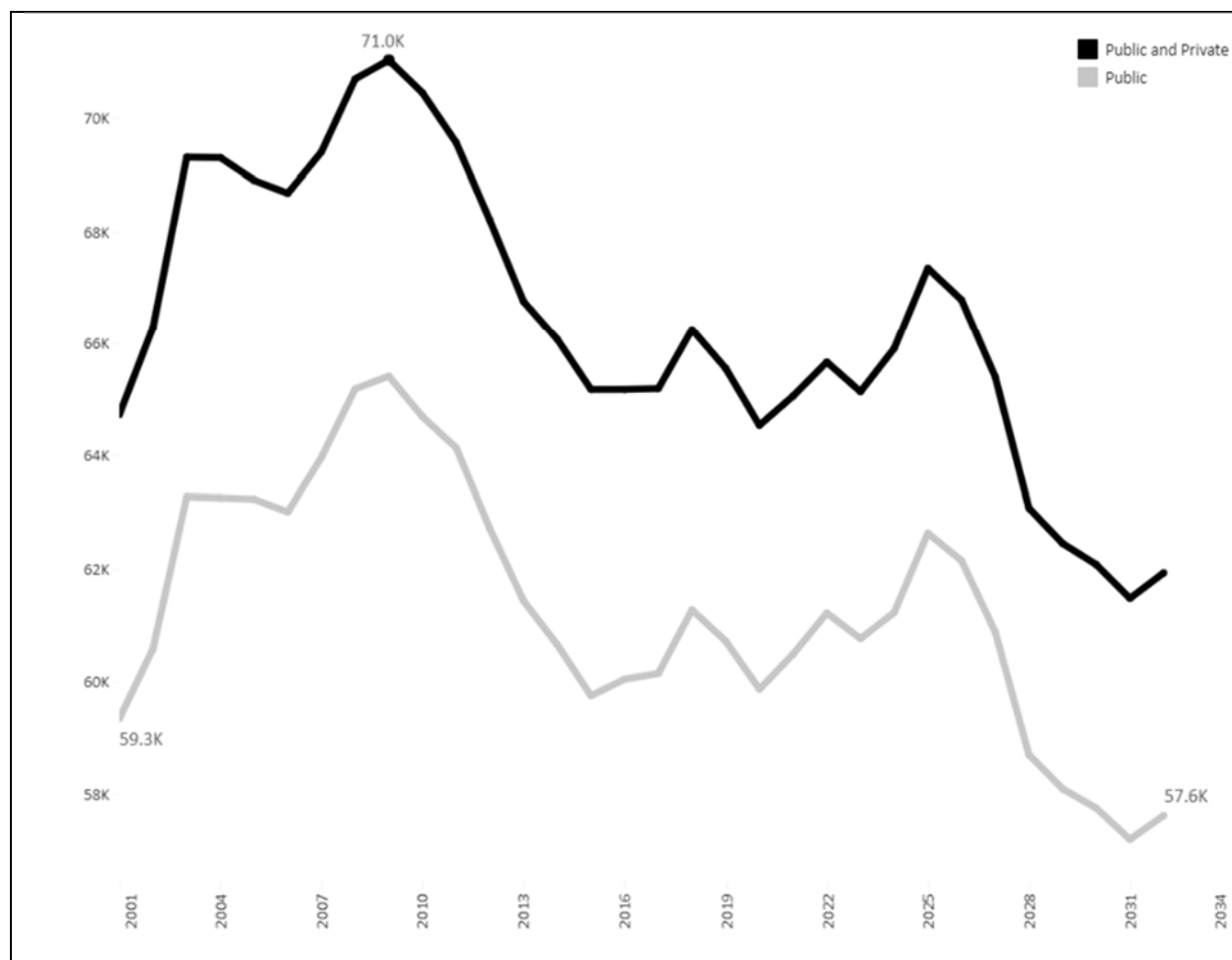


Figure 4: Wisconsin High School Graduation Trends

(Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2016).

Note. Projections begin with the Class of 2012 for Public and Private together; 2014 for Public only.

In 2015, the UW Colleges changed again and were restructured as part of an effort called regionalization. That restructuring, designed to cut administrative costs in response to declining enrollments, grouped multiple campuses under single administrative deans for each region. The

UW-Fox Valley, the UW-Fond du Lac, and the UW-Manitowoc campuses were combined as a regional unit. The move also centralized administrative functions, such as human resources, business, information technology, student conduct, physical plant, communications, and marketing, into the state-level UW Colleges office. About 80 administrative positions across the UW Colleges system were eliminated through regionalization; no faculty positions were eliminated (University of Wisconsin Colleges, 2015).

The current restructuring was precipitated by continued enrollment declines in the UW Colleges. When preliminary plans for the mergers were released in fall of 2017, President Cross called the current model “unsustainable” and noted that enrollment in the UW Colleges declined 32% in the UW Colleges between 2000 and 2017, with enrollment at some institutions dropping as much as 50% (Cross, 2017). At the time of the proposal, some of UW Colleges campuses enrolled only 200 FTE (University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, 2017). President Cross was very familiar with the UW Colleges, as he had served as chancellor of that unit from 2011 to 2014, before his appointment as president of the UW System.

The resolution approved by the UW Board of Regents outlined the following objectives for the restructuring:

- expanding access by offering more general education and upper-level courses at the integrated branch campuses;
- reducing barriers to transferring credits within the UW System; maintaining affordability by continuing current tuition levels at the branch campuses post-merger for general education courses;
- further standardizing and regionalizing administrative operations and services to more efficiently use resources; and

- to leverage institution talent and resources to get more students into and through the educational pipeline to better meet Wisconsin's projected workforce needs (Wisconsin Board of Regents, 2017).

The resolution further specified that while the branch campuses would operate as units of their receiving four-year institution, they would: 1) maintain the open access and transfer mission of the UW Colleges campuses and the strong partnerships with counties and municipalities where the campuses are located, and 2) continue to allow open access recruiting and transfer to all UW four-year institutions. Based on interviews with institutional leaders, these elements add a layer of complexity for the combining institutions that may not be found in other higher education mergers and will be discussed further in this chapter.



Figure 5. Map of the University of Wisconsin System restructuring. Adapted from the University of Wisconsin System, n.d.

Restructuring Timeframe.

The restructuring plan was announced in October 2017, approved by the Board of Regents in November 2017, and approved by the Higher Learning Commission in June 2018. The system restructuring was planned to occur through two phases: Year 1 (July 1, 2018, through June 30, 2019) and Year 2 (July 1, 2019, through June 30, 2020). In Year 1, the UW System expected that the two-year campuses would maintain some autonomy and continue to function in the existing manner while preparing to integrate with the UW System institutions; in Year 2, the UW System planned for operations and services to be integrated with the receiving four-year institutions (University of Wisconsin System, n.d.). This case study was conducted in the spring and summer of 2019; the interviews were conducted in June 2019, at the end of Year 1 and just before full implementation in Year 2.

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Campuses

Through the University of Wisconsin System restructuring, the two-year UW Colleges Fox Valley and Fond du Lac campuses were joined with the four-year University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Campus (see Figure 5). The three campuses, located in Oshkosh, Menasha (Fox Valley), and Fond du Lac, are situated in northeastern Wisconsin along the Fox River and Lake Winnebago. The region is one of the top manufacturing regions in the nation and is well-known for papermaking and printing.

As noted previously, the UW Colleges had experienced enrollment declines in recent years. Similarly, the Oshkosh Campus has experienced declining enrollment. Beyond their shared enrollment challenges, the campuses share commonly held institutional values, including a commitment to student success, inclusivity, community partnerships, and shared governance. However, the differences in scale, environment, and student populations at each of the campuses

reflect significant contrasts in organizational culture, as well as operational structure and processes.

The Oshkosh Campus.

The Oshkosh Campus was established in 1871 as Oshkosh State Normal School with a focus on educating teachers, and it initially offered free tuition to anyone who committed to teach in Wisconsin public schools. As the school evolved, it added a graduate school in 1963 to become a comprehensive university. In 1972, the university merged into the Wisconsin system to become the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the 2018 population of the Oshkosh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) at slightly more than 171,000 people. The City of Oshkosh, with a population of about 67,000, surrounds the compact, mid-sized Oshkosh Campus, which occupies more than 120 acres along the Fox River. The campus features a mix of older, mid-century and modern facilities, which speaks to its growth and development since its establishment. The most historic building on campus is Dempsey Hall, built in 1918 to replace the university's original academic building, which had been destroyed by fire. Today, Dempsey Hall serves as the campus' central administrative building. Like most liberal arts campuses, the Oshkosh Campus also boasts an athletic center, an art gallery, music hall, and science center, among its facilities. Though located in the heart of the city, the campus commitment to sustainability is evidenced by its grounds, which are lush with a variety of old trees and native plantings.

The campus enrolls about 11,000 students, and nearly half of them are first-generation students. About 85% of the Oshkosh Campus' freshmen and sophomore students live in residence halls, and the campus has an active student life division that sponsors several typical student traditions and events, including festivals, service opportunities, homecoming, the

chancellor's late-night breakfast, and a winter carnival, among other activities. Additionally, the university sponsors 19 NCAA Division III athletic teams, and, in 2019, the university's men's basketball team won the NCAA Division III national championship. The championship resulted in an air of accomplishment and positive momentum for the campus.

The campus has approximately 1,200 employees and offers nearly 200 programs of study that lead to associate, baccalaureate, graduate, and professional doctoral degrees. Like most institutions of its size, the university has well-defined administrative units and academic departments that operate somewhat independently. Leaders promote the campus as "an opportunity of place" because of its location in a population center with abundant internship and career opportunities. The institution's marketing materials describe emphases on sustainability, student success, general education for the 21st century, and growing research opportunities.

Dr. Andrew Leavitt became the 11th chancellor of UW Oshkosh in November 2014. In his first year at UW Oshkosh, Chancellor Leavitt led a strategic planning effort that has elevated the institution's commitment to research and economic development. Through the planning effort, institutional leaders also established seven core values to guide its work: student success, an inclusive environment, sustainability, shared governance, community partnerships, creativity, and workplace joy. These values have proven increasingly important in the years since as the institution has struggled with financial and legal challenges. In early 2017, UW Oshkosh and its Foundation became the focus of an investigation when UW Oshkosh's former chancellor, Richard Wells, and the former vice chancellor for business were charged with allegations of improper financial transactions related to five real estate transactions involving the UW-Oshkosh Foundation. While the UW System and the UW-Oshkosh Foundation have since reached a settlement in the case, criminal charges are still pending against the two former university

officials (Herzog & Beck, 2017; Maguire, 2019; Shastri, 2019). The case has had a significant influence on the campus' finances and operations, as well as the level of trust in the institution's leadership. Wells served as the university's chancellor from 2000 to 2014. Chancellor Leavitt openly responded to the adversity with a commitment to transparency, collegiality, and ethical leadership (Leavitt, 2017). By all accounts, that commitment carried through his leadership in the joining of the three campuses, which will be discussed more comprehensively in this chapter. Chancellor Leavitt had led UW Oshkosh for three years at the time of the announcement of the restructuring, and his leadership is a critical variable in this case study. Through a previous administrative role, he was part of the administrative team that led the consolidation of North Georgia College & State University and Gainesville State College to become the University of North Georgia. More than one person noted that it was helpful and reassuring to have someone in leadership who had experienced a merger before. Additionally, there were a few administrators among those interviewed who had experienced mergers while working in a corporate environment. Collectively, their experiences enabled them to understand and frame some of the challenges and opportunities the restructuring presented and helped them interpret that information for campus and community stakeholders.

