THE DOOR IS OPEN: AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO CROSS-UNIT

COLLABORATION IN A FULL-TIME MBA PROGRAM

by

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(Under the Direction of Karen E. Watkins)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research study was to create an intentional community of practice to explore ways to improve cross-unit collaboration for staff in a full-time MBA program. Over the course of two years, two action research teams comprised mostly of staff, and including students and faculty explored their ideas and expertise related to program quality and the how staff collaborated across their respective units. Also during these two years, the researcher used a process of first-person action inquiry to gain a better understanding of her own personal leadership development.

These research questions guided the study:

1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?

2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?

The conclusions point to the importance of viewing quality as a process rather than a product. Communities of practice within performance-focused organizations need to balance their internal processes of learning and reflection with their external focus on outcomes in order to develop staff leadership capacity and develop sustainable methods

of collaboration. For individuals, the results imply that a first-person action inquiry approach develops reflective practice and greater awareness for improved collaborative practice. The study points to the significance of viewing quality as an influenceable process and the importance of using a systems approach to leadership development for individuals and groups.

INDEX WORDS: Action Research, Community of Practice, First-Person Action Inquiry, Cross-Unit Collaboration, Leadership Development

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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

2018

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Jacqueline A. Kane, without whom none of this would have been possible. Thank you, Mom. For everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Whether public or private, institutions of higher education are impacted by

external social, political, and economic forces just as they endeavor to impact those

forces. They are social constructions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 4) that function as

open systems (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and as such, can be examined empirically,

theoretically, and experientially. Applying these three modes of inquiry within an action

research approach allowed an insider-research (and scholar-practitioner), such as myself,

an opportunity to better understand my organization within my own institution, my role

within that organization, and through that examination, effect change and be affected by

that change. This learning and leadership journey was a process of moving from a

macroscopic view, where I initially thought my focus would be, to a microscopic

examination of my own leadership development and how that development enabled me to

be a change agent within my organization. This action of "reversing the telescope"

(Lynton, 1996) broke down isolation between functional units, developed greater

awareness for individuals, and enabled staff to engage the broader collective needs of the

organization. First, though, the beginning.

System and Context

I have spent my entire professional career, since earning my master's degree in

1992, working for institutions of higher education. I started as a writing tutor and an

English composition instructor and I am now the director of admissions for a mid-sized

Top 50 full-time MBA program in a college of business (COB) situated in a large public research university in the Southeastern United States (SERU). I have been learning how to be "me" for fifty years, but this phase of my professional life—and my leadership development - began in July 2011. My doctoral journey began in May 2014.

The U.S. MBA marketplace is saturated after decades of growth. The number of AACSB-accredited business schools grew 105% from 1984 to 2011 and 488 of the 649 schools are in the United States (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2013, p. 7). However, the number of U.S. citizens taking the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), used for admissions for MBA programs and specialized master's programs, decreased 27% between 2011 and 2015 (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2016, p. 4). In fact, application volume for all graduate management programs, except Executive MBA programs, has seen declines between 2000 and 2016 (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2016, p. 3). This decline is being felt more sharply by full-time MBA programs with smaller enrollments. "Application volumes have been mixed in recent years, with smaller programs tending to receive fewer applications and larger programs experiencing growth" (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2016, p. 4).

In the last several years, five full-time MBA programs have closed—Wake Forest University, Virginia Tech, Simmons College, and the University of Iowa—and the University of Wisconsin reversed a decision to close in fall 2017 after a backlash from students and alumni. Though academics and pundits have been ringing the death toll for MBA programs for decades, these actual closures place pressure on those that are struggling for enrollment and rankings, especially those close to the divide between the

Top 50 and the Top 100. Other large public universities have also seriously considered what direction to take—University of Minnesota and Ohio State being two—and what many deans are saying, much more loudly than in previous years is that "this is an industry ready for disruption" (Byrne, 2017). As a result, programs are determined to tap into other markets—specialized master's programs and online programs—and/or reinventing their programs through curriculum revisions and additional program offerings. How to adapt to a changing MBA marketplace is the current question and programs are deciding how to respond to the challenge and determining what their capacity is to do so. "Schools must proactively demonstrate relevance, value, and reputation, which means rethinking how they conduct research, select and train faculty, design curriculum, engage students, and measure quality" (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2013, p.14).

Entry into the System

When I began working in MBA admissions in 2008, this was the world I entered and I had a lot to learn. An admissions office is an external facing unit and manages the application funnel from inquiry to enrolled student. As an admissions officer—first as an assistant director, then associate director, and now as director—my charge is to recruit, evaluate, select, and enroll the most qualified class of students each year using a holistic evaluation approach and a behavioral interview methodology. Between 2008 and the present, I have learned how simple and how difficult it can be to execute that objective successfully. Within the College of Business (COB) at SERU (Southeastern Research University), the full-time MBA program is the only master's level degree program whose

quality is determined by its admissions statistics and its employment outcomes. The pressure to improve statistically is continuous and the scrutiny is constant.

Admissions work has become increasingly complex and diversified since the 1990s when it became possible to use websites and email to conduct candidate outreach. With the growth of digital advertising, any program's reach can be global. Admissions officers must utilize all outlets—print pieces, websites, email communications, digital advertising, virtual and in-person recruiting, both on and off campuses—to attract candidates. In addition, social media outlets—Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, for example—add another work stream to an already complex, but effective recruiting strategy. It is no longer enough to answer the phone, respond to emails, plan a few events, and wait for the applications to roll in. In fact, for the fall 2016 application cycle, 89% of COB's full-time MBA applicants were "stealth," that is, unknown until they started an application. The most effective way to reach these unknown applicants is by developing robust websites and effective email and digital advertising campaigns. The influence of the media rankings significantly impacts the visibility—and application volume—of full-time MBA programs.

From 2008 to 2011, I worked for a top-10 full-time MBA program in the Northeast that is part of one of the world's most highly regarded institutions. That experience shaped my perceptions and thinking about what a high quality MBA program looks like and does. I brought that pre-understanding, and its associated preconceptions, to the role I entered in 2011, working for a lower-ranked program at a large public institution in the Southeast with a significantly smaller enrollment and significantly fewer resources. One reason I decided to leave a coveted and comfortable position was for the

challenge—to see if I could apply what I had learned in the Northeast to the challenges faced by COB in the Southeast.

To further set the stage for how I related to this context, I have three memories to share, each attached to specific emotions. The first occurred at around 10 a.m. on July 14, 2011, when I crossed the state line into my new home state to begin a new phase of my life. I had driven since 2 a.m. to beat the heat because my air conditioning died with eight hours of driving remaining the next day. Besides my desire to get off the hot road, I distinctly remember how eager and excited I was to start this new venture.

My second significant memory occurred on the first day of MBA orientation at COB on July 29, 2011. The experience was so disappointingly different from my previous position that I remember feeling utter dismay. I kept thinking, "This is not how this should be done. This could be such a memorable experience for these students." This unexpected surprise was a catalyst for me, and my journey to understand what quality meant and how quality was enacted by staff and students began that day.

My third memory occurred in 2013, at the annual conference of the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) during a session titled, *The Value of Graduate Management Education: Reclaiming Quality in Our Programs,* presented by Dr. Robert S. Rubin and Dr. Eric C. Dierdorff, two management faculty from DePauw University. Sponsored by GMAC's research institute, MERI, these two management faculty outlined in lay terms and with humor what is wrong with the current media rankings "game" that MBA programs play. When Dr. Rubin informed the audience that the #1 factor that helped a program achieve a Top 30 position in the rankings was to have been part of the original Top 30, I was stunned. Can this be true that a program's ranking is a foregone

conclusion? The game is fixed? This session was my introduction to the conflict between the media rankings and MBA program quality.

Problem Identification

With my years of experience in graduate business education, I have learned that there is an important relationship between a program's "standing" (ranking plus reputation) and three factors: its application volume and enrollment (admissions success), its program offerings (as related to the student experience), and its employment outcomes for students (percentage employed three months after graduation and average salary signing bonus). Much of the focus on employment outcomes is a direct result of the media "rankings game" (Policano, 2007), a measurement of quality that is exceedingly stable over time, especially for *Businessweek* (Morgesen & Nahrgang, 2008). "The quality of the program is directly related not to what you learn, the network you create, or what you accomplish, but to the salary you earn after you graduate" (Policano, 2005).

As stated earlier, the admissions office is responsible for recruiting, evaluating, selecting, and enrolling a new class of MBA students each year. To a limited extent, admissions controls the input process in this open system. Reputation, ranking, brand strength, and marketing initiatives create the funnel of applicants for the program. My office is responsible for having, and maintaining, defensible and understandable admissions standards, providing exemplary customer service to all prospective applicants, and "selling" what the program offers so that we enroll a highly qualified and diverse class who will be successful as students and in the recruiting process.

The full-time program at COB has three units—admissions, student services, and career services—and 10 full-time staff. Between 2008 and 2014, the full-time MBA

program did not have a full-time program director, and when I arrived, had just undergone an organizational restructuring that joined the finances of the full-time program with the professional programs. Since 2011, the college seated a new dean, worked to stabilize itself financially, and underwent a centrally executed rebranding. During this same time, the department lost eight staff (one to retirement), transferred two to other units within the college, one person moved into a new role, hired and trained seven people, rehired one into a different position, retained two of those seven hires, and gained one program coordinator position. Also in that time frame, four people were promoted within the organization and a new program director (still part-time) started in August 2014. In 2017, the full-time program separated financially from the professional programs. This was an astounding amount of change for a small organization and some of those changes negatively impacted staff morale.

From a cultural standpoint, the college was very siloed. Departments functioned independently of one another and acted in their own best interests. The full-time MBA program was an administrative department with no faculty and the program director had limited leverage in advocating for additional teaching resources without the dean's support. Also, the full-time MBA program was negatively perceived by other departments within the college. In the 1980s, the faculty voted to close the MBA program altogether. The full-time program was perceived as a resource drain in comparison to other master's programs within the college, even though our professional programs generated significant revenue. Rather than our allocation of resources being benchmarked against our peer, aspirant, and competitor programs, it was compared to other master's program offices in the college. As a result, some college faculty and staff resented the

full-time MBA program. Thirdly, due to the financial situation of the college, the MBA program budgets were closely managed, with revenues from each program going into operating expenses for the college. Each year since 2011, the full-time MBA program has been asked mid-year to cut expenses from their budget. Lastly, until the latest dean started in 2014, the program had no strong advocates in the senior administration.

In terms of resources, the budget allocation for the program—both to operate and to recruit—has not kept pace with tuition increases nor with student expectations for programming and services. The recruiting limits admissions to domestic travel, and most of that is in the Southeast. From a rankings perspective, the program peaked in 2002, with a *Businessweek* ranking of #36. Between 2000 and 2016, its scholarship budget increased about 28%, while tuition for both in-state and out-of-state MBA students nearly tripled. Until 2010, the program had no budget for marketing the program. In 2010, the then-program director negotiated a marketing budget of $50,000 by agreeing to a percentage cap on the number of graduate assistantships that could be awarded to full-time students. Constraining awards in this way handicapped full-time admissions at the same time as the student cost of attendance increased and the program dropped in the rankings.

This resource-starved environment permeated the culture of the full-time MBA program. Continually asked to improve admissions statistics and employment outcomes with fewer and fewer resources, staff morale plummeted, and work within units became increasingly siloed. During the transition period between deans during the summer of 2014, staff worried that the program would be closed and that they would lose their jobs. Some faculty even assumed that the new program director was appointed to close the

program, not support and improve it. From a personal standpoint, this was a challenging and stressful work environment.

Since 2000, it was a program struggling to maintain enrollment, to improve student quality, while experiencing inconsistent employment outcomes, and offering a minimum amount of student support services and programming than its peer, aspirational, and competitor programs. Concurrent with those internal challenges, it had several better ranked and resourced competitors, two in the same metro area, and others throughout the southeast region. Positioned as a third tier full-time program, it was facing significant external competition for the same shrinking pool of qualified applicants. The root problem facing admissions was to enroll a class of 50-65 qualified students each year using the tools in our toolkit: a smaller pool of merit aid than peer, aspirant, and competitor institutions and a reputation as the third best MBA program in the metro region.

Since 2003, the full-time program had consistently enrolled a class of about 50 students. At the same time application volume had been below 300 applications since 2008. For the Class of 2017 application cycle (students entering fall 2015, completed applications are above 300). Table 1 displays the applications, accepted students, and enrolled students for fall 2000-fall 2017.

Table 1

Full-Time Applications, Accepts, and Enrollees, 2000-2017

Status	Year								
	2000	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**
Applied	567	612	552	392	252		229/277	269	362
Accepted	135	131	130	108	89	87	95/97	95	103
Enrolled	60	58	77	49	49	41	42	45	56

Status	Year								
	2009[*]	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**
Applied	265	180	219	199	212	291	330	276	262
Accepted	80	84	88	73	95	98	102	98	100
Enrolled	46	53	51	44	49	46	52	48	55

Note. [*]2009 was the last year of entry for the 11-month program; data between 2000 and 2009 represents data for both the 2-year full-time MBA and the 11-month full-time MBA.

Over time, we received fewer and fewer applications until the increased volume experienced in 2014 and 2015. At the same time, the program's employment outcomes lagged behind its peer, aspirant, and competitor programs. Table 2 details employment statistics for the Class of 2014 as compared to its comparison groups.

Table 2

Full-Time MBA Employment Benchmarking, 2014

Benchmark	Group 1	Group 2	SERU
# of students seeking	151	67	36
% of students seeking	82%	83%	80%
Average base salary (excludes bonus)	$101,894	$91,394	$84,385
% with offers at graduation	80%	74%	75%
% with offers at 3 months	92%	91%	89%
% employed at graduation	75%	70%	61%
% employed at 3 months	89%	89%	81%

This table shows that we fell behind both reference groups on all counts, except for percentage of students with an offer at graduation where we exceeded group 2 by 1%. The biggest achievement gap from the table was the percentage of people employed at graduation. Though 75% had offers in 2014, only 61% had accepted. So, one target for improvement was that conversion rate. This was not an admissions problem, though the success of our graduates did loop back and impact admissions because prospects look to employment statistics and financial aid opportunities when they visit school websites (Safón, 2007).

A program's offerings—its curriculum, its experiential, and its development opportunities—are important in attracting applicants, and besides the employment statistics, are the "products" that an admissions office "sells" to prospective applicants. In 2015, internal benchmarking research indicated that most of our peers, aspirants, and competitors had more joint program offerings, a better focus on market-driven academics, and significantly more international and experiential components. Many also offered better leadership programming and had more engaged alumni. These

shortcomings in programming, combined with poor employment statistics, left

admissions staff marketing a program that lacked differentiators in a competitive

marketplace.

Though program offerings and career services fell outside the scope of my office,

the work of each of those units directly impacted the success of admissions, and vice

versa. When I began working at COB, each unit operated as a separate entity. Literally

located in separate offices, we worked in silos and only shared information as needed

across units and only between directors. That organizational structure stymied

communication and collaboration in multiple ways, and it wasn't until that physical and

interpersonal situation changed that we reflected on the differences. My role as a change

agent engaged in a continual process of inquiry informed my work as an insider-

researcher, inquiring into both what we do and how we do it. Later in this paper, I will

discuss how this positionality lends itself to first, second, and potentially third person

action research within my organization.

Problem Statement

A small program, such as mine, faced both external and internal challenges.

Externally, programs must balance the competing priorities alumni, employment

recruiters, and the media rankings. Internally, program staff balanced those external

demands against those of faculty, administrators, and students. Because of the pressures

of these external and internal forces, program staff existed in a continuous loop of

feedback and assessment (Gioia & Corley, 2002) without adequate time, resources, or

influence to reflect, evaluate, and affect change. Research conducted by Morgesen and

Nahrgang (2008) demonstrated (ironically) that allocation of institutional resources was the least studied factor in ten years of academic research on MBA programs.

The root problem that the program faced was attracting enough quality applicants to enroll a class of 50-65 qualified students each year. Ideally, the COB wanted to increase enrollment to 120-130 students; however, since 2003, the full-time program consistently enrolled a class of about 50 students. At the same time application volume was below 300 applications since 2008. Over time, we have received fewer and fewer applications except for an increase from 2014-2016. We also face significant competition from two higher ranked competitor schools that are much higher ranked in both *Businessweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*, a ranking many prospective applicants look to.

When I started as assistant director at COB, I knew that enrollment was a challenge for admissions. The "admissions funnel," as it is called, did not yield enough applicants to increase class size. There were many factors which impact application volume and yield and most of the factors were outside the control of admissions: reputation, ranking, program offerings, employment outcomes, regional and national competition from better-resourced programs, a shrinking domestic pool of applicants, and fewer resources for financial aid and marketing initiatives compared to peer, aspirant, and competitor programs. Lastly, it was short-sighted not to recognize that a full-time MBA program had a "disproportionate influence on a business school's reputation, suggesting that other business school programs can 'bask in the reflected glory' of prominent MBA programs" (Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2008, p. 34).

In addition, the full-time program did not have full-time leadership. Each program director since 2000 was a member of the faculty with a teaching and research load in addition to their administrative duties. We were also at a disadvantage because of our class size: "demand for graduate business education is directed to the largest, more popular programs" (Graduate Management Admissions Council Applications Trends Survey Report, 2017, p. 7). In application year 2016, 64% of U.S. full-time MBA programs experienced a decline in applications (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2017, p. 8). When I observed how the units functioned as separate silos under part-time, distracted leadership, I felt part of an organization in decline due to both stagnation (lack of management and non-competitive market conditions) and cutback (as evidenced by the fact that the cost of attendance had almost quadrupled since 2000 yet the merit aid budget remained stagnant). This two-pronged decline was both suicide and homicide (Whetten, 1980, p. 582).

Increasing enrollment was not a problem that admissions can solve in isolation from other units and without a collaborative effort of staff and senior leadership of the organization. Because of the influence of the rankings, we could not lower student quality without negatively impacting career outcomes, the student experience, and recruiter assessments (Safón, 2007). According to one business college administrator, the feedback loop between admissions and career services significantly impacted our position in the marketplace:

> An important consideration in understanding the above trend is the relationship between admissions and employment outcomes, which tend to feed back on each other. For example, a small number of applications leads to a small incoming

class, which in turn is a deterrent to recruiters who find it costly to visit campus to

recruit a small number of MBAs. This severely restricts the options available to

our students, eventually leading to less than satisfactory employment outcomes.

These, in turn, determine future applications to the program. (Benchmarking

Report, 2015, p. 8)

Admissions and career services, along with student services, were interdependent because

of this feedback loop. It was also the case that prospects look to employment statistics

and financial aid opportunities when they visited school websites (Safón, 2007).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research study was to create an intentional community

of practice to explore ways to improve cross-unit collaboration for staff in a full-time

MBA program. Over the course of two years, two action research teams comprised

mostly of staff, and including students and faculty explored their ideas and expertise

related to program quality and the how staff collaborated across their respective units.

Also during these two years, the researcher used a process of first-person action inquiry

to gain a better understanding of her own personal leadership development.