The Fox Cities Campus.

The Fox Cities Campus, previously known as the UW-Fox Valley Campus, is located in Menasha, Wisconsin, which is part of an urban region with a population of approximately 310,000. The campus is situated on about 41 acres near an interstate, and it is surrounded by suburban amenities, including P-12 schools, religious centers, various businesses and retail, and housing. The campus consists of mostly single-story facilities and has two distinctive structures:

the Barlow Planetarium, the first major planetarium in Wisconsin, which opened in 1998, and a modern 51,000-square-foot Communication Arts Center that opened in 2009.

The campus had its start in 1933 when the University of Wisconsin Extension Service began offering college courses in the vocational wing of Menasha High School. In 1960, an era when many community colleges in the United States were being formed, enrollment had reached 290 students, and the school opened its current campus a few miles away from the high school. In fall 2018, the campus enrolled about 1,600 students, and it has about 60 faculty and staff, providing a high level of student support and engagement.

As an open-access campus, Fox Cities offers an Associate of Arts and Sciences degree, with an emphasis in specific disciplines, to enable students to complete a two-year, general education program. The campus also offers students the opportunity to complete select baccalaureate degrees in collaboration with other area universities. Like all of the two-year colleges that were part of the UW Colleges, there is a strong emphasis on preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions in the UW System or elsewhere. The faculty and staff at the Fox Cities Campus take particular pride in preparing students to transfer to UW Madison, perceived as the most prestigious university in the system. The mission and value statements, which include a specific reference to the campus' "energetic, forward-thinking personnel with a 'can-do' attitude" clearly reflect the faculty and staff commitment to students and the community. This spirit was evident in interviews with institutional leaders and will be discussed further in this chapter.

The Fond du Lac Campus.

The Fond du Lac Campus, the smallest of the three campuses in this case study, is located at the south end of Lake Winnebago in a bucolic park-like setting with a two-acre lake and

expansive vistas of the adjacent Gottfried Prairie and Arboretum. The campus comprises six buildings, including a two-story University Center that was part of a \$13 million expansion and renovation project in 2000. The University Center includes a library, a music suite, a 340-seat theatre, the campus bookstore, and cafeteria. Located in close proximity to the campus are the UW Extension Office for Fond du Lac County, a technical college, and athletic complexes.

Fond du Lac County is home to about 100,000 residents and is largely an agricultural community dominated by milk production. However, given its shoreline access to Lake Winnebago and an extensive public park system, tourism and outdoor adventure activities are important year-round economic drivers for Fond du Lac. Borne out of the “Wisconsin Idea,” which strived to extend higher education opportunities from the state’s land-grant institution, the University of Wisconsin Madison, to every community in the state, the Fond du Lac community has had intermittent access to higher education as an extension site since 1933. After serving an initial surge of WWII veterans, the Fond du Lac center closed in 1951 due to budgetary problems. In 1963, Wisconsin’s Coordinating Committee for Higher Education (CCHE) established two-year branch campuses as part of the Wisconsin State University system and selected Fond du Lac as one of the sites. The Fond du Lac County board funded and built the new campus, which opened in 1968 and was administratively attached to the then-State University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. When the state merged systems in 1972, the Fond du Lac Campus became part of the two-year branch campus system that would later become UW Colleges. The campus celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018. Like the Fox Cities Campus, the Fond du Lac Campus is tightly connected to its community, which funds the campus facilities and physical operations. The campus is viewed as a resource of expertise, as well as a place for community cultural events, and it hosts a number of theater, musical, and arts productions.

In fall 2018, the campus enrolled about 500 students supported by about 40 faculty and staff. The small campus size and informal, family-like community setting contribute to an easy-going organizational culture. Campus leaders take pride in the nurturing environment they provide to students through small classes, attentive faculty and advisors, low tuition, and the state's guaranteed transfer program that ensures admission to any UW four-year campus. Just over half of Fond du Lac's students are full-time, and about 78% of the students are 21 years of age or under. A 2016 community report for the Fond du Lac Campus noted that the top transfer majors for its students were business, health sciences, biology, education, and sociology. The campus opened a 121-bed apartment-style housing complex in 2017. Students may choose to participate in Student Government Association, approximately 10 recognized student organizations, or a handful of club sports.

It is important to note that the county or cities where the UW Colleges campuses are located, rather than the UW System, own and maintain the campuses' buildings and facilities. Educational programs, equipment, and services are provided by the comprehensive universities they are affiliated with and the UW System. Thus, the campuses and their operations are tightly connected to their communities. In addition to underscoring the importance of the campuses to the local communities' educational access and cultural life, this unusual operational structure presented fundamental political, funding, and management challenges for leaders during the restructuring process as the campuses became branch campuses of the receiving four-year institutions.

Having provided an overview of the restructuring process and the campuses of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the experiences of individuals involved in merging these campuses into one institution, including the influences of

and impact on organizational culture, leadership and communication strategies, and the outlook for continued transformation.

Table 3: Summary of Campus Characteristics

	<i>Oshkosh</i>	<i>Fox Cities</i>	<i>Fond du Lac</i>
<i>Established</i>	1871	1933	1968
<i>Mission/campus profile</i>	Comprehensive university with liberal arts emphasis	Community college that prepares students to transfer to other institutions	Community college that prepares students to transfer to other institutions
<i>Admission profile</i>	Selective	Open-access	Open-access
<i>Degree programs</i>	Associate through professional doctorates	Associate	Associate
<i>Enrollment</i>	11,000	1,600	500
<i>Employees</i>	1,200	60	40
<i>Campus environment</i>	Integrated into small city downtown community along the Fox River	Urban/small city setting surrounded by retail and light industry.	Park-like setting in rural, agricultural community.
<i>Distinctive programs or facilities</i>	Highly successful Model United Nations Program; AeroInnovate program; 2019 NCAA DII men's basketball national championship	Barlow Planetarium; Communication Arts Center; STEM/interdisciplinary academic programs	Gottfried Prairie and Arboretum adjacent to campus; University Center with theatre and music suite
<i>Population</i> ^a	171,020	237,524	103,066
<i>Regional economic drivers</i>	Manufacturing, aviation, information technology	Manufacturing, healthcare, retail	Agriculture, tourism

^a Estimated 2018 population of the Metropolitan Statistical Area for each campus, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov>.

Thematic Findings

This section reports eight thematic findings, as well as a number of subthemes, drawn from analysis of interview and document data, that chronicle the experiences of the administrators and campus leaders from the time they learned of the pending restructuring through the end of the first year of planning and the beginning of full implementation. The

primary findings highlight: 1) the shock of the restructuring announcement, 2) the chancellor's vision for the university, 3) the characterization and description of the restructuring process, 3) the similarities and differences in organizational culture, 4) differences in organizational culture revealed through campus customs, 5) leadership ambiguity associated with the restructuring, 6) institutional communication challenges, 7) the human toll of the restructuring process, and 8) forward-looking opportunities. Overall, the findings mirror the research and literature on corporate mergers; however, the themes highlight challenges and opportunities particular to higher education that interview respondents perceived at the point of transition between the planning and implementation years of the restructuring process.

Was this a joke?

On the evening of Tuesday, October 10, 2017, the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel published an article outlining President Ray Cross' plan to restructure the UW System by clustering each of the 13 two-year access campuses with seven of the four-year-universities by region. The news took by faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community leaders by surprise, as Cross originally planned to announce the proposal later in the week. Reporter Karen Herzog (2017a) noted that Cross designed the restructuring proposal to cut costs while expanding access and raising graduating rates. She reported that contributing factors for the plan were continued enrollment declines and changing demographics, including the point that nearly 95% of Wisconsin's population growth would be people 65 and older by 2040 and those in the labor force ages of 18 to 64 would decline.

While most institutional leaders had received advance notification that the restructuring was imminent the Sunday prior to the publication of a news article on Tuesday, the untimely disclosure of the plan resulted in tremendous consternation and anxiety among faculty and staff

across the state. News articles noted that faculty from various institutions expressed a lack of confidence in President Cross as a result of secretive planning of the restructuring and a perceived disregard of shared governance with the institutions (Herzog, 2017b; Herzog, 2018). Faculty and staff at the access campuses were shocked; after all, they had just recently experienced a restructuring through regionalization of the UW Colleges. One long-serving faculty member and governance leader at the Fox Valley Campus noted, “it was literally a bomb out of the blue, no advance warning whatsoever about what was going to happen.” An access campus administrator who had been significantly impacted by the earlier regionalization commented:

I asked myself, was this a joke, who would do such a thing so quickly? Employees were finding out on social media, which became very difficult for people. ...There was disbelief, there were tears, and there was a sense of loss. It was a little bit like grieving the loss of a friend.

An Oshkosh Campus administrator, drawing upon his previous experience in a corporate merger, said employees were experiencing “fear, uncertainty, and doubt” – what he called the “FUD Factor” – as they tried to understand how this impacted their careers and their roles. From his own previous experience with a higher education merger, Chancellor Leavitt knew that the news of the restructuring presented “an existential threat to those who were on the Fox and Fond du Lac campuses” that generated anxiety and uncertainty regarding their future. “There was a bewilderment, betrayal, fear, all of those things you would expect; the loss of control, the loss of identity of the colleges,” he said. While his immediate reaction and desire was to go to the campuses to hear and allay their concerns, the 13 access campuses of the UW Colleges were still under the direction of another chancellor who wanted to visit each campus herself first. It would

be more than two weeks before Leavitt was able to visit the access campuses and meet with administrators, faculty, and staff.

In contrast to the access campuses, the faculty and staff at the Oshkosh Campus were largely indifferent at first, feeling that the restructuring would have little impact on them. Some Oshkosh Campus administrators and staff noted that if they were going to have to merge, at least their grouping made sense. An academic staff leader from the Oshkosh Campus described the combination, “Ours made sense geographically; they made sense in terms of community and who is in these communities, what the communities do... ours made a ton of sense, and I think that allayed a lot of initial concern.” Also, faculty and staff from the Oshkosh Campus noted that they knew enrollment at the UW Colleges had declined, so they were not surprised, something had to be done to protect the access campuses from closing.