These research questions guided the study:

1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional
   community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?

2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?

Theoretical Framework

An MBA Program is an open system (Burke, 2014, p. 54-55; Graduate

Management Admissions Council, p. 321; Katz & Kahn, 1978) that is heavily influenced

by external factors and stakeholders. But unlike a manufacturing process, the "widget"

we create is a human who enters our system in one form, is hopefully "transformed" by

our program into a better, more successful version of him/herself, and our final "product"

is a high-performing quality individual and this is measured by compensation factors

(salary and bonus). However, the widget moving through the system is as much an

uncertain variable as the external influencers. The role of admissions is to apply rigorous

entrance criteria that provides assurance to the rest of the system (throughput and output

functions of student experience and career services) that our enrolled human widgets will

be successful "producers" and "products."
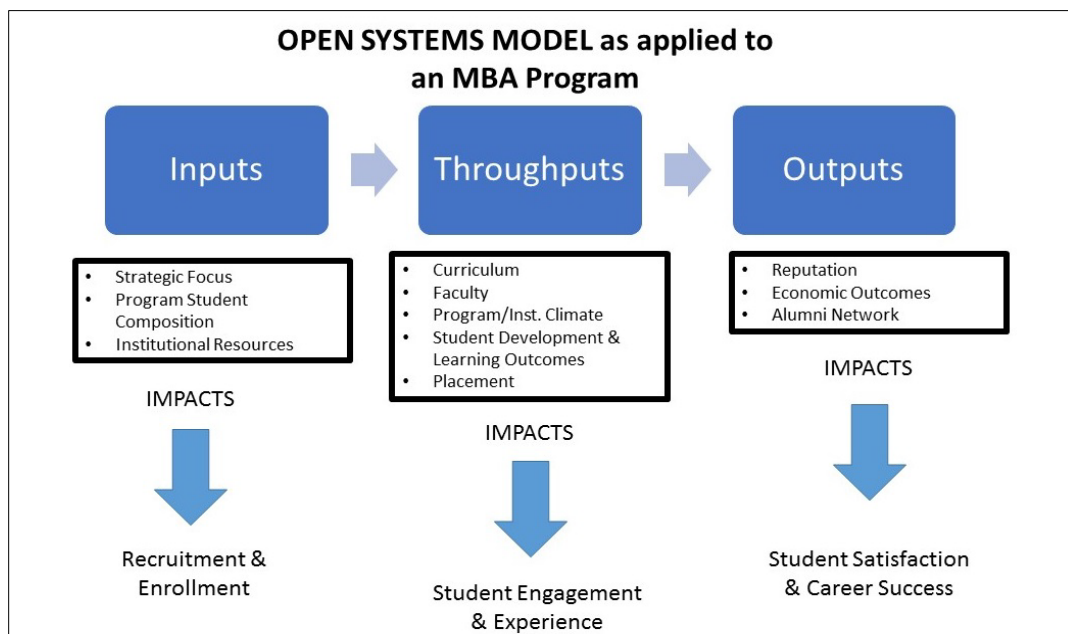
Figure 1. Open Systems Model as Applied to an MBA program.

Figure 1 depicts the ideal movement of an individual through the system and the program

quality indicators that fall within the influence of each phase/business unit. First,

Admissions recruits prospective applicants and admits selected individuals into the

program based on specific admissions criteria (admissions quality indicators). Once

enrolled, the student undergoes a transformation through the acquisition of new

knowledge (curriculum), practical experience (experiential and extracurricular learning),

and career development training. The successful student obtains a high-paying position

within three months of graduation (at the latest) and this achievement reflects well on the

program's reputation and perception. The cycle depicted represents how positive

employment outcomes yield positive results for the admissions pipeline, resulting in more

and higher quality applicants.

Significance

The knowledge developed through this study was of great value to other MBA

programs and their staff who must balance the pressures of external stakeholders with the

needs and priorities of the program. By learning to be intentional about our

communication practices, program staff improved how they collaborate and created

opportunities for individual leadership growth. This study added to the literature of

LLOD by demonstrating that improving program quality demanded a focus on internal

processes, external messaging to stakeholders, and understanding that maintaining quality

(and improving it) required ongoing staff collaboration and staff development. It also

demonstrated how impactful collaboration was in breaking down individual silos and

provided guidance to other higher education professionals looking to improve program

quality and the student experience through cross-unit collaboration.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This purpose of this chapter is to examine the literature that supports the conceptual framework guiding the first-person action inquiry of the author and the development of an intentional community of practice within the author's organization. The literature review involved the examination of books and articles from scholarly journals identified through searching academic databases, such as Dissertation Abstracts, EBSCO, ERIC, Galileo, and ProQuest. At times, the initial searches were conducted using Google Scholar to start from the broadest base and then narrowed down using academic databases to identify peer-reviewed articles from scholarly journals. This study is based on the scholarly literature in two primary areas—communities of practice and first-person action research. In the first section, I discuss the literature on communities of practice. In the second section, I discuss the literature on first-person action inquiry. After each section, I will summarize and address the gaps in the literature. In the conclusion, I will address how these two literatures are situated in the study.
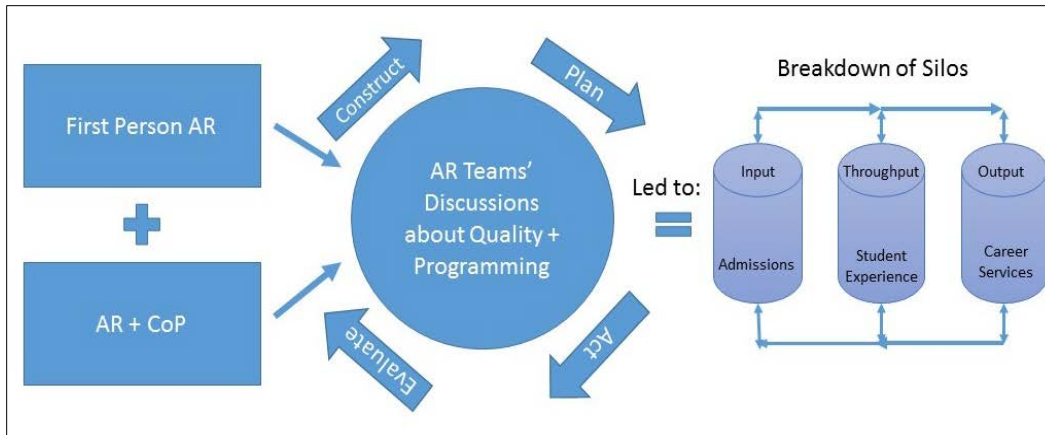
Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Using AR and FPAR to Improve Collaboration.

Communities of Practice

Jean Lavé and Etienne Wenger developed the idea of "situated learning" that requires engagement in collaboration with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger's initial work defined a community of practice "as the basic building blocks of a social learning system" (Wenger, 2000, p. 229) with three dimensions: that participants hold each other accountable in a joint enterprise; that they determine the norms and standards for how they will interact with each other in relationships of mutuality; and that they produce a shared repertoire of shared resources (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). Later, in *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (2002), he discussed how critical it is for communities of practice to play a role in "stewarding knowledge" (p. 14), especially in our current knowledge economy: "Indeed, knowledge-driven markets make it imperative to develop a 'knowledge strategy' along with a business strategy" (Wenger, 2002, p. 7). Further on, he states: "communities of practice create value by connecting the personal development and professional identities of practitioners to the strategy of the organization" (p. 17).

In 2000, Storck and Hill examined the characteristics and practice of a strategic community, the Alliance, within Xerox that operated autonomously from upper management, but with their sponsorship, that also adhered to Wenger's three dimensions of practice. Over time, the team created new knowledge management capability for Xerox because though the group began with a specific goal in mind (to transform the IT infrastructure), once that was accomplished, the focus shifted and expanded beyond simply functioning as a task-oriented team. This was accomplished by mutual engagement on the "playing field of practice" (Storck & Hill, p. 67), self-directed communication practices, and the group functioned as a joint enterprise where members determined what "value-adding tasks and issues" (Storck & Hill, p. 69) they would work on. Moreover, the Alliance created value by creating new knowledge management capability by formalizing reflective activities into their practice, which in turn, diffused learning throughout the organization, giving the Alliance an external focus and influence, and expanded it beyond being a task-oriented group. Storck and Hill's example demonstrates that a strategic community with significant autonomy can add organizational value "through learning, innovation, and knowledge transfer" (Storck & Hill, p. 72).

Thematically, the work of Ancona et al. (2007), Storck and Hill (2002), and Wenger (2002) agree that high-performing successful teams that produce useful results for their organizations function with some degree of autonomy, define objectives that align with organizational needs, use some form of distributed leadership within the team, seek to build and maintain relevant connections external to the team, produce outcomes

that benefit the larger organization, and seek to share knowledge and incorporate the knowledge of others.

In examining the literature on communities of practice in higher education, the empirical literature primarily focuses on faculty, faculty development, curriculum development, and teaching (Annala & Makinen, 2017; Cox, 2013; MacPhail et al., 2014; Mak & Pun, 2015; Nistor et al., 2015; Strean, 2016; Yeo, 2016). These examples all demonstrate that learning communities thrive when they create a space for mutual engagement, develop processes or joint enterprise, and generate a repertoire of shared knowledge.

Annala and Makinen (2017) analyzed the experience of 25 scholars participating in a university-wide curriculum reform process and found that individual, disciplinary, and institutional identities reflect the power relations within the academic community and add multiple layers of complexity to the process of building community. MacPhail, Patton, Parker & Tannehill (2014) explored four case studies of physical education teachers and pre-service teachers determined that communities of practice contributed to the professional growth of participants if the CoPs were sustained over time, had a clear purpose, enhanced learning, and developed trust and respect. Mak and Pun (2015) also studied the use of a community of practice with 18 ESL teachers to identify how they learned and developed as professionals. They found that sustainable professional development through participation in a CoP requires strong commitment from individuals to remain engaged and strong support from the wider educational community.

Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, and Diekamp (2014) explored how sense of community (SoC) played a role in academic communities of practice (CoP) through a

correlation study that identifies predictors of success in knowledge sharing. Participants'

socio-emotional interpersonal knowledge was the strongest predictor for the acceptance

of knowledge sharing followed by time spent as part of the CoP and each participants'

centrality (defined as having expert status) within the CoP. Yeo (2016) explored the use

of a CoP in a major curricular change process in an Athletic Therapy Program. Yeo

argued that developing a community of practice and enhancing members' appreciation of

one another as practitioners was crucial to the process of curricular change because new

learning is required. Cox (2013) examine the impact of engagement in a CoP on the

professional development of early-career academics. Cox found that involvement led to

higher tenure rates for some, and for others, resulted in having a positive impact on their

interest in their learning process, their feelings of belonging to the community, and

increased their interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Loertscher (2011)

examined three case studies that documented three communities practice for biochemistry

academics at two different universities. Each CoP was formed to promote innovative

teaching ideas and practice. The author found that success of each CoP related to

developing a sense of ownership in the community, the learning process, and that

participation enabled deeper discussions in areas of mutual interest.

Strean (2016) relates a personal account of the benefits gained from his

involvement in a community of practice focused on mindfulness in teaching and learning.

Strean and his colleagues created a community of practice that offered interactions with

other faculty that broke down academic isolation, created opportunities to share

"pedagogical practices of mindfulness" (p. 2), including sharing resources, and also

brought together a diverse group of people from all disciplines. Three articles (Hong &

O, 2009; Kim, 2015; Yang & Williamson, 2011) examine communities of practice for staff in higher education and industry: a theoretical discussion of how librarians could foster communities of practice; three case studies of two academic departments, in China and Australia, and one hi-tech Chinese company; and another case study documented over a six year period within an IT department showing that the lack of a common identity and power inequalities between the two IT teams prevented collective learning and the development of a learning community.

Kim (2015) explored the ways in which libraries and librarians were well-suited to utilize communities practice in their work and "enable libraries to widen their role as cultural and educational institutions" (p. 49). Besides the benefits of collaborating with faculty in developing learner-centered approaches, librarians themselves benefitted from what Kim termed "professional socialization" (p. 51) where they exchange ideas, build their professional identities, and share expertise. Kim also identified specific barriers to sustaining communities of practice: a lack of engagement and difficulty in building trust (p. 52).

Yang and Williamson (2011) found that effective workplace learning benefitted from six relevant factors: 1) shared mission, vision, values, and goals; 2) commitment to continuous improvement; 3) collaborative culture and collective inquiry; 4) supportive and shared leadership; 5) freedom based on equality; and 6) proximity and mutual engagement (p. 165). Most of all, they found that a distributed leadership model was most important to create and sustain a community of practice.

Hong and O (2009) studied how the social tensions caused between groups when members have multiple identities across organizations and embedded power differences

create obstacles to knowledge sharing (p. 311). These gaps in identities, power and status differences led lower status and less established members to detach from the groups. This social isolation led to failure of the communities of practice. Hart et al. (2013) conducted a case study of communities of practice to examine the effectiveness of CoPs in building university-community partnerships. The findings identified that CoPs face limitations depending on how effectively they manage power differences,; manage issues of how, why, and when people participate; and manage different perspectives, identities, and knowledge. The authors found that even if organically formed, CoPs working at the boundaries of new domains of interest, require significant cultivation in order to be sustained.

Based on the literature, success (as a broad term) in building and sustaining communities of practice depends on several critical factors. Communities must navigate the dynamics of status and power between members by following a distributed model of leadership that empowers all members and creates a sense of equality. They must engage people through creating a shared vision and purpose and a commitment to continuous improvement. Knowledge sharing within communities of practices requires trust between members, as well as collaborative mindset and intellectual curiosity. If successful, communities of practice reduce isolation—both physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and enables people to develop their best professional and personal selves. Lastly, CoPs that span boundaries must pay particular attention to cultivating a sustainable community that can navigate and integrate the diversity of knowledge and perspectives of its member.

There is also a body of work theoretically exploring whether Wenger's theory is actually a "theory" (Storberg-Walker, 2008) and more than one discussing the limits of communities of practice (Duguid, 2005; Roberts, 2006; Storberg-Walker, 2008). Storberg-Walker (2008) study the theoretical limits of Wenger and colleagues (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) aspects and usage of communities of practice (CoP). They analyzed 13 elements of Wenger's perspective to determine if it could be operationalized as a theoretical framework, but found that the community of practice aspects were too broad and abstract to fit neatly into an applied theory. This imbalance between research on CoPs and practice of CoPs points to Wenger's commitment to promoting the use of CoPs in a broad array of real world practices. This diversification, however, has resulted in a lack of consensus as to how to define a CoP or how best they can be used.

Roberts (2006) identifies three factors which limit the use and effectiveness of communities of practice: their context and whether there is a "strong sense of community spirit" in the larger community (p. 634), whether their interests are aligned well with the interests of the larger community or organization (p. 635), and whether or not there are resource limits based on how many people or staff that are available to support them (p. 635). Duguid (2005) argues that CoPs operate with a much more limited theoretical scope than economic and social capital theories because there are epistemic and ethical limits to what some communities can and will share. Because of these voluntary and involuntary limitations within communities, CoPs theory "only addresses certain topics involving quite special types of community and networks (p. 115).

There are also a number of studies of online communities of practice (Boulos et al., 2006; Shih-Hsien, 2009; Smith & Shea, 2017) as related to wikis, blogs, and social

networks. Smith and Shea (2017) reviewed 41 studies of online/blended learning environments that used CoP as a framework for their analysis. Seventeen of the studies focused their analysis on the most well-known elements: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. Smith and Shea (2017) suggested that there is a need for studies which dig deeper into other elements of CoP "theory" to "provide more complex and more nuanced understandings of online/blended learning environments" (p. 234). Boulos et al. (2006) study the rapid adoption of "collaborationware," especially wikis, blogs, and podcasts, in health-related professions and associated educational providers. They determined that if these platforms are effectively deployed, then they can significantly enhance the learning experience by deepening engagement and collaboration within those online environments (p. 1). Lastly, Shih-Hsien (2009) focused on blogs as a successful platform for ESL student teachers to improve individual and collective reflection and build community.

Table 3 provides an overview of the literature on communities of practice.

Table 3

Empirical Literature on Community of Practice

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
Annala & Makinen (2017). Communities of practice in higher education: Contradictory narratives of a university-wide curriculum reform	Semi-structured interviews exploring narratives of curricular change	Interviews with 25 scholars: 12 professors, 7 senior lecturers, 3 university teachers and 3 staff with teaching responsibilities	Analysis of the experience of scholars in a university-wide curriculum reform at a public university 3 Wenger dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire	Curriculum change is a complex process related to individual, disciplinary and institutional identities and reflects the power relations within the academy
Cox, Milton (2013). The impact of communities of practice in support of early-career academics	Web-based surveys	Early career academics at 6 Ohio universities over 30 years through 3 phases of study	Traces history and impact of CoPs in supporting early career academics to study the impact on tenure, feelings of community, and feelings of an integrated life	FLC and CoP programs move institutions toward becoming learning organizations that connect members to the missions, goals and challenges of the organization
Hart et al. (2013). Mobilising knowledge in community-university partnerships: what does a community of practice approach contribute?	Case study	4 CoPs, 3 closed memberships, one open forum, over a period of 12 and 24 months	Combatting power differentials between academics and community partners	CoPs have limitations depending on effectiveness in dealing with power, participation and working across boundaries
Hong & O (2009). Conflicting identities and power between	Case-study methodology with two phases: first phase, the	In-house and out-sourcing management and frontline staff of an IT	Explore tension and conflicts underlying two distinct communities	Lack of a common identity and power inequalities between the two staff distracted the

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
communities of practice: The case of IT outsourcing	author collected data through observation; second phase of 10 semi-structured interviews with different parties	department at a university in Macau	and the overall impact on organizational learning in an IT out-sourcing project	collective learning and participatory process and undermined the potential for creating a coherent learning community
Loertscher. (2011). Cooperative learning for faculty: building communities of practice	3 case studies	1 CoP within a research-intensive department; 2 science faculty learning community at another large university	Introduce CoPs to biochemistry education community	Success from shared sense of ownership and engaged dialogue
MacPhail, Patton, Parker, & Tannehill (2014). Leading by example: Teacher educators' professional learning through communities of practice	Four case studies	Physical education teacher educators (PETE) and pre-service teachers (PST)	Using Wenger's CoP elements to share examples of the extent to which the landscape of professional development in the form of a CoP is suited to a teacher education context	Shared construction of knowledge continued over time indicating a progression of potential for teacher education's growth and development
Mak & Pun (2015). Cultivating a teacher community of practice for sustainable professional development: Beyond planned efforts	Ethnographic-cum-action research documents cultivation of CoP among	18 ESL teachers in Hong Kong over a 10 month period	Chart way(s) teachers learn and develop as professionals and as a CoP	Sustainable professional development requires strong individual commitment and support from schools, parents, and the wider community
Nistor, Daxecker, Stanci, & Diekamp (2015). Sense of community in	Correlation study	Two academic CoPs located at universities in Germany and Romania at a	Investigates predictors and effects of the social component of	CoP members' socio-emotional interpersonal knowledge is strongest predictor