However, the Oshkosh Campus had also experienced troubling enrollment declines. Chancellor Andrew Leavitt noted that since 2014, enrollment at the Oshkosh Campus had declined by roughly 1,800 students—equating to \$11.5 million in tuition revenue. He emphasized that declines were common across the state, but perhaps are more pronounced in the Fox Valley region, even for technical colleges, due to the area’s high manufacturing base and an unemployment rate of less than two percent that motivate high school graduates to go directly into the workforce. “Five years ago, seven out of 10 students went into some kind of college,” he said. “Today, that number is four out of 10. Six out of 10 are choosing to skip college altogether, even technical college, because they can get paid 17 bucks an hour to fold boxes.” Leavitt felt strongly that there was an opportunity to leverage the merger to strengthen the university’s role in the region, but first he had to help stakeholders transition from the initial shock, build trust and collaboration, and envision their future.

Casting a vision of “Three Campuses. One University.”

From the time that President Cross announced the restructuring proposal, Chancellor Leavitt cast a vision for a stronger university and opportunities for students. In a message to the campus community, he wrote, “This proposal brings UW Fox Valley and UW Fond du Lac together with UW Oshkosh to form one University, and I believe such a transformation offers a brighter future for all students involved and the entire region.” As the leader tasked with the amalgamation of the campuses, Chancellor Leavitt rejected the idea of having a main campus, focusing instead on the history and the potential of each campus, and he was very intentional about the language he used. For example, he did not use the terms branch campuses or satellite campuses, but access campuses, which focuses on the mission of those campuses. An administrator in the chancellor’s office added, “When we talk about coming together, it is as equals, it’s joining, we are joined. We are not merging; we are not taking over—that’s just all pejorative toward the two-year campuses.”

In fall 2018, at the opening day events for each of the campuses, Chancellor Leavitt acknowledged that the restructuring process is “at times, painful, but always hopeful,” and he continued use of forward-looking language that emphasized “the potential to become something bigger than the sum of its parts, something to celebrate.” It was at this point in the restructuring that he began to use the phrase, “One university, three campuses,” which soon became a ubiquitous effort to unite faculty, staff, and students. It also served to help community stakeholders and prospective students begin to understand the university’s new structure. Interestingly, the fall 2018 Opening Day events at the Oshkosh, Fox Valley, and Fond du Lac campuses included a presentation by the UW Oshkosh archivist on the history of the region and the three campuses. The “look back” provided vital context to connect the history of campuses

to their region and communities, including a reminder that the campus in Fond du Lac began 50 years earlier as a part of UW Oshkosh, as well as a nod to the campuses' continued evolution and future opportunities. In his presentation to groups at each of the campuses, the archivist noted:

The changes considered were often the same options that had been suggested many times in the past – from re-merging with UW Extension in 2005 to regionalization in 2016.

And now, with our restructuring, again an idea long-discussed over the past 50 years, we have seen that our history... is not over. We have more evolution left to us left in us at UW Fox Valley, UW Fond du Lac, and UW Oshkosh. So, three campuses and one university. We trace our lineage back to a time when access to higher education was simply revolutionary. That the intelligence of the many and not the few was the idea of the day. Whether it was born out of the land grant concept or the Normal School, the base idea was the same – for our state and country, for our counties and cities, education is the key. We are all inheritors of this charge; let us go forward and deliver on it. (Ranger, 2018)

In reflecting upon this presentation, the communication leader for the access campuses – who happened to be an alumna of UW Oshkosh – remarked that in addition to highlighting the work of a university historian, a resource the access campuses did not previously have, it served to connect the histories, missions, and regional connections of the campuses. She said, “The historian did such a wonderful job of showing the path of our university is constantly connected ...and moving now again forward together; people just loved it.”

From the beginning, Chancellor Leavitt's communication strategy established a collaborative and optimistic tone that the campuses were partners in the restructuring and established a direction for moving forward. Toward that end, Chancellor Leavitt said he often

asks campus and community stakeholders a simple question: “What kind of university does this region need and deserve?” Simultaneously, he has suggested that UW Oshkosh is going to be a different university because of the presence of the two access campuses—a much more powerful university that better serves the needs of the region, offers students multiple pathways to a range of degree programs, and provides faculty the opportunity to engage with community issues and capitalize upon meaningful research.

A loud and messy process.

The restructuring process defined by President Cross and the Board of Regents for the system specified that in the first year, campuses would continue operating as they had been, but that they would spend that time planning for full integration in the second year. The interviews conducted for this case study occurred at the end of the first year in the process. Unlike most of the other Wisconsin mergers, where decision-making was characterized as top-down, at UW Oshkosh, the planning process took the form of a broad and inclusive structure of workgroups focused on critical areas: academics, administration, student affairs, information and technology, governance, culture and identity, marketing and branding, and external affairs (Figure 6). Within each of those areas, additional workgroups addressed facets of the broader topics, resulting in about 40 workgroups overall. Leavitt said, “of all the joinings across the system, ours is the loudest and the messiest. At almost every other joining, it's been very top-down... I wanted to facilitate actual, real, honest to God debate on this.”

At UW Oshkosh, the top-level workgroups were assigned to functional leaders, the vice presidents or other senior administrators for those areas, and the sub-groups were populated and led by a variety of faculty and staff from across the three campuses. The guiding principles for the workgroups were: 1) to work toward one university with three campuses, 2) focus on

integration, not acquisition, 3) use honorable language, 4) do not create winners or losers, 5) do not be exclusive, and 6) openly discuss any issues. Those guiding principles were based on the culture of the institutions, their strong tradition of shared and participatory governance, and a leadership commitment to transparency. They also served to level the playing field between stakeholders of the three campuses, to honor and respect the people and their concerns in the process, and to encourage dialogue. Ultimately, it was a beneficial mechanism to build relationships and trust and help community members begin to make sense of what they needed to accomplish.

An institutional update on the restructuring published at the end of the 2017-2018 academic year described some of the workgroup achievements to that point:

In brief, the teams and workgroups have made a great deal of progress toward uniting UW-Fond du Lac, UW Oshkosh, and UW-Fox Valley since this process began late last year. Among the accomplishments are an integrated vision for the new university, a determination of departmental “homes” for UW-Fox Valley and UW-Fond du Lac faculty, a high-level policy on integration of curricula, and a shared governance framework to guide development of a permanent representational structure.

The workgroups, as shown in Figure 6, were strategic and practical structures to identify issues of concern, discuss potential solutions, and engage faculty, staff, and students in the process. Widely, respondents described the process as helpful in that it gave participants the opportunity to learn about the other campuses and the way they operated. One staff member commented, “A lot of time has been spent on building consensus” and the process “went above and beyond to understand what was important to stakeholders.” Chancellor Leavitt remarked, “They’ve always had the opportunity for input, and that’s different than all the other joinings.”

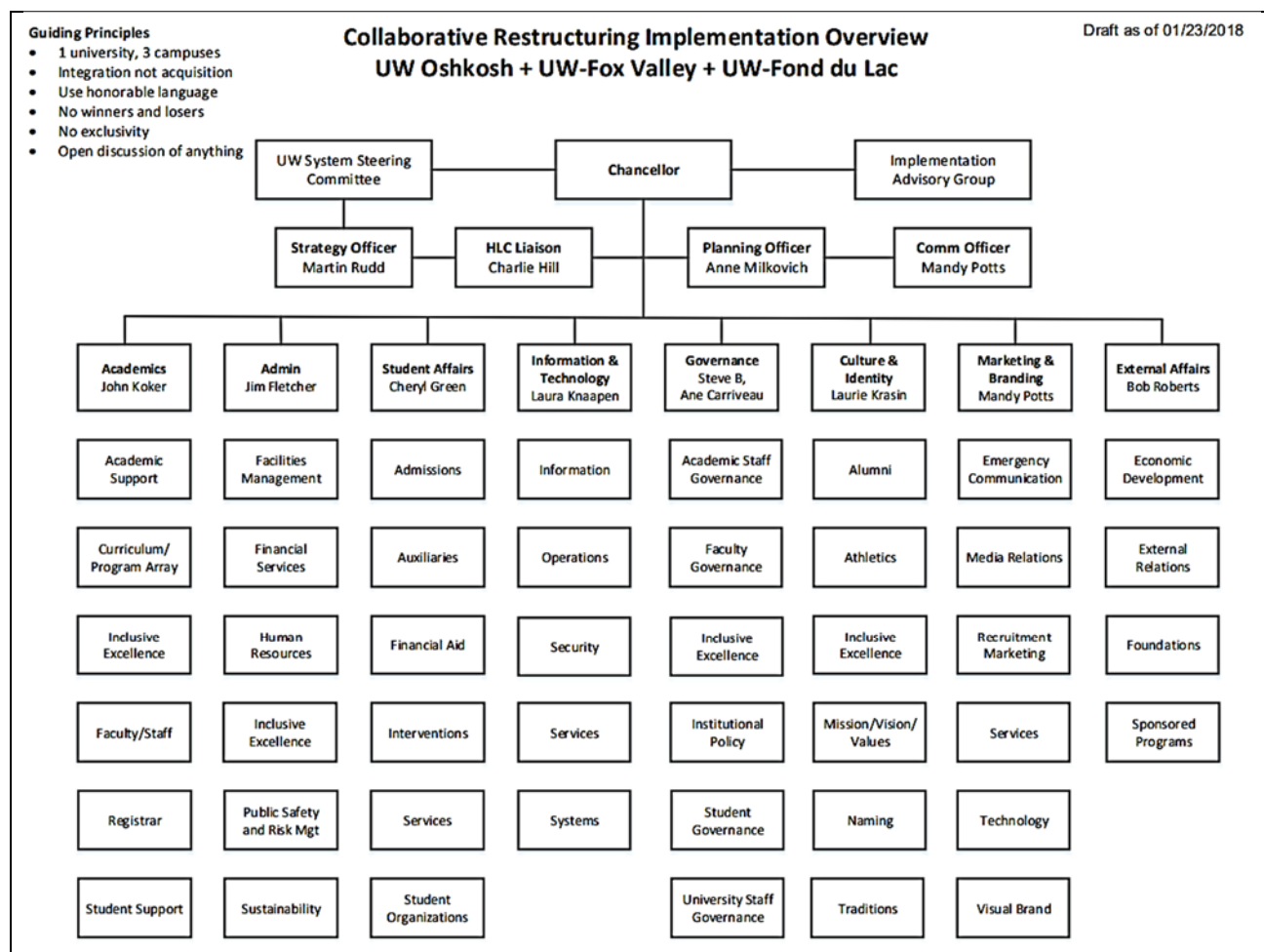


Figure 6. UW Oshkosh restructuring implementation workgroups. Adapted from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, n.d.