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
academic communities of practice: Predictors and effects		Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences with 69 participants in Germany and 67 in Romania	Sense of Community (SoC-S) in academia	of SoC and of knowledge sharing acceptance
Strean, William (2016). Communities of practice: A mindful opportunity	A personal reflection describing a CoP around mindfulness in teaching and learning	A CoP formed after an open session at the University of Alberta hosted by the Center for Teaching and Learning	Focus on what the CoP meant to the participants and the author	Importance of interpersonal connection, mutual learning, and appreciation of diversity
Yang, Shih-Hsien (2009). Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice	Qualitative study of blog data plus surveys on the student teacher's reflective experiences and group reflective dialogues recorded by the instructors during class meetings	43 students teachers in 2 teacher education programs at 2 science and technology institutions in central Taiwan	Explore the use of blogs as a reflective platform in the training process of English as a Foreign Language student teachers	Student teachers actively discussed teaching theories and their implications through the blogs; all 43 teachers were reflective; and the participants considered technology a useful platform for reflecting and communicating with each other
Yang & Williamson (2011). A cross-cultural study of learning communities in academic and business contexts	Qualitative study using a case study method using document analysis, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews	Purposive sample of 20 faculty of economics at a Chinese university, 17 faculty of business at an Australian university, and 20 staff at a Chinese hi-tech business	In-depth investigation of two specific contexts which are defined as bounded systems through an examination of Wenger's 6 factors of a CoP	Provide insight into how practitioners perceive their work, how they value their work context as a CoP and how they construct meaning about team work, common tasks, sharing and flexibility of role relationships and argues that cultural

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
				differences have the greatest impact on their perceptions
Yeo, Michelle (2016). Curricular change: Deepening professional community	Qualitative self-study of recorded work meetings	5 faculty members and one educational developer in an Athletic Therapy Program	Explores the aspects which emerges throughout a curricular change process	Developing a community of practice to enhance participants appreciation of one another is essential to the process of curricular change; three themes emerged: curriculum and pedagogy, theory to practice, and building a professional community

Communities of Practice in a Business School Context

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) posit that a community of practice is a combination of three specific elements: a *domain* for establishing common ground and a common identity; a community that "fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual trust"; and a *practice* creating a space for shared knowledge, tools, ideas, and information (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, pp. 27-29). Regardless of its name, a group comprised of these three elements is a community of practice. In business contexts, groups form to produce value for the company or organization through the creation of assets, whether they be in the form of knowledge, or inventions, or product ideas. But the success of the group depends on its output, its product, not only on the community created and the knowledge shared within. In business schools, we are training students to

build successful teams that work well together and produce what is needed. It makes

sense, then, that program staff model the behavior we want to see in our students. How

then, does the concept of a community of practice translate into the business

environment? In this next section, I will extend the discussion of communities of practice

and discuss the work on x-teams developed by Ancona and Bresman (2007).

Ancona and Bresman's (2007) work on x-teams challenges the traditional model

of teams and focuses primarily on internal team processes. The emphasis is on issues

worked out within the boundaries of the team, such as goal setting, role definition,

cohesion building, and conflict resolution. This internal focus can, however, insulate the

team from the external environment, and in today's interconnected world this can

profoundly limit the team's effectiveness (Ancona, Bresman, & Caldwell, 2009).

Effective x-teams move through 3 phases: exploration, exploitation, and

exportation (Ancona et al., 2009, p. 119). When they explore, they examine their context,

engage in out-of-the-box thinking to explore new ideas and discuss all the potential

options. Next, during exploitation, they choose a direction for action and implementation.

Then, still looking outward and engaged with the larger organization, they ensure that

their efforts gain acceptance by the larger organization. By moving flexibly between

these three phases of activity, they avoid getting stuck at one stage of their process.

Another strength of x-teams is their distributed leadership model, which aligns

well with an action research team comprised of co-researchers and in which "a core set of

people provide different kinds of leadership at different times to guide the team along the

path to completion" (Ancona et al., 2009, p. 220). To accomplish its goals, the x-team

leadership follows six main principles:

1. Choose team members for their networks.

2. Make external outreach the modus operandi from day 1.

3. Help the team focus on scouting, ambassadorship, and task coordination.

4. Set milestones and deliverables for exploration, exploitation, and exportation.

5. Use internal process to facilitate external work.

6. Work with top management for commitment, resources, and support. (Ancona et al., 2009, pp. 220-222)

These principles map well to action research tenets of involving stakeholders, actively engaging the entire team, and working to transform the organization. Number five is highly relevant because the interactions of the team that protect "psychological safety, on-going reflection, and memory" (Ancona et al., p. 221) speak directly to action research thinking around group formation and how it enables double and triple loop learning (Coghlan & Brannick, p. 115). The x-team phases also align well with the action research cycles of construct, plan, act, and evaluate (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 11). In phase one, exploration, the team works to understand their task, "look at the world with fresh eyes," and "map patterns and changes in technologies, markets, and competition." This corresponds with the construction phase of action research. In phase two, exploitation, the team chooses the one thing it will produce after a cycle of rapid prototyping. This corresponds to the action and evaluation phases of action research. Phase three, exportation, the team "works to transfer its excitement and expertise, to others who will ultimately 'own' and leverage the team's work" (Ancona et al., 2009, p. 219). This phase corresponds to the evaluate phase of action research, but through the

dissemination of the project outcomes, seeks to make the work of the team more immediately useful and available for further exploration by others.

Summary of the Literature on Communities of Practice

The existing literature on communities of practice is wide and varied, and this review has attempted to identify an apparent gap related to how graduate management program staff interact and collaborate, both to serve their students, and to model effective team strategies for their students. While several of the studies discussed were situated in higher education, all focused primarily, and all but one exclusively, on faculty or teachers-in-training. None of the studies discussed focused on graduate business education. Though graduate students certainly learn from and look to their faculty for business knowledge and mentoring, they also rely on staff for guidance with personal issues, social programming, professional development, and academic support. One can certainly argue that students spend more time with staff than with faculty during their two years in a full-time MBA program. Because of this, staff have a responsibility to model good behavior and best practices, especially as it relates to teamwork and collaboration. Since their two-year experience begins with team assignments for their first semester, we owe it to them to understand the challenges and rewards of collaboration.

<div align="center">First-Person Action Inquiry</div>

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) state that first-person action research "is characterized as a form of inquiry and practice that one does on one's own, and so addresses the individual's ability to foster an inquiring approach to their own life, to act out of awareness and purposefully" (p. 7). This research is two-pronged, or can be, where researchers look outside themselves and examine their behaviors and how they relate to

others, or inside themselves, to examine "their basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 7). Torbert (2004) states that "action inquiry begins because we (any one of us, or any family, or organization) experience some sort of gap between what we wish to do and what we are able to do" (p. 5). In other words, action inquiry strives to make the inside (thoughts, intentions, motivations) match the outside (behaviors, communications). In addition, at the level of the individual, one goal of action inquiry is "to generate effectiveness and integrity in ourselves" (p. 7). In the literature review, we will see how this issue of integrity—also discussed as quality—is a recurring theme.

For Marshall (2016), first-person action inquiry serves as a "foundation for inquiring with others or engaging in more traditional forms of qualitative—and other—research" (p. xvi). For Marshall (2016), this commitment to living a life of inquiry "represents a challenge, in invitation, of seeking to live a mindful live as we go along" (p. xvii). Mindful, purposeful, awareness, acting with integrity—these key words frame any discussion of first-person action research. Marshall (2011) states that action research can be "relatively focused…or a more pervading approach of 'living life as inquiry' problematizing different issues as they become learning edges of some kind" (p. 245). In the literature review that follows, I begin with a discussion of the articles on the doing of first-person action research, which are personal accounts of research and self-reflection used to develop suggested frameworks, theories, and practices, this practice of problematizing. I conclude with a review of examples of "relatively focused" action research in organizations where the researcher employs first-person action research in their process.

The Doing of Action Research

Marshall (1999) asserts that research is not separate from her personal life, and because of that she "hold[s] an attitude of continuing inquiry" (p. 157). She also recognizes that research is political, that those who conduct research hold power over who or what is researched. Being aware of her power and privilege, she also assumes responsibility for being a change agent, that first-person inquiry is not just a service to the self, but also the self in relation to others. Her approach is also systemic in that it assumes that systems are highly resistant to change, and that insiders—"tempered radicals" (Marshall, 1999, p. 159)—work within organizations they want to transform. In her roles as professor, university Senate member, and a member of her department, she perceives her daily work as inquiry because it is "strongly process and people-centered rather than outcome-based" and she "used practices and skills relevant to [her] researching to achieve administration in this way" (Marshall, 1999, p. 164). These awareness strategies enabled her to engage in incremental change work while also gaining institutional knowledge. Her practice is guided by the theme of knowing when to persist and when to desist (Marshall, 1999, p. 165) and a theoretical approach to examining "relational work" (Marshall, 1999, p. 167) and her dependence on/use of consultation with others. Both of these ideas relate to understanding that one's work is political, has ramifications, and one must stay aware to how much boundary-pushing the system can take at any one moment in time, and the personal toll these efforts take.