Another difference in the planning process at UW Oshkosh was Chancellor Leavitt's recognition of the importance of external stakeholders. In addition to the internal workgroups, Leavitt also established a restructuring advisory group composed of external stakeholders, including the city and county leaders that controlled the access campus facilities, alumni and students from each campus, and other community members. As noted previously, the access campuses were intrinsically linked to the city and county governments that provided and maintained their facilities. The restructuring advisory group ensured that Chancellor Leavitt was

staying abreast of community concerns and that those leaders remained engaged in the process as the institution considered changes to structure and identity, including a potential name change.

To manage stakeholder expectations, Chancellor Leavitt delineated the roles and responsibilities of institutional leaders and the restructuring advisory group (Figure 7). One administrator described the importance of the restructuring advisory group:

One, it demonstrated our seriousness about inclusive thinking and feedback and guidance and, two, to literally have them as a sounding board was really valuable. So, when we came forward with an idea, we could bounce it off them and get their thoughts. We'd open up every meeting with a sort of what are you hearing on the street agenda item... here's something I heard the other day, heard some praise here, heard some skepticism here, and we could address it.

Many respondents noted that the process employed at UW Oshkosh was very different from the other mergers occurring in the state, which were characterized more like acquisitions. Those receiving universities decided that the access campuses would either continue to function with a large degree of autonomy or that the access campuses would function as satellite operations of the larger institutions. However, the path UW Oshkosh leaders chose for Year 1 of its restructuring was not without its challenges, which fall into two broad categories: 1) cultural differences surrounding mission, identity, environment, governance, customs, and leadership and 2) the pace and management of the process.

Restructuring Roles and Responsibilities					
Chancellor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keep everyone's eyes on the vision ▪ Champion and endorse the undertaking ▪ Protect the climate of open discussion of everything ▪ Resolve conflicts 					
Restructuring Advisory Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Serve as an advisory group to the Chancellor on the restructuring process ▪ Provide input and outlet for campus and community comments ▪ Influence positive and transparent outcomes ▪ Represent efforts to appropriate constituencies 					
Restructuring Leaders <table border="1"> <tr> <th>Martin Rudd, Strategy Officer</th><th>Anne Milkovich, Planning Officer</th></tr> <tr> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Act as UW System Steering Committee liaison and central point of contact ▪ Develop management strategy in consultation with leaders ▪ Act as campus liaison and UW Colleges relationship and subject matter expert ▪ Communicate progress across campuses and functional areas ▪ Manage Up </td><td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Act as institutional planning liaison and central point of contact ▪ Develop management plans in consultation with leaders ▪ Plan, coordinate and organize across the implementation ▪ Monitor and report progress to Chancellor, functional, and restructuring leaders ▪ Manage Down </td></tr> </table>		Martin Rudd, Strategy Officer	Anne Milkovich, Planning Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Act as UW System Steering Committee liaison and central point of contact ▪ Develop management strategy in consultation with leaders ▪ Act as campus liaison and UW Colleges relationship and subject matter expert ▪ Communicate progress across campuses and functional areas ▪ Manage Up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Act as institutional planning liaison and central point of contact ▪ Develop management plans in consultation with leaders ▪ Plan, coordinate and organize across the implementation ▪ Monitor and report progress to Chancellor, functional, and restructuring leaders ▪ Manage Down
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Functional Leaders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify functional area projects ▪ Create and charge workgroups ▪ Coordinate with Planning Officer ▪ Approve project plans ▪ Monitor and report progress 					

Figure 7. UW Oshkosh restructuring roles and responsibilities. Adapted from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, n.d.

Aligning divergent cultures.

The cultural differences between UW Oshkosh and the UW-Fox Valley and UW-Fond du Lac campuses are significant and play a substantial role the restructuring process. Faculty, staff, and administrators acknowledged these challenges existed in the Oshkosh restructuring and

discussed how they have navigated the cultural differences. The following subthemes are loosely aligned with Tierney's (1988b, 2008) framework of organizational culture, previously detailed in Table 2. In this case, the subthemes highlight findings relative to the process of reconciling mission, identity, faculty identity and perceptions, socialization, information, leadership and governance, campus customs.

Mission.

Without question, the mission of any institution plays a role in shaping the campus' environment, the identity of those who work in the institution, how they communicate, and how they conduct their work (Tierney, 2008). As noted previously, the mission of the UW Colleges and the Fond du Lac and Fox Valley campuses is to provide community-based access to higher education that prepares students for career opportunities or to transfer to another institution to continue their education. Whereas, the mission at UW Oshkosh calls for faculty and staff to be involved in teaching, research, economic development, entrepreneurship, and community engagement in a wide range of disciplines that lead to degrees from the associate to doctoral levels. An important point related to the theme of institutional mission is the focus of and pride from the access campuses to prepare students for transfer opportunities to a variety of four-year universities, as opposed to the desire of the Oshkosh Campus to attract and retain students from the access campus. As a Fox Valley Campus faculty member said:

It's been a long and sometimes contentious conversation in many of the restructuring groups about getting the folks at Oshkosh to understand that one of the most fundamental parts of our mission is transfer. And by that, I mean not just having our students transfer from these access campuses to UW Oshkosh, but preparing our students who come to us on these access campuses to transfer to any of the four-year institutions in the UW

system... We are a transfer institution; we are not—I think the word now is a transit institution—where all students who come to us will eventually graduate from Oshkosh. That needs to be retained.

The disparate missions, marketing approaches, and student populations are particular sources of strife for campus and institutional leaders. As an outcome of the 2015 regionalization of the UW Colleges system, marketing services had been centralized in a state-level office and did not occur at the campus level. In the first year of the current UW System restructuring, the four-year universities were supposed to take on marketing responsibilities for the access campuses they were receiving. Thus, in this case, the marketing and enrollment management staffs of the UW Oshkosh Campus were supposed to assume those responsibilities for the Fox Valley and Fond du Lac campuses. However, several respondents reported frustration that the Oshkosh-based communication and marketing staff did not understand the enrollment cycle and needs of the two-year campuses, which they attributed to missed opportunities and a detrimental decrease in admission applications. An important observation regarding communication and marketing during this period is that the administrator who led that function for UW Oshkosh departed the institution in early 2018. Chancellor Leavitt noted that the office has been in structural transition since that time.

Another point of tension was highlighted by an Oshkosh-based student affairs and enrollment management administrator, who expressed irritation that marketing materials prepared by access campus staff continued to contrast the affordability of the access campuses against the higher tuition charged at the Oshkosh Campus. From his perspective, this is a topic that remains problematic, and, given the enrollment declines statewide, is concerning. This particular administrator recognized that there is a mindset that “your birthright, if you were born

in Wisconsin, is to go to Madison” and access campus faculty and advisors take great pride in directing students to the state’s flagship institution and have balked at promoting UW Oshkosh alone. However, as the administrator said, as a consolidated institution, they must “all sink or swim together.” Discussions are ongoing about recruitment and advising strategies to promote the breadth of opportunities for students under the new UW Oshkosh umbrella.

Identity: What’s in a name?

Institutional identity was a substantial question for the campuses and local communities, mainly as it related to the name. As noted earlier, Chancellor Leavitt regularly asks stakeholders to consider what kind of institution the region needs and deserves. He envisions the restructuring as an opportunity for institutional transformation to expand the university’s reputation and role in the Lake Winnebago region from its northern point with the UW-Fox Valley Campus to the southern end at the UW-Fond du Lac Campus. While the other UW institutions that were merging decided early in the process on campus names and designations, Leavitt initiated a market study to better understand the region and explore potentially changing the name of the entire institution to emphasize the Lake Winnebago region. Because of the access campuses’ ties to municipal and county government agencies, this process had political ramifications as well. As an administrator in the chancellor’s office said:

We’ve been very sensitive to how we talk about, refer to, and project the campuses in the eyes of their county governments...we heard loud and clear from the county executive, he did not hold back, and he said, ‘I don’t know if the county is gonna want to keep funding something that doesn’t have their name on it.’ OK, good to know. And he was the first one to say, when he saw the treatments for how we’ll approach naming and the letter marks, that we hit the bull’s eye. So, that was great confidence from him.

In May 2019, the naming workgroup recommended that, pending municipal partners' support and UW System Board of Regents' approval, all three campuses would be identified as a campus of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. The three campus designations are:

- University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Fond du Lac Campus
- University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Fox Cities Campus
- University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh Campus

The recommendation was approved by the Board of Regents in July 2019, providing the UW Oshkosh community with the opportunity to move forward with other aspects of the merger. In addition to institutional mission and identity, other environmental, social, and informational aspects of institutional culture, such as governance structures and campus customs, highlight distinctions between the campuses, challenge assumptions made by members of each campus, and will require more collaboration to resolve.

Faculty identity and perceptions.

As is often the case across the nation, differences in mission and scope contribute to a perception that community colleges have lower-quality students and faculty who focus on teaching, rather than research or other scholarly work that is typical for faculty at comprehensive universities. In the UW Oshkosh restructuring, that perception created a point of friction and cynicism between the faculties of the access campuses and the Oshkosh Campus. One faculty member from the Fox Valley Campus commented:

There is a sense among some faculty members at Oshkosh that the faculty on the access campuses are somehow lesser than, that they're not quite as qualified. ...That's not true at all. We have some very good faculty members who publish, attend conferences, they've done good work. ...that's created some real anxiety and some real resentment

among some faculty members here on the access campuses towards their departments at Oshkosh.

The UW System Board of Regents intensified this division when it approved a resolution in November 2017 that any faculty members who had tenure under the UW Colleges would maintain tenure in their receiving institution. According to several administrators, faculty at the Oshkosh Campus expressed frustration that the tenured faculty at the UW Colleges had not been required to meet the same standards for tenure that they had. Provost Koker, who originally joined UW Oshkosh as a faculty member in the math department and has a 28-year history with the institution, shares with faculty who take umbrage to that decision that a similar approach was taken many years ago when the math department was desperately trying to fill vacant positions. Although the reason is different now, he responds, “For a while, we will have people who are tenured in the same department that had different expectations. ...We’re not going to change the rules on someone.” Leaders at all campuses emphasized that these sentiments are not the case in every academic department, and they are less common in academic departments where faculty members may have interacted previously with colleagues at other campuses through professional or disciplinary organizations.

Socialization is contextual.