In Marshall (2004), the author employs a storytelling approach to address issues of quality in first-person actions research and demonstrate "inquiry in action" (p. 307). As this account of her "learning journey" (Marshall, 2004, p. 308), she uses "quality

notes" to draw attention to the questions that arise from the research story. She also uses the process of writing this article/story as a means of exploring and explaining her systemic approach to inquiry. Systemic thinking is explicitly relational—how one interacts with, understands, engages with, acts upon, is influenced by—the system in which one operates. It is also about how one navigates the system and how to "live with integrity" and "participate influentially" without "seeking to control" (Marshall, 2004, p. 309). She describes "three interconnected research pathways" and explores the first two. These pathways are: opening the ideas of "living systemic thinking" to "review, critique, and development; tracking examples of [her] practice; and exploring associated ideas" (Marshall, 2004, p. 309). As with the previous article, the story of the article is part of the inquiry process. To achieve quality in the first-person action research process, we must pay attention to several reflexive and relational elements that are critical to action research practice. Marshall defines how she "work[s] with experiencing" (Marshall, 2004, p. 323). These tools are personal and relational: "inquiry intent, writing accounts, research approaches, sense making, theorizing, saturating inquiry, working with feedback, representation, and research cycling" (Marshall, 2004, p. 323). Each of these tools seem obvious—and Marshall calls them "unremarkable" (Marshall, 2004, p. 323) —but employing them appropriately ensures integrity in practice.

Marshall and Reason (2007) explore quality further and align quality with one's capacity for self-reflection and ability to "attend to the perspectives and assumptions we are carrying" (p. 369). This "attitude of inquiry" —a stance demonstrated in "the nature of our engagement with others" (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 370) —asks that we adhere to several "qualities of being" (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 370): We are curious and

serious about asking good questions, are willing to articulate and explore our purposes, adopting humility in our approach to what we know and what we don't know, that we "are radically interconnected with all other beings" (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 373) and participate with people as co-researchers, and engage in an iterative process of sense-making that they call "radical empiricism" (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 373). These qualities of being and presence are realized through attention to four disciplines of practice: attention to framing, enable participation and attend to issues of power, develop one's capacity to include multiple ways of knowing, and see research as an emergent process (Marshall & Reason, 2007, pp. 374-376). They conclude by saying that their "core implication is that we would like to see evocative evidence of the researcher as both alive and disciplined in the research account, so that we can judge the quality of their doing of research" (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 376). I draw attention to the phrasing of this last quote. They focus on the quality of the doing, not just the quality of the research. How we research matters as much as what we research. This study began with a focus quality as an achievable ideal and initially treated as an external "thing" that we just apply. However, the inquiry and research processes revealed that understanding quality is a collective process of self- and group-exploration. To have quality as a product, one must treat quality as a process.

First-Person Action Research in Practice

In the following articles, one striking thing is how contextually different each is, based on location and focus of the study and positionality of the researcher(s). But what each also reveals is how first-person action research can engage the researcher in a deeper, more aware process of learning and knowing.

Table 4

Empirical and Theoretical Literature on First-Person Action Inquiry

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
Marshall (1999). Living life as inquiry	Applies notions of inquiry as method in personal and professional life	The author's activities within her workplace	To explain what is meant by "living life as inquiry"	Awareness strategies guide the author in navigating her institutional responsibilities, discusses a framework for examining relational work, and ends with a reminder that inquiry is an ongoing process
Marshall (2004). Living systemic thinking	Detailed storytelling approach; reflective account	The author	Explores how ideas of systemic thinking influence the author's practice of first-person action research; purpose is to contribute to developing this type of research and to address issues of quality	Quality in first-person action research requires attention to practices and disciplines that make the reflexive activity transparent and accountable
Marshall & Reason (2007). Quality in research as 'taking an attitude of inquiry'	Reflections on 25 years of experience in action research	Two researchers, the authors	Purpose is to show that "taking an attitude of inquiry' is a quality process that complements more procedural approaches	Identifies qualities that enable taking an attitude of inquiry and disciplines of inquiring that guide practice and demonstrate validity of the approach
Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria (2009). The paradox of	First-person action research, case study	Relationship between Jewish researchers and a	Deals with the building of the participative relationship, and details the	Systemic joint reflection allowed researchers to discover how

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
participation in action research		Palestinian Arab non-governmental organization in Israel, 40 formal meetings over a 2 year period in which 30+ people participated	"paradox of participation' when the researcher imposes participatory methods on unwilling (or unable) partners	they had created a relationship that fell short of their aspirations and identify two theories of action to be more effective: identifying values and assumptions and understanding contextual conditions
Burgess (2006). Participatory action research: First-person perspectives of a graduate student	First-person action research	Nurse and community health care centre director returning to school for doctoral studies	Examines the tensions and challenges of a graduate student maneuvering the institutional hierarchies in her journey of PAR	Iterations of insider-outsider positionality moves the researcher toward a partnership with her community of inquiry
Coghlan, Shani, Roth & Sloyan (2014). Executive development through insider action research: Voices of insider action researchers	Insider action research; two case studies	A manager of an R&D organization at a biofarma company; HR team leader with 33 participants and 5 outside researchers)	Address whether an insider action research approach can trigger and enhance executive development and company performance	Insider action research offers a value-added approach to management development by developing competency to lead change through a focus on first, second and third person practice
Foulger (2010). External conversations: An unexpected discovery about the critical friend in action	Scholarly reflection of a novice researcher experimenting with the cultivation of workplace communities of practice	K-3 teachers at one school: 2 3rd grade teacher, 1 1st grade teacher, a K-3 Second Language Specialist, and the Library	Provides insight and justification about using a critical friend who is external to the research process	The use of a critical friend helped researcher address 3 dilemmas: isolation, accounting for tacit knowledge, and data

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
research inquiries		Media Specialist		overload; using an External Conversation may strengthen a study and be supportive for novice researchers
Githens (2009). Leadership and power in fostering a collaborative community in a non-profit professional organization	First-person action research; narrative chronological and thematical approach using surveys, interviews, meeting notes, journal entries, observations by committee members	Members of an all-volunteer professional organization (RD) in the midwestern US	Study of the how the leader exercises power while building a collaborative community	Balancing the role of leader and facilitator is complicated and power dynamics need to be examined openly, also the need for succession planning
Heen (2005). About feelings in action research	First-person action research and case study	Author's reflections during an equality study with a Norwegian organization	Roles of feelings in action research and why they have received so little attention	Importance of developing the ability to not inquire and not to reflect, to let the wholeness be
Hillon & Boje (2007). The social ecology of action research	First-person action research, case study	2 researchers in New Mexico overseeing a student consulting group	Offer a reflexive commentary on the nature and validity of actionable knowledge from the authors' experience	Identifies 3 fundamental tenets: locality grounded critically in reflection, instrumental participation leads to trust and genuine understanding, and a shared desire to actualize untapped human potential to solve problems.

Article	Methodology	Sample	Focus	Findings
Mann (2005). Sharpening the instrument: Challenges to improving practice from interactive and self-reflective growth	Self-reflective experiential research, case study using reflections and interviews over a 4-year period	Author (an academic) and three therapists	Explores learning derived from an innovative psycho-therapeutic approach (PBSP) by considering content of the learning narrated and the process of how it has been realized and communicated	Two core elements for improving practice: social - person-to-person interactions - and individual - matching movement with mind.
Margolin, Illana (2007). Shaping a new professional identity by building a new personal concept of leadership through action research	First-person action research using transcripts, interviews, a reflective journal and a triadic journal	Author's reflections on leadership over a 4 year period	Study of 3 action cycles related to developing a new personal concept of leadership	Findings on 3 levels: personal, professional, department; to change teacher education, first had to change herself
Ramsey (2005). Management learning: A scholarship of practice centred attention?	Case study of action research project	30 month project on how to integrate CAD technology into product development	Explores scholarly processes in management learning and education	Scholarship of practice attends to 3 domains: engagement with ideas, practice of inquiry, and navigation of relation

Arieli, Friedman, and Agbaria (2009) detail a first-person action research project that involved the relationship between Jewish researchers and a Palestinian Arab non-governmental organization in Israel. They use a case study method to explore, and reflect upon, their failed efforts to build a participative relationship with the members of the Palestinian-Arab organization. The study covers two years, 40+ formal and informal

interactions, and other joint activities. The researchers documented all meetings and events and their own systematic reflections throughout the two years. The case study is an example of the "paradox of participation" and details the difficulties in building relationships in an action research context when the researchers "unintentionally impose participatory methods upon partners who are either unwilling or unable to act as researchers" (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009, p. 275). The power inequalities between partners, lack of goal clarity, cultural differences and the conflict between the action-oriented community members and the process-oriented researchers, stymied true partnership. The reflection process identified "actionable knowledge" (Arieli et al., 2009, p. 283) and two theories of action to identify values and assumptions and the contextual conditions that will lead to desired outcomes.

Burgess' (2006) account of her graduate school "learning journey" (p. 420) as she develops a research plan and encounters issues of power as she transitions from being the director of a community health care center to a graduate student. As a community health professional, she used the principles of participatory action research (PAR) to define her work in healthcare and she reflects on PAR as an authentic approach for her research and her graduate study because it integrates multiple paradigms, promotes inter-professional collaboration, and enhances her graduate learning (Burgess, 2006, p. 427). First-person inquiry assists her in questioning social relations and organizational structures, and the attention to self-reflection, which reveals her beliefs and assumptions, also integrates "her roles as a student, leader, educator, nurse, researcher, scholar, participant, and community member" (Burgess, 2006, p. 431). First-person action research strengthens her "validity

as a researcher and a participant" because it allows her to explore how she adds value to her community through her academic work (Burgess, 2006, p. 432).