Another cultural disparity between the institutions is related to socialization, chiefly the level of interaction and collaboration between departments. The Oshkosh Campus, like many large universities, seems to be challenged by disciplinary and administrative “silos” that can result in disjointed communication and processes. In contrast, faculty and staff at the access campuses, by their very nature of being smaller organizations, worked closely together across departments and divisions. A faculty member at the Fox Valley Campus described the campus

culture as “extremely collegial,” an environment that led to collaboration on interdisciplinary courses, a high degree of participation by members of the campus community in governing processes, and informal conversations around “a faculty-staff table at lunch.” He lamented the culture has changed, beginning with the regionalization efforts, when many faculty were encouraged to teach online courses and more significant time was spent on work necessitated by regionalization, and exponentially so in the current restructuring:

Many people feel as though we’ve lost our identity, we’ve lost our mission, we’ve lost many of the elements that used to define the culture on this campus, and it’s difficult, as someone involved in the restructuring process, to convince faculty and staff that, you know, we all have to get in the game here if we want to preserve those things that we often enjoyed about this campus in this new environment. Lots of people just essentially have checked out from all of that... it’s going to be what it’s going to be, and I’m just going to roll with the tide, and I’m not going to get involved. That’s problematic, obviously.

A staff member from the Fond du Lac Campus observed that “it feels much different in a large organization.” She explained that due to limited hierarchies at the access campuses, they could “walk down the hall and talk to the budget person and walk down the hall and talk to the student affairs person” to resolve a student-related issue in about 10 minutes. In contrast, while individual Oshkosh Campus departments might be very close, she said it was surprising “to be at meetings and realize that department hasn’t talked to this department at all...I still don’t even understand all of the hierarchy and departments.”

Leadership and governance.

While shared governance is a common characteristic on each of the campuses involved in the UW Oshkosh restructuring and is described as a strong and valued tenet, the governance structures at the Oshkosh Campus and the access campuses are very different. Each of the campuses recognizes shared governance participants as faculty, academic staff, university staff, and students. As part of the UW Colleges system, the shared governance model employed at the access campuses is Collegium, a monthly governance gathering of faculty, staff, student leadership, and, according to one access campus administrator, “until restructuring, it was where decisions were made.” The UW System Board of Regents specified as part of the restructuring that faculty, staff, and students from the access campuses would retain the Collegium structure and have a voice in the governance structure of their receiving institutions. This commitment is reflected in UW Oshkosh’s accreditation documents for the HLC review:

In addition to integrating UW-Fond du Lac and UW-Fox Valley faculty, staff, and students into the governance bodies that currently exist at UW Oshkosh, we recommend that each branch campus maintain its current Collegium structure. The Collegium is a body that includes faculty, staff, and students, and is intended to deal collaboratively with local issues in an efficient (and often time-sensitive) manner. Moreover, it will help provide a local support network for members of the branch campus who might feel disconnected from the hosting institution. (University of Wisconsin System, 2018)

Despite that recommendation, concern exists among the faculty and staff at the access campuses about the future of Collegium and their involvement in UW Oshkosh governance structure. Their concerns center on the frequency and timing of UW Oshkosh governance structure meetings (more frequently than Collegium) and at times when access campus faculty

typically have teaching responsibilities, the expectation that they need to drive to another campus to participate, and their voice being overwhelmed with little point to run for election because they are not known to the Oshkosh Campus faculty. As one access campus leader noted, there is also concern about the value of Collegium, if there is no “bite to what the group does.”

Campus customs reveal cultural gaps.

Just as shared governance structures reflect the character of campuses, so do academic ceremonies and rituals. In May 2019, each of the three campuses held spring commencement ceremonies. The events, held near the end of Year 1 of the restructuring (the access campuses are in reality units of UW Oshkosh but still operating somewhat autonomously), provided a recent and tangible event that most respondents brought up during the case study interviews as an example of disparate approaches and expectations.

From the perspective of the access campus leaders, the event was a sentimental and symbolic transition of becoming part of UW Oshkosh. The event coordinator, a communication staff member from the access campuses, mentioned trying to “infuse the new UW Oshkosh and layer in some of their traditions and protocols” while honoring the graduates’ journey at the access campuses. Those actions included positioning an access campus academic banner at the entrance of the stage where graduates, who started as students under UW-Fox Valley or UW-Fond du Lac, passed as they came onto the stage and a UW Oshkosh banner where they departed the stage. Additionally, although Chancellor Leavitt was part of the stage party for the commencement ceremonies at the access campuses, the access campus administrator, rather than the chancellor, presided over the ceremony and was featured in the printed commencement program. Some Oshkosh administrators commented that they perceived the events’ format and execution as an unintentional slight to Chancellor Leavitt, as, at that point in the restructuring,

Leavitt was the head of the institution. Also, some Oshkosh Campus administrators acknowledged that when discussing the events later they caused some consternation when they mistakenly assumed that all future commencement ceremonies would be held at the Oshkosh Campus. Leaders are discussing that topic, but a course of action had not been determined by the conclusion of this study.

Leadership ambiguity.

The assumptions highlighted through the commencement ceremonies point to a pervasive sense of ambiguity, and for some, a sense of frustration, at the midpoint of the restructuring. While many individuals expressed appreciation for the inclusivity of the workgroups and advisory group structure, they also noted that it had considerable impacts on the pace and management of the process. Provost Koker commented:

The more people you engage, you know, the slower the process moves. ...this was announced in [fall 2017], and I'm going to say that it was certainly after the first of the year before these groups were even fully formed. So while [the other six institutions] already had been making decisions, we were just getting started.

To provide stability during the transition, Chancellor Leavitt hired the eight-member regional leadership team of the access campuses (Leavitt, 2018). Among those hired were Dr. Martin Rudd, who served as the regional executive officer and dean of the access campuses for the UW Colleges Northeast Region and became Assistant Chancellor for Access Campuses. Chancellor Leavitt also appointed Rudd as the institution's representative on the UW System's Restructuring Committee and as the UW Oshkosh restructuring strategy officer. The move was well received and created some continuity in leadership in addition to helping bridge the gap between the access campuses and the Oshkosh Campus. Leavitt and Rudd both noted that this

move was also very different than at the other Wisconsin mergers, where, in most instances, the access campus leadership teams were disbanded.

In the internal restructuring role, Assistant Chancellor Rudd was paired with an Oshkosh Campus leader who served as the restructuring planning officer. However, when that individual took another position outside the institution in September 2018, the university hired Huron Consulting Group to assist with the restructure planning. After that one-year contract ended, the institution appointed another internal planning officer. Those responsibility changes and the accompanying changes in planning platforms, perhaps, impaired or slowed the planning process. Chancellor Leavitt was self-critical in this regard:

...in a lot of ways, I've let some of this go on too long... It's not to say we're not moving but let's finish some of these things. ...So, for instance, we're the last institution by a year to name the access campuses.

Many individuals noted that settling on a naming structure was a huge milestone that impacted operations from information technology to marketing and communications. Once the name was determined, it "kind of released the floodgates a little bit," according to one staff member who works in the information technology division.

Other frustrations along the way centered on the allocation of resources and understanding functional roles. Because many of the administrative functions of the former UW Colleges had been centralized, the access campus staffs are small in number, and staff members typically wear multiple hats that span more than one administrative division. At the Oshkosh Campus, budget cuts and attrition over the past few years meant that departments on that campus were leanly resourced, too. So, as Oshkosh Campus administrators began to try to integrate services with the access campus staff, they often sought to convert access campus positions into

more specialized roles. Unless additional resources are made available, there are concerns that more specialized roles may hinder student support at the access campuses, where cross-trained personnel has been essential. As some responsibilities and access campus staff have transitioned into Oshkosh-based divisions, it has created some uncertainty and challenges in leadership. One student affairs administrator based on the Oshkosh Campus commented, “Transferring supervision has been messy because former supervisors are still there, and I’ve maybe met them in person only a handful of times.” An administrator serving the Fox Cities and Fond du Lac campuses said, “...authority lines are pretty warped at the moment; I do not know my level of authority at the moment. So, the authority piece is something that remains pretty mysterious.” While the blurred lines of authority may be inherent in the process, navigating the changes is often left to more informal processes and leaders. An academic staff leader described it as a delicate dance to engage the right people:

There is the person or office that the organizational chart says I should go to, but then there’s the person that actually knows what’s going on and is actually making decisions that you need to go to. So, it really has been about learning and understanding how decisions have been made... figuring out which decisions are still being made in that way and which have transitioned and which live in some sort of a hybrid system.

Communication challenges.

Perceptions of communication in general during the restructuring are mixed—some viewed that there was not enough communication, while others viewed that there was too much. Across the spectrum, faculty, staff, and administrators praised Chancellor Leavitt’s commitment to engaging stakeholders directly through a series of town hall-style forums on all campuses and his consistency in messaging. Leavitt and others also provided updates during regular faculty-

staff meetings, Collegium meetings, by email, and through information posted on the institution's restructuring website. Early in the process, a structural communication challenge that administrators encountered was that the email systems used at the Oshkosh Campus was different from the one used for the access campuses. As a result, not all stakeholders were receiving valuable information, and some stakeholders perceived that communities were receiving more information than others. There was not a quick and easy fix to bridge that divide; however, the institution has since transitioned to a single email system.

The institution established a restructuring website to provide a reliable communications channel and source for information, restructuring updates, and decisions regarding the workgroup recommendations, though several respondents noted that faculty and staff do not proactively visit the site for information. Also, decisions are generally not announced via mass communication, unless they are significant, such as the naming recommendation. Consequently, some stakeholders are ill-informed about decisions, according to interviewees. One staff governance leader based at the Oshkosh Campus noted that recommendations from one workgroup would go up the chain to get final approval, but they might not hear anything after that, or that the recommendation or approval might impact another workgroup or administrative area, so the feedback loop might be incomplete. Another academic staff member remarked that the decision itself is not necessarily sufficient information, "People are looking for 'how are we going to do this,' not 'here's the decision.'" Provost Koker commented:

We probably need a full-time person just to be the restructuring communicator. ...I think that's one of the big complaints that we get... this restructuring website, is it up to date, or as we make decisions or recommendations, are those clearly communicated?

For a short time, Assistant Chancellor Rudd sent updates to faculty and staff at the access campuses in response to a need for more information at those locations, and some staff from the Oshkosh Campus asked to receive those notices as well. According to one staff member, “I think they were hungry for information, too.” Despite good intentions to communicate regularly, the updates fell by the wayside in the transition to a new project manager and due to a lack of time to devote to an extra activity in an overwhelming process.

“Change Warriors” and fatigue.

A consistent theme in the case study interviews was the drain on employees and the feeling of fatigue. Provost Koker observed, “there’s some days that this really was another full-time job; that’s been really a hard thing here because we really have asked a lot of people to do a lot more work.” The restructuring process seems to have been particularly taxing on the employees at the access campuses, because of the significant volume of change they have had to absorb in such a short time. Chancellor Leavitt, in numerous statements, referred to these groups as “change warriors” and highlighted their extraordinary resiliency. Several Oshkosh-based respondents mentioned a high level of respect for and sensitivity toward the members of the access campuses. For example, one Oshkosh-based staff governance leader spoke about getting access campus employees more involved in committees and commented:

They’re tired. They’re exhausted. I mean they’ve gone through one restructuring and it barely even finished up before this one got announced. So, some of what may be perceived as a lack of involvement from here,...no, they’re just burned out, they’re exhausted, they don’t have any more availability for these kind of things. So we try to be very respectful of that.