Coghlan, Shani, Roth, and Sloyan (2014) asked, and answered, the question of whether or not insider action research can simultaneously promote executive development and improve company performance. The authors presented two case studies by the author-executives of their experiences leading change in large, complex organizations. Through an insider researcher approach, and an in-depth academic process, they developed new competencies and were able to collaboratively lead change in their organizations. The authors found that insider action research facilitates executive development, creates new knowledge and develops change leadership capabilities" (Coghlan et al., 2014, p. 1001). These three impacts demonstrate the effectiveness of first, second, and third-person action research in "integrat[ing] the intense engagement of the individual executive with endeavours to improve or change organizational performance" (Coghlan et al., 2014, p. 1001).

Foulger (2010) writes a scholarly reflection on her dual roles as a researcher-practitioner working as a professional developer with a group of elementary school teachers learning how to integrate technology into their curriculums and pedagogy. As a novice researcher, the author struggled to manage the three dilemmas faced by conducting the research while also managing the responses and reactions of the participants: managing isolation, tacit knowledge, and data overload. Working in isolation limits the researcher's ability to explore and maintain perspective on their own values, beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions (Foulger, 2010, p. 138). This isolation also lessens the researcher's ability to objectively reflect on the contextual and influential

factors of their particular situation because they are located in the study. Lastly, when conducting a group-based study, as in this article, it is a challenge for a sole researcher to collect and analyze the volume and complexity of the data. To resolve these dilemmas, the author collaborated with someone external to the study but familiar with the context of the work, a content expert with no prior interactions with the participants or the situation involved in the study. Using this critical friend required her to add a step to her action research cycle, which she named External Conversations, and doing so "ended up carrying this study further than what [she] would have expected" (Foulger, 2010, p. 144). Most importantly, this collaboration enabled the author to become "more intimate" (Foulger, 2010, p. 149) with the data, and was also a professional development experience for both her and the critical friend.

Githens (2009) is also an account of an individual researcher serving as the leader of a non-profit professional organization. Using action research, he "sought to explore the balancing of [his] role as the group's director (i.e., the leader) with the desire to develop a more collaborative approach" (Githens, 2009, p. 415). Interestingly, the author explains how the yearlong project began with no clear methodology determined, no clear conception of the project itself, and he allowed the theoretical frameworks to emerge as the project developed. Because of the inquiry process, however, he remained open and aware of the need for "continuous reflection on and modification of the process that was occurring and the methods used" (Githens, 2009, p. 416). This was one way, among others, in which he attended to the quality issues of the study and the self-study. Githens uses a narrative chronological approach and a thematic approach to explore the issues that surfaced throughout the research. He also explored issues related to power dynamics

and conflict within the self-study aspect of the project, but determined that a more open and collaborative approach to exploring power issues would have been more ideal. But the article adds to the conversation of how researchers and practitioners can explore power issues in organizations while using also working towards identifying shared values and improving collaboration.

Heen (2005) discusses the role of feelings in action research through a first-person account of the author's interactions and feelings related to work with a large organization in Norway conducting an equality study. The author details a pivotal meeting with the organization's new leader and other members of the Equality Committee. The feelings generated by the new leader's opposition to the study inform the subject of her inquiry. Using first-person inquiry, Heen is able to explore the role of feelings in research through a theoretical lens without negating the feelings themselves. Heen sees a connection between how the researcher imprints their own work and the role feelings play in the action research process, both in ways that make her leery of action research and supportive of inquiry that gives credence to feelings as information. She examines how she could "dis-identify with [her] feelings and still let them be" (Heen, 2005, p. 270) in order to "use them as information" (Heen, 2005, p. 270). She also learned that feelings "could convey quite accurate information…and could be used to formulate hypotheses" (p. 270). Her theoretical dilemma surrounds a concern that the accuracy and the purity of an experience are changed in the act of describing it. Through her analysis and discussion of the literature on feelings in research, she argues that researchers should develop "the ability to not inquire and not to reflect, to let wholeness be" (Heen, 2005, p. 275) as a complementary competence to reflecting and inquiring. In some ways, this act of

disassociation enables a researcher to distance themselves from the feelings in order to include them in the inquiry process.

Hillon and Boje (2007) use a case study of student consultants working with a restaurant owner over the course of two years to explore how an action researcher's expectations for an experience or of an environment imposes constraints on their ability to perceive all its possibilities. How then, they ask, do we determine the validity of action research from our different "perceptive frames" (Hillon & Boje, 2007, p. 360) applied to different environments? The article also explores the theoretical and literal tension between theory and practice and how we validly translate locally-based action research into globally applicable actionable knowledge—or even whether we have to. For them, the "conundrum of validity" (Hillon & Boje, 2007, p. 365) meets at the crossroads of rigor and relevance, balancing both to extrapolate what it useful in a broader sense but also enables the research participants to shift their perspectives into actionable knowledge within their context.

Mann (2005) uses first-person action research to explore the learning derived from four years of reflection on therapeutic training by himself, an academic, and three others, all therapists. The author collected data through observation, individual and shared critical reflections, and taped interviews. The author also explores how this training affected his professional life and also how or whether it improves their competence as therapists. His four-year journey of experiential learning and practice reinforce that there are two core elements for improving reflective practice, social and individual. First-person reflective research is enhanced by co-reflective inquiry (social), and also by enabling the individual to connect mind and body, "by linking the tacit with

the explicit, affective with cognitive, and movement with mind, has raised understanding of how my information can become a deeper influence on another person's knowing" (Mann, 2005, p. 330).

Margolin (2007) uses three cycles of action research to explore three levels of inquiry into her role as head of an Elementary School Department in a teacher education college over a four-year period: personal, professional, and departmental. With the personal, where she reconceived her role and became a more collaborative leader. As a professional, she shaped a new professional identity by shifting her perception of leadership from a transactional model to one of distributed leadership. At the departmental level, she coped with significant organizational change. This inquiry practice clarified for the author the importance of transforming herself as a leader in order to effect change on her organization and on teacher education. Using three cycles of action research, she illustrates her concept of leadership as it evolved and become more integrated with the system in which she was located. In establishing a more collaborative leadership model through action research, the teachers also developed their "collaborative and exploratory skills" through a "community of practice" (Margolin, 2007, p. 541) which challenged assumptions, values, and beliefs, empowered them all to make changes in their practice, and "taught them the skills to live with the inherent contradictions" within their community (Margolin, 2007, p. 541). This idea of "living with contradiction" stands out and refers back to Hillon and Boje's (2007) desire to make their action research applicable and useful to the participants they researched.

Lastly, Ramsey (2005) uses his study of management learning, and the teaching of it as a scholar, to illustrate ideas about "a scholarship of practice that centres

intentional attending-to at its core" (Ramsey, 2005, p. 7). In contrast to management learning focused on knowledge, the author seeks "a more fine-grained understanding of the process by which we might learn to become practically wise, by which we might learn to make more skillful judgments in our practice" (Ramsey, 2005, p. 9). The case used as research was a 30-month project to examine the organizational aspects of using CAD (computer-aided design) technology to improve product development. The author's learning journey focused on his role as an action researcher, applied researcher, and academic consultant. Interestingly, he solicited reflections from colleagues involved in the project and also critical friends (Foulger, 2010) to improve "the quality and helpfulness of my narrative" (p. 11). In his reflection on his account, he notes that the "sense making always involves action rather than analysis and understanding" (Foulger, 2010, p. 15) lending weight to his argument for a scholarship of practice in management learning. In concluding, he notes that the article has become a documentation of his own scholarship of practice.

Summary of the Literature on First-Person Action Research

At the beginning of this section, I separated the literature into two categories: literature about doing first-person action research, which was more theoretical, and literature in which scholar-practitioners related their experiences doing action research within a variety of organizations, from education, large corporations, non-profit and community organizations, in Norway, New Mexico, in situations with academics and non-academics. These are examples of doing research about research and doing research about the self, and all reveal the interdependency of the two. They provide richness and detail about how to establish quality in the research through iterative cycles of self-

reflection and focus on specifics aspects of quality: by building participative relationships (Arieli et al., 2009); through self-transformation (Burgess, 2006); through leadership development and its impact on first, second, and third person practice (Coghlan et al., 2014; Githens, 2009; Margolin, 2007); by improving collaborative inquiry through the use of external conversations and critical friends (Foulger, 2010; Ramsey, 2005); by authentically balancing roles (Burgess, 2006; Githens, 2009); by integrating feelings as information (Heen, 2005); by balancing rigor with practical applicability in an analysis of actionable knowledge (Hillon & Boje, 2007), which is relatable to Ramsey's (2005) scholarship of practice for its attention to usefulness for participants; and by improving practice with attention to its social and individual aspects (Mann, 2005), which reinforces the need for mind/body wholeness in collaborative inquiry.

Before concluding, I would also like to reference another stream of first-person research: self-study (Dinkelman, 2003). Dinkleman (2003) argues for the development of reflective teaching practices in teacher education as a tool of progressive and democratic teaching practices. Though cousin to first-person inquiry, Dinkelman's focus is on individual awareness more than the systems view taken by Marshall (2016) and other action researchers. His work is specific to teacher education practices and the transformative possibilities of reflective practice for the advancement of teacher education reform.