In his overview of the history of the UW Oshkosh campuses at the fall 2018 Opening Day ceremony, Archivist Josh Ranger remarked, “Perhaps as a result of these decades of scrutiny and debate about the Centers, these campus administrators, faculty, and staff grew quite adept at surviving and thriving under less than ideal circumstances.”

“This merger is giving us an opportunity to become something that we’re not.”

While phase one of the restructuring was marked by uncertainty and apprehension, UW Oshkosh is entering the next phase of the merger with a sense of hope and vision—for stability and greater resources, for the opportunities it will provide students, and for the role and impact the university will have on the region. One staff member at the Fond du Lac Campus, who expressed optimism as the institution moves into the next phase of restructuring, said, “It was much like a grieving process to grieve the old institution, but I think people have done that now and are looking forward to what are the opportunities for the future.” Several respondents discussed increased opportunities for students soon, including the potential expansion of baccalaureate and master’s level programs to the access campuses and the convenience and availability of services and activities to students across all three campuses.

Chancellor Leavitt, in keeping with his question to stakeholders about what kind of university the region needs and deserves, envisions greater opportunities, too, for faculty and staff to be relevant outside the bounds of their campuses. He has challenged faculty and staff at the Fox Cities and Fond du Lac campuses, in particular, to do some visioning of how they want their campuses to interact with the communities that they serve. He said, “They have all this intellectual capital on the campus ... and all of these different social, economic, environmental issues going on in the community. The faculty need to be engaged with that.”

Provost Koker said the university has a unique opportunity as a result of combining the three campuses to become a significant comprehensive university with an expanded footprint that drives progress in the region. He said, “if we can become that in the eyes of our community, and they see us as something that can help them succeed in whatever they want to succeed...this merger is giving us an opportunity to become something that we’re not.” This vision was reinforced by another administrator in the chancellor’s office, who said:

I would love to see what 50 years from now it looks like here in the region, because I think the university’s strength and integration into the life of companies and nonprofits and local government will be even stronger...we will really be in a humming region in Wisconsin, and I think the university will be seen as one of the centerpieces.

In August 2019, UW Oshkosh held a single opening day ceremony for faculty and staff from all campuses at the Oshkosh Campus. The event, presided over by Provost Koker and Chancellor Leavitt, seemed to mark a clear delineation of leadership, as well as a clearer picture of the institution’s future. Provost Koker passionately conveyed a sense of accomplishment in student success measures as well as an emphasis on collective problem-solving to meet the challenges that remain, particularly surrounding the institution’s financial and enrollment challenges. Similarly, Chancellor Leavitt remarked on the work and sacrifice that faculty and staff put into stabilizing the institution over the past year and to establish a new identity. Most profoundly, he challenged the audience to begin thinking further ahead, about how the university needs to continue to evolve to prepare for the disruptive forces, including “new modalities and programs that will better align with future demand.”

Conclusion

Merging organizations is difficult work, and mergers in higher education have layers of complexity related to institutional culture and governance that will inevitably lead to cultural clashes and communication challenges. The silver lining against this dark backdrop, however, is that mergers are also an opportunity for reinvigorating institutional purpose and mission—an opportunity to engage and connect in new ways with internal and external stakeholders to leverage the strengths and knowledge found in institutions of higher education to meet the changing needs of the communities and students they serve. Energetic and effective leadership and communication play vital roles in the perceived success of organizational change.

Chancellor Leavitt and his administrative team appear committed to “getting it right” for the long-term health of the institution and its campuses. One access campus administrator described the process, “it’s messy. It’s been hard, but it’s been driven from the ground up. It’s been built from the ground up, which I think will make it stronger.” That statement reflects the vision that Chancellor Leavitt cast in his State of the University address in fall 2018, that the process is frustrating and somewhat messy, but those characteristics are a testament to the high level of engagement and participation in the formation of critical decisions and the inclusion of all voices in the process of combining organizational cultures.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is an old adage that change is inevitable, and this is true in higher education, where change initiatives at the disciplinary, institutional, and system levels are persistent. Increased calls for accountability and performance, opportunities to improve student outcomes, and changing demographics and societal concerns demand innovation, which is not a simple task in higher education organizations commonly characterized by a slow pace and bureaucratic governance systems. Thus, higher education leaders benefit from understanding the organizational context of their environments, effective change strategies, and the resistance and obstacles they may encounter. This understanding is particularly relevant for public higher education mergers, where unions are sometimes characterized as “forced marriages” (Mangan, 2019).

Further complicating these mergers are the factors that typically precipitate such mergers, chiefly declines in funding, enrollment, or other resources that negatively affect an institution’s ability to prosper. This dissertation attempts to address the understudied field of higher education mergers, and, in particular, how organizational culture and communications shape the merger process. This final chapter provides an overview of the study, presents key findings in connection to the literature, offers recommendations for higher education leaders, and concludes with implications for further research.

Review of the Study

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's restructuring to combine a large four-year institution with two smaller community colleges presents a complex case study that highlights the roles of culture and communication in a cross-sectoral merger of higher education institutions. Using institutional and system data, analysis of news articles and various presentations, as well as data collected from 15 interviews with institutional leaders and stakeholders, Chapter 4 presented a case study describing the change process and the cultural considerations of the restructuring at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Importantly, this study confirmed that institutional or campus culture is the convergence of many factors and that institutional actors play a role in shaping culture through leadership and communication strategies.

Three considerations led to the development of this dissertation topic. First, while change is a constant influence in higher education, significant change in higher education today is being driven by external forces – federal and state controls, governing bodies, funding and market forces, demographic changes, stakeholder expectations – that constrain the ability of institutional leaders to manage or resist change (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005; Hearn & McLendon, 2012). Astute leaders should be attuned to the growing prevalence and speed at which outside forces are requiring higher education to be accountable and responsive. Further, as Kezar (2018) argued, leaders should focus not only on the content of the change initiative but should take time to understand the change process, the potential influence of external forces, the organizational context on their success, and the leadership required to create the change.

Second, mergers in higher education as a change process are understudied topic, particularly in the United States, yet policymakers are increasingly considering or using mergers as a strategy to address enrollment challenges, shrinking state resources, and attainment goals.

Finally, in the context of higher education, organizational culture and its various dimensions can have a significant impact on the success of a change process. Various scholars (Kezar, 2001; Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Tierney, 2012) point to the unique culture of the academy with its shared governance structure, goal ambiguity, and fluid participation. Further, most colleges and universities are steeped in tradition, often resulting in a deep-seated resistance to change, including threats to identity or mission. Also, the typical pace of change in higher education and its complex stakeholder and governance structures make colleges and universities inherently less nimble.

This dissertation examines the roles of culture and communication in mergers between public institutions of higher education. The three motivating research questions, stated initially in Chapter 1, are:

1. How do existing organizational cultures shape the merger process, as perceived by senior institutional leaders?
2. How do organizational cultures change during and following the implementation of institutional mergers?
3. How do institutional leaders use communication and change strategies manage the change process, reduce conflict and anxiety, and support acculturation into a single organization?

The questions focus on the change process and are examined using a multi-faceted theoretical approach that draws from organizational culture theory, communications theory, and

sensemaking theory. Additionally, I examined the cultures of the merging institutions using a framework developed by William Tierney, who identified six elements that contribute to an institution's culture: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership.

Findings

Beyond the obvious administrative changes associated with the merger of the three campuses in this case study to become one institution, the long-term outcome of this merger, if successful, will be a cultural or second-order change over time. As Kezar (2018) posited, second-order change is so substantial that it is able to challenge long-held assumptions and organizational culture. This case study, conducted during a period of significant institutional transition, reveals a community experiencing grief, loss, pain, and frustration, but it is also an account of revival, hope, and collaboration to work toward a sustainable and productive future for the university's three campuses and the region and students they serve. While the process of this merger is still ongoing, the evidence from this early stage suggests that while some aspects of the campus cultures hinder the merger process, other aspects of institutional culture may contribute to a more sustained change and acculturation. The findings represent a complex scenario of institutional leaders and stakeholders trying to bring together three different campuses – along with all of the necessary processes and structures – under one institutional umbrella while honoring components of the campuses' identities and missions. My findings are organized around the three theoretical underpinnings used for this study.

Organizational culture.

Many aspects of culture, because it is built upon norms and values established over time, are unwritten and unspoken. As a result, studying the culture of an organization can be challenging. Tierney's six dimensions of institutional culture – environment, mission,

socialization, information, strategy, and leadership – provided a structure through which to examine the culture of each of the campuses involved in this merger. However, it is challenging to strictly ascribe most observations to a single dimension, because, as Tierney (1988b) suggested, the elements of institutional culture are interwoven, overlapping and connecting at multiple points like a spider’s web.

One might presume that as institutions of higher education within in the same region, the campuses might operate very similarly. However, I observed that the distinctions in mission, size, scope, and leadership contribute to highly dissimilar governance and social structures, as well as different modes of communication and decision-making. One key conclusion from my observations of the campuses in this case is the relevance of campus size in the process of socialization, information, and decision-making—or to use Tierney’s term—strategy. Though a somewhat obvious point, it is intrinsically simpler for smaller organizations to communicate, to share information, to collaborate, and to reach consensus. It is through these mechanisms and processes that individuals develop a sense of identity, construct values, and understand how the organization functions (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Schein, 2004). Though leaders in this restructuring implemented an inclusive and consultative process to engage institutional stakeholders in the issues that had to be addressed, the significant disparity in size between the two-year access campuses and the larger Oshkosh Campus and the ways in which the campuses were accustomed to operating resulted in challenges that included an inability or lack of interest by some to participate in the process and, in some cases, fluid participation.

Leadership is another significant cultural dimension that plays a critical role in a merger. Tierney’s (1988b) description of leadership examines what the community expects from its leaders, who the leaders are, and the roles of formal and informal leaders. Kezar (2018) noted

that campus communities may be skeptical about and resistant to some top-down change initiatives, such as restructuring and efficiency efforts, because they are incongruent with those commonly held values, and she suggested that leaders may overcome these obstacles and enhance ethical leadership by accepting resistance and encouraging participation, open communication, trust, and transformational leadership. Chancellor Leavitt fully embraced his role as the individual responsible for casting a vision of future success with both internal and external stakeholders in a period of adversity and uncertainty, and it was clear from his actions that he sought to be fair, inclusive, and transparent while guiding the organization and its campus communities toward a more stable and viable future. He demonstrated this by retaining the senior leadership of the access campuses—a reportedly uncommon occurrence among most of the UW restructurings, by developing the workgroup process, and through his guidance about how the workgroups would operate. All respondents noted their appreciation of Leavitt's inclusive leadership style and his attention to institutional culture and how the restructuring impacted faculty and staff. Not surprisingly, some staff members from the Oshkosh Campus expressed frustration that they were at a point in the process when decisions just needed to be made and observed that the top-down approach employed at other UW restructurings was more efficient.

Of note, too, is the fluidity of leadership the campuses experienced in the restructuring. The access campuses had very recently restructured under regionalization resulting in some leadership changes at those campuses. At the Oshkosh Campus, a few administrators left for positions at other institutions either just before the restructuring announcement or soon after, resulting in interim leadership in several areas and a shuffling of responsibilities. Such attrition is likely common to mergers, and while it may create opportunities for restructuring or

elimination of positions, the loss of talent and institutional knowledge may also create a void or ambiguity when leadership is needed most.

On a final point regarding leadership, informal leaders are present in every organization, and they can play a valuable role in a change process. Several interviewees noted individuals within the organization who were not necessarily in positions of authority, but because of their institutional knowledge, became “go-to” people for information or even direction about how to get something done when operational processes lacked clarity. Institutional leaders would fare well to identify and include such individuals in a change process to ensure actions are consistent with decisions that are being promulgated and to support informal communications.

Organizational communication.

The literature emphasized that leaders attempting to implement cultural change may face resistance if the values and beliefs associated with the change initiative violate or contradict existing cultural norms, and that one way to overcome this resistance is to pay close attention to messaging to adjust the value system slowly and to align the organizational mission with the new values by creating new rituals and ongoing communication of the new values (Kezar, 2018; Tierney, 1988b). This concept is reinforced by other organizational theorists, including Bolman and Deal (2003), who noted that “...change agents fail when they rely almost entirely on reason and structure and neglect human, political, and symbolic elements” (p. 383). Communication in a merger is distinctively challenging due to the complex needs of different constituencies and omnidirectional sources (Habeck et al., 2000; Manning, 2018), and it may be further complicated by disruptions in traditional communication mechanisms.

The restructuring process at UW Oshkosh suffered from structural and organizational communication challenges that impeded the development of trust and relationships and

complicated the implementation of the restructuring. For example, communication between the campuses was thwarted by disparate email systems that could not be combined easily. Further, individual assumptions and perceptions, inconsistencies in the frequency and content of electronic communication, and reliance on a website to passively disseminate information about process decisions resulted in pockets of conflict, distrust, and frustration. These struggles point to culturally-embedded expectations between the two-year campuses and the four-year campus regarding frequency and mode of communication, as well as how the organizations articulate their mission and identity to stakeholders. A significant and ongoing point of conflict centers on the recruitment and marketing efforts for each of the campuses. During this transitional timeframe, as responsibilities for marketing the two-year campuses were assumed by staff at UW Oshkosh, some individuals at the access campuses perceived a lack of urgency and understanding related to their admission cycle and student recruitment efforts that further weakened enrollment at those campuses. Additionally, disparate views remain about positioning the access campuses as a more affordable option than attending Wisconsin's four-year campuses, including Oshkosh. These concerns were, perhaps, exacerbated by transitional leadership of the university's marketing and communication unit and will likely take some time and leadership to resolve.

I did not find a comprehensive or formal communication plan in use at UW Oshkosh during this restructuring; however, I did observe several examples of strategic and open communication designed to build trust and leverage common ground to unite the campus communities. First and foremost, Chancellor Leavitt regularly hosted and participated in open forums that encouraged open discussion about issues important to students, faculty, and staff. This position of being physically present and available for face-to-face conversations helped

establish a sense of trust and fostered communication. Similarly, access campus leaders commented how important it was and how much they valued that Leavitt made himself available for events and meetings in the communities where their campuses are located. Given the political nature of the relationships of those campuses with the municipal and county governments, Leavitt's efforts to build relationships there was vital. Second, repeated and consistent use of the phrase, "Three campuses, one university" became a mantra to help both internal and external stakeholders begin to understand the new structure and discuss the positive potential the restructuring represented.

In other ways, faculty and staff also played a role in these communication strategies. In one example, at the fall 2018 opening day event for faculty and staff, the UW Oshkosh archivist presented a historical overview of the three campuses that highlighted common elements of the campuses' mission and their historical ties. In the second example, at that same event, a faculty member at the Fond du Lac Campus who provided a campus governance update shared with excitement that, through the restructuring, faculty would have access to the Oshkosh Campus' offices for IRB, grants and sponsored programs, and undergraduate research – all services and opportunities previously unavailable to faculty at the access campuses.

While these strategies and tactics supported positive communication in the UW Oshkosh restructuring,

Despite good intentions, the communication challenges experienced in the UW Oshkosh restructuring contributed to sores that will linger in the acculturation process. The human factor and the need for information is paramount, and, based on my observations, I conclude that communication plays a substantial role in the success of higher education merger and should be a

fundamental and intentional consideration for institutional leaders as they plan and implement a merger.

Making sense of change.

While leaders must work across multiple leadership frames to navigate a change process, sensemaking as an organizational change theory and strategy is one that is particularly important in achieving second-order change at the cultural level (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Kezar, 2018). As the literature suggests, sensemaking involves a reinterpretation of institutional culture, history, values, and traditions to advance initiatives and community members' understanding of the institution and current priorities (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2000). I observed the sensemaking process repeatedly at UW Oshkosh, as community members strived to navigate the dynamic environment associated with the restructuring and as a leadership strategy to articulate the changes in progress. Most notably, Chancellor Leavitt acknowledged the challenges each of the campuses faced if they did not take steps to change, and he framed a forward-looking vision of the institution by inviting stakeholders to consider how the university could best contribute to the region's needs and aspirations. This exercise seemed to help constituents see beyond the immediate process and envision future opportunities. Leavitt's apparent success using this sensemaking strategy points to an opportunity and responsibility that institutional leaders have to use their communication platform strategically to cast a vision that motivates and engages internal and external stakeholders in the success of the institution.

Additionally, the change implementation structure that Leavitt created is consistent with scholars' (Kezar, 2018; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) view of organizational sensemaking that leaders can develop processes and structures, such as task forces and conversations, which help individuals create a share sense of organization. The restructuring framework of

workgroups at UW Oshkosh enabled campus constituents to progress from a state of turmoil, to shared experiences and information, and then to interpret new meaning and processes for the new organization. This process and the structure required participants to interact, question presumptions, and take actions to stabilize the organization.

Finally, as noted previously, Leavitt and his administrative staff were very intentional with the language they used regarding the restructuring and referred to it as a “joining,” rather than merger or consolidation. Scholars (Lang, 2003; Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Rowley, 1997) have described various end-states related to acculturation of merging organizations as integration, assimilation, autonomous, or acquisition, with the variations stemming from the perceived domination of a larger organization over another smaller organization. Leavitt was clear in his intent to honor the existing cultures of each of the campuses and leverage their strengths while developing a single, cohesive organization, and his design of the restructuring process ensured wide input from members of each campus community. While initial observations seem to indicate some success toward the integration of the three campuses under one umbrella, it was not surprising that some of the respondents at the smaller access campuses still felt as though their organizations were being consumed by the larger Oshkosh organization. It is likely that the acculturation process will take some years to fully achieve and more fully assess.

Recommendations

With such a specific case, my findings are not intended to be generalizable to other higher education mergers. However, I hope that the observations in this chapter will provide insight to institutional leaders to navigate such significant organizational change and understand its impact on stakeholders. Toward that end, I offer four practical and rather rudimentary

recommendations based on the findings of this case study for those who may be involved in leading an institutional merger:

1. *Pay attention to the culture.* Campus cultures are deeply ingrained, and there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for orchestrating change of this magnitude. However, those higher education leaders who try to navigate a merger without studying and understanding the cultures of the legacy institutions may do so at high risk of culture clashes. Leaders should consider the institution's history and mission, its symbols, language, customs, and its political and structural environment to be mindful of underlying systems of meaning and values to ensure that change aligns with the institutional culture and to increase the odds of success.
2. *Communicate early and often.* Effective communication strategies can assist leaders in building upon existing meaning and history to unite the campus communities and create a cohesive culture. Toward that end, institutional leaders should set a positive and forward-looking tone, but one that is balanced with realism regarding the challenges the institution has. Such transparency is a foundational tenet in building trust and instilling loyalty. An effective communication strategy will identify all stakeholders and key messages; include multiple modes of communication, such as face-to-face meetings and presentations, written communication, and a digital presence; establish an expectation regarding frequency of communication; and identify those individuals accountable for executing and monitoring communication. Finally, leaders should remember that stakeholders need varying degrees of information, and communicating a decision may not provide sufficient detail for an employee to perform their work.

3. *Eliminate ambiguity as much as possible.* While constituents first will want to know if and how the merger impacts them personally and professionally, as the process continues, they need and want to understand how the changes implemented affect reporting lines and functions, in other words, who is doing what and who is in charge of what. Without appropriate communication, rumors and misinformation will fill this void. While information and decision may not always be available in a timely way, leaders can relieve anxiety and frustration through regular and consistent updates about the status of the process or interim steps.
4. *Understand that change of this magnitude is a long-term process.* Mergers are complex change processes on multiple levels. While administrative restructuring might be achieved in a relatively short timeframe of two to five years, deeper cultural change may take decades. Institutional leaders may incentivize or encourage change through programs that drive activity toward aspirational goals, through professional development opportunities or learning communities, or through strategic planning efforts.

These recommendations reflect basic management principles; however, my own professional experience with a higher education merger, my observation of the UW Oshkosh restructuring, and a review of the literature, all indicate that they may be overlooked or undervalued tenets in the change management process. How is it that such elementary ‘best practices’ are not fully employed? The answer may lie in the intensity and unusually fast pace associated with such monumental organizational change in the higher education environment. Additionally, as was observed in this case, transitions associated with personnel departures or changing roles can result in a loss of institutional knowledge and leadership, as well as ambiguity of responsibility.

Limitations and areas for future research

This dissertation has been limited in its scope, focusing on only one case of a public higher education merger at the midpoint of its progression. Further, my interviews were limited to institutional leaders in key administrative positions, governance leadership roles, or communication roles. The interviews are skewed more heavily toward leaders at the Oshkosh Campus, as that is where the majority of the institutional leadership resided, and also because a few of the invited leaders of the access campuses chose not to participate. Expanded research could explore the perceptions and experiences of students and external stakeholders. The findings in this dissertation and the dearth of literature on higher education mergers open additional opportunities for future studies.

First, a comparative case analysis using two or more institutions within a single state system or among different states could be enlightening. Because organizational cultures and contexts are unique from one institution to another, no two merger events should be expected to be the same. As noted in Chapter 4, several interviewees stated that the leaders at UW Oshkosh approached their joining more inclusively than their colleagues at other UW institutions. A multi-case study that compares different approaches to similar change initiatives would provide an interesting analysis of institutional culture and change leadership.

As noted, this case study occurred at the midpoint of the restructuring at UW Oshkosh – at the end of the planning year and at the beginning of the planned implementation year. At this point in the restructuring, several respondents noted a great sense of uncertainty and ambiguity about the future and the institution's shifting identity. Kezar (2018) noted that cultural change within higher education is a long process. Studies conducted at periods later in the change

process would offer the opportunity for greater reflection by participants and would likely reveal different understandings of the personal, institutional, and cultural outcomes of the restructuring.

This case intentionally examined a merger among public institutions of higher education, which are more likely to be unions designed and forced by governing boards, in contrast to mergers of private or for-profit institutions where institutions voluntarily pursue potential educational partners to strengthen academic programs and market share or to increase financial stability. Conceptually, a similar case study involving voluntary mergers might highlight a change approach that is more analogous to corporate mergers and acquisitions.

Colleges and universities in the United States have faced extraordinary pressures in the past ten years due to economic strains, political challenges, and demographic shifts. These stressors on institutional viability have pushed some state systems of higher education and politicians to increasingly consider mergers as one possible solution to reduce costs while striving to increase educational attainment levels and meet workforce needs. While these intensive initiatives have results-oriented emphases, this study underscores the point that Burke (1988) made that a merger is not an event; it is a process that requires planning, managing, and monitoring to prevent failure. Based on the significant disruption resulting from a merger—including the time, energy, and personnel resources required to implement them—policymakers should carefully consider whether the short-term cost savings will truly achieve the desired results or if other solutions might be more effective in the long-term. If a merger is undertaken, leaders and policymakers must exercise appropriate change management and communication strategies that are particularly attentive to institutional culture to ensure lasting success.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL VIA LETTER OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
<http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/>

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

April 22, 2019

Dear [Erik Ness](#):

On 4/22/2019, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Higher Education Mergers: The roles of culture and communications
Investigator:	Erik Ness
Co-Investigator:	Margaret Maine
IRB ID:	PROJECT00000526
Funding:	None
Review Category:	Exempt, 2(ii)

We have approved the protocol on 4/22/2019. Please submit a Progress Report by 4/21/2024.

This is an Exempt study, so it's not necessary to submit a modification for minor changes to study procedure. You can keep us informed of changes that don't affect the risk of the study by using "Add Public Comment".

Please close this study when it is complete.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

William Westbrook, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

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APPENDIX B

SITE APPROVAL



April 10, 2019

Dear Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia,

I am writing to indicate my permission for Kate Maine, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia to conduct research at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh as part of her research project titled, "Higher Education Mergers: The roles of culture and communication."

We have agreed to the following study procedures:

- 1) interviews with institutional stakeholders;
- 2) observation of relevant meetings or events; and
- 3) analysis of publicly available information such as relevant documents, websites, speeches, and publications.

As Chancellor at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, I grant permission for these activities to take place at our three campuses; Fond du Lac, Fox Valley, and Oshkosh during the months of June and July, 2019.

Please provide Ms. Kelly Schill, Office of Sponsored Programs, a copy of your IRB approved research protocol and training documentation from UGA prior to your arrival. This also serves as assurance that this institution complies with all State and Federal laws regarding Human Subject Research and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Leavitt".

Andrew J. Leavitt
Chancellor

CC: John Koker, Provost
Martin Rudd, Assistant Chancellor for Access Campuses
Kelly Schill, Office of Sponsored Programs

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN OSHKOSH • 800 ALGOMA BLVD • OSHKOSH WI 54901-8617
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APPENDIX C

RESPONDENTS

The study included face-to-face interviews with a total of 15 administrators and governance leaders from each of the three campuses. The interviews were conducted in early June 2019, which was at the mid-point of the two-year restructuring process.

Chancellor	Oshkosh Campus
Chancellor's Office staff (2)	Oshkosh Campus
Academic Affairs administrators (2)	Oshkosh Campus
Academic Staff Senate leader	Oshkosh Campus
Faculty governance leader	Fox Valley Campus
Campus administrator	Access Campuses
University Affairs administrator	Oshkosh Campus
Restructuring project leader	Oshkosh Campus
Student Affairs administrator	Oshkosh Campus
Communications staff member	Oshkosh Campus
Communications staff member	Access Campuses
Finance administrator	Oshkosh Campus
Staff Senate leader	Oshkosh Campus

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How long have you worked with the university and in what capacities?
 - a. How has your role changed since the consolidation?
2. As we think about institutional culture in terms of mission, values, traditions, leadership, and processes, how would you describe the culture of the institutions pre-consolidation?
3. What was the community reaction when the consolidation was announced?
 - a. Describe the emotions or perceptions associated with various stages of the merger process.
 - b. What were some of the things you were feeling personally?
4. Did the culture of the previous institutions shape the merger process and, if so, how?
5. In what ways did institutional leaders guide change, help stakeholders adjust to the merger, and unify the different campus communities?
 - a. What role did information and communication play?
 - b. Which communications strategies were the most effective?
 - c. What were some of the challenges or things that you believe could have been done better?
6. How would you describe the culture of the consolidated institution today?
 - a. What would you describe as the most significant change?
 - b. How do you think the institution and culture will change over the next 5-10 years?
7. What would you tell leaders of other institutions preparing to go through a merger process?

APPENDIX E

INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Dear <<insert name>>:

I am a doctoral student working under the direction of Dr. Erik Ness, Associate Professor at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. I have a research interest in higher education mergers, and I am writing to request your participation in a case study exploring the roles of organizational culture and communication in institutional consolidations.

As [formal title here], you can provide valuable insights for my analysis. If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would like to interview you in June 2019 when I will be on campus.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of key leaders involved in an institutional merger. In particular, this study seeks to understand how existing institutional cultures shape the merger process, how the institutional cultures change during and following the implementation of a merger, and how institutional leaders use communications strategies to lead transformational change and merge presumably divergent cultures.

Your participation will involve a 60-minute face-to-face interview with me. With your permission, I will record the conversation to help remember what was said and may cite specific statements in publications or presentations. I will destroy the audio files when the study is complete. While conducting the study, I, and possibly a professional transcriptionist, will be the only person with access to the audio files and transcripts. All information will be stored in a locked file or password-protected computer in my office.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information. No foreseeable risks or discomforts are expected. There may also be no potential benefits for you personally from this study.

If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by email at mkm29499@uga.edu or by phone at 706.429.4093. Additional questions regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board Chairperson by telephone at 706.542-3199 or by email to IRB@uga.edu.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this study, as your perspective and experience will add value to this research. I will contact you soon to schedule a time for us to talk, if you are willing and available. Again, thank you for your consideration. Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Kate Maine
EdD Candidate
Institute of Higher Education
University of Georgia

APPENDIX F

STUDY CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM**Higher Education Mergers:
The Roles of Culture and Communication****Researcher's Statement**

We are 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

Erik Ness | Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia | cness@uga.edu | 706.542.0573

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of key leaders involved in a merger of public higher education institutions. In particular, this study seeks to understand how existing institutional cultures shape the merger process, how the institutional cultures change during and following the implementation of a merger, and how institutional leaders use communications strategies to lead transformational change and merge different organizational cultures.

Study Procedures

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

- Participate in an interview, approximately one hour in length. The interview will be recorded for future analysis by the researcher.
- During the interview, the researcher will ask you questions about your experience and perspectives related to the merger process.
- If needed, follow-up clarification may be sought via email, phone or possibly an additional meeting.

Risks

Participants will be asked to speak about their experience related to the merger involving their institution and their perceptions of the organization's culture and change management. The specific institution will be identified, and participants may be identified by name, title or role.

Benefits

Participants may benefit by receiving an aggregated report of the findings, which may help inform future institutional decision making.

Audio Recording

The interview will be recorded for analysis by the researchers only and will be destroyed at the conclusion and submission of the research results. Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

_____ I am willing to have this interview recorded.

_____ I do not want to have this interview recorded.

Privacy/Confidentiality

In the reported findings, the specific institution will be named, and interviewed subjects may be identified by name and title. However, direct quotes will only be used with explicit permission. All interview recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secure file during data collection and will be destroyed following full completion of the study and acceptance of the dissertation.

Taking part is voluntary

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 withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Kate Maine, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now.

If you have questions later, you may contact Erik Ness at eness@uga.edu or Kate Maine at mkm29499@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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.

M. Kate Maine

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

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

APPENDIX G

RESEARCHER IDENTITY MEMO

M. Kate Maine
 Researcher Identity Memo
 June 1, 2019

Prior to entering the Ed.D. program in UGA's Institute for Higher Education and conducting this research, the public liberal arts university where I serve, now the University of North Georgia (UNG), participated in an institutional consolidation. The 2013 consolidation was the merger of North Georgia College & State University, where at the time I worked as the chief communications officer, and Gainesville State College. I currently serve as chief of staff to the university's president and, as such, am very involved in executive and institutional communications. Based on my roles and the experience of consolidation, I bring to this research assumptions that each institution of higher education has a culture specific to its organization and that communication plays a role in helping members of the institutions, as well as external stakeholders, navigate that change process.

These experiences contribute to my motivations for conducting this research. While it is possible this experience could present potential bias in my study, it also provides a heightened level of awareness essential to the scope of my research and an understanding of the issues associated with a university merger. This stance is supported by Maxwell (2013), who noted that while researchers have often viewed experiential knowledge as a bias that should be eliminated from the design, it should be viewed as an asset that can be an important source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks. This may be particularly important for qualitative research, where, as Maxwell (2013) stated, "the researcher is the instrument of the research" (p. 45). Maxwell's recommended strategy for assessing the effect of an individual's experience on their research is the inclusion of a researcher identity memo. Toward that end, as I prepare to interview research participants at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, I will briefly document some of the themes that I recall from my own professional experience.

- The UNG consolidation was among the first conducted by the University System of Georgia.
- Information about the merger was leaked prematurely, resulting in shock to community members.
- Because it was among the first consolidations, there was very little information available to share with community members about what the initiative meant and little practical guidance from the USG about how to implement it.
- The resulting process was marked by feelings of uncertainty, attrition of employees who chose to leave the institutions, and changing roles and an exorbitant workload for the employees who remained.
- The process involved negotiation and compromise in many situations where the organizations were merging or developing new processes or structures related to student information systems, technology, communication channels, faculty structure, and curriculum, among other operational systems.
- The consolidation process, which began in January 2012 when the plan was announced, is still ongoing. While operational changes were implemented during the initial year or two, the complex process of bringing together various institutional cultures is long and protracted. Relationships, communication, and attitude (as part of campus climate) are key elements of culture building.
- Long-term, the consolidation has increased opportunities: (a) students have benefitted from expanded academic programs and greater access; (b) faculty and staff have benefitted from greater professional opportunities and increased investment in professional development, research, and salary equalization efforts; (c) the university's larger, multi-campus footprint has contributed to enhanced educational access, increased regional engagement, and improved economic impact.