Conclusion

In a very simplistic sense, quality action research is achieved by paying attention to paying attention, similar to Marshall's (2016) conceptualizing of the inner and outer arcs of attention that connect the insider-researcher to the system-in-study. First-person

action research, by its design, is conducted in relation to other people and their systems. This "dynamic modelling of researching" (Marshall, 2016, p. 7) is "about experimenting, encountering tensions and dilemmas, and learning more" and "allowing immersion to inform and expand the learning" (Marshall, 2014, p. 7). Action research aims to represent "timely action in the present" (Chandler & Torbert, 2003, p. 135), and though the articles in this review have many things in common, they "are not my tongue nor exactly my shape" (Marshall, 2004, p 307). Unlike Heen (2005), whose profession is "thinking and reflecting" (Heen, 2005, p. 264) and Marshall is an "entangled academic" (Marshall, 2014, p. xvii), I am an entangled knowledge worker in an action-oriented organization. Just as each researcher is different—in feelings, assumptions, values, beliefs, and perceptions—so is each system. As such, the "gaps" can never be filled, but there are always new ones to explore. Communities of practice form either intentionally or organically, and when mindful of the needs of both their members and their external stakeholders, can influence change at all three layers of inquiry and practice: first, second, and third person. What the literature also reveals is the importance for the researcher to attend to themselves and the landscape of each unique situation. In fact, the uniqueness of each researcher and situation is/are the gap(s) that can be explored. In this study, we seek to explore new terrain: how, through a process of first-person action inquiry, a novice insider-researcher, using program quality as a vehicle, can create an intentional community of practice that aims to transform the organization and the individuals engaged in the action research process.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The initial purpose of this study was to explore whether or not creating an intentional community of practice among stakeholders within my organization would improve cross-unit collaboration and breakdown siloed activity between units. Tangentially, the change created by this effort would improve staff morale in an organizational culture that I experience as dismissive of staff expertise and that was undergoing a significant amount of organizational change over a seven-year period. Initially, the research questions that guided this study were: 1) How can the research team develop a quality measurement tool using Rubin's program quality model that will allow us to better measure the quality of the full-time MBA program?; 2) What interventions can be implemented and analyzed that will positively impact the program's reputation and perception with the COB, with prospective applicants, and with its peer, aspirant, and competitor institutions?; and 3) What learning takes place when an action research team of faculty, students, and director-level staff form an intentional community of practice to develop, execute and analyze interventions designed to improve program quality?

These questions have a predominantly outward-facing focus. Since I began this study as a novice researcher and facilitator, the study's focus and its methodology shifted, and as a result, the research questions changed as my perspective changed about what the scope could and should be. In its second iteration the research questions narrowed their scope and became more inward-facing:

1. What are the dimensions of quality that differentiate this full-time MBA program from other competitors?

2. In what ways does using an action research approach contribute to a culture of reflection on quality in a full-time MBA program?

3. How can the research team develop and implement a quality measurement tool using Rubin's program quality model to better measure the quality of the full-time MBA program and identify areas of improvement?

However, as the study progressed and I became aware both of my limitations as a facilitator and the changes in management and leadership that were still unfolding within the organization, operationalizing an assessment tool seemed still too ambitious an objective. To build a truly collaborative culture and an empowered leadership team within the department, I realized I was still externalizing the "problem" and began to see that this study was an opportunity to explore my own leadership development while also engaging with a team of peers in a process of discovery. As such, the research questions that finally guided the study were:

1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?

2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?

In the second phase of the study, working with a second research team, I saw the need to engage in a first-person action research approach. Making the shift from asking questions of others to asking questions about myself was a challenge, but through it I have come to see the deep interdependency between how my development as a leader influences and

shapes the development of other staff in the organization. These research questions enabled me to narrow that focus.

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study and includes the following sections: design of the study, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and validity of the data, limitations of the study, research subjectivity, and positionality.

Design of the Study

The methodology used in this study was first-person action research. The study also used qualitative research methods such as case study, meeting transcripts, emails, researcher notes and memos, and interviews with action research team members and faculty, students, and alumni for data collection and analysis. The "discovery" phase of the study researched organizational artifacts (indigenous knowledge on quality)—strategic plans, operational plans, benchmarking reports, external comparative data—that provided historical and comparative context to the later phases of the study. Figure 3 details the action research timeline from discovery through each phase of working with each team.
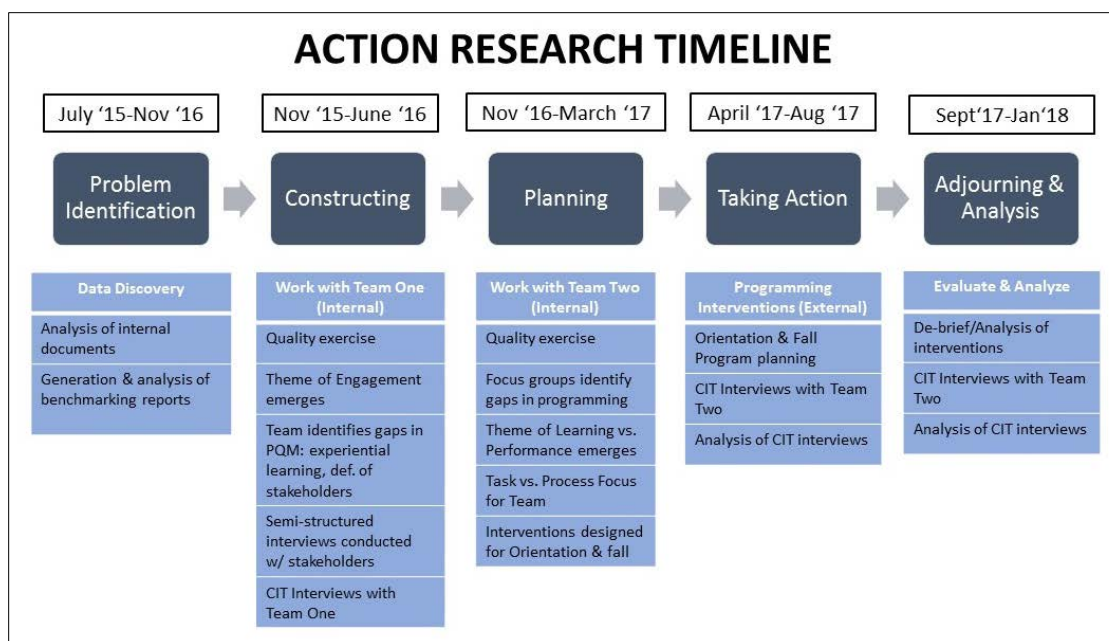
Figure 3. Action Research Timeline.

Action Research Methodology

Action research as a methodology grew out of the work of Lewin and others post-World War II, and is defined broadly as a "whole family of approaches to inquiry which are participative, experiential, emancipatory and action-oriented" (Reason, 1999, p. 222). Reason and Bradbury (2008) also state that action research is a family of approaches operating in a wide variety of diverse settings. Stringer (2014) defines action research as "a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (p. 1). Stringer gives a more delineated definition:

Formally, then, action research, in its most effective forms, is phenomemological (focusing on people's actual lived experience or reality), interpretive (focusing on their interpretation of acts and activities), and hermeneutic (focusing on how people make meaning of events in their lives. It provides the means by which

stakeholders explore their experience, gain greater clarity and understanding of

events and activities, and use those extended understandings to construct effective

solutions to the problems) on which the study was focused. (Stringer, 2014, p. 37)

Note the repetition of the word "effective" in the definition above. Patton (2002) locates

action research along a continuum of research: basic research, applied research,

summative evaluation, formative evaluation, and action research (Patton, 2002, p. 213).

The researcher chooses their approach based on the purpose of the research. Action

research has "the narrowest focus" (Patton, 2002, p. 221) because it "focuses on specific

problems and issues within the organization or community" (Patton, 2002, p. 221).

Because the focus of action research is on problems and issues within organizations, its

purpose is to be useful to the organization. A key attribute of action research is its

duality—that it stands on the divide between theory and practice and seeks to integrate

the two while preserving a separate identity for both the action and the research. Effective

action research identifies effective solutions. Stringer (2014) also asserts that there is no

direct or logical relationship between the theory and the practice. One informs the other

rather than one determining the other.

Kemmis argues that action research centers around four iterative cycles of action

that are dynamic and fluid: plan, act, observe, and reflect (as cited in Herr & Anderson,

2005, p. 5). In the *planning* stage, the researcher and co-researchers (also referred to as

stakeholders) define the problem, develop their vision for change, and plan actions to

improve or solve the problem. In the *acting* stage, the first intervention is implemented.

In the *observing* stage, they evaluate the results of the action taken, and in the fourth

stage, they reflect on these results and use them to plan the next cycle of actions. These

spirals of action and reflection increase the researchers' understanding of the original

problem and lead to effective, sustainable change.

Action research is a methodology that steps away from traditional research by

third party researchers who are outside (not members) of the organizations they study and

is located within organizations and among the stakeholders involved in the study. As

such, it is research *with* rather than research *on*. Or, as Coghlan and Brannick (2014)

define it, "research *in* action, rather than research *about* action" (p. 6). As research *with-*

in an organization, it is by function and purpose collaborative, purposeful, and subjective.

This inherent subjectivity demands that action research also be reflexive, so that the

researcher is self-aware and engaged in questioning their own biases—assumptions,

beliefs, values—and attentive to the power dynamics, cultural perspective and politics of

the system they study (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 4; Marshall, 2016, pp. 4-5; Patton,

2002, p. 65). Action research, then, is both an activity—the cycle of events that are

planned, executed, and evaluated—and a process—a rigorous and reflective process of

co-researching and co-learning by organizational members (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

Action research engages the insider-researcher in three levels of learning: first,

second, and third person. First-person is a practice and form of inquiry conducted by the

researcher to learn about their assumptions, beliefs, desires, and values (internal facets),

and also their behaviors and how they relate to others and the world or system in which

they operate. Second-person connects the individual to others and to how they work with

others on mutually defined problems and issues. This is not simply "what we do," but

also inquiring into how we work with others, and what we can learn by examining

ourselves in relation to others. Third-person action research is more "traditional" because

it concerns the knowledge that is generated and shared based on the interactions between first and second person action research, what is termed "actionable knowledge" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, pp. 6-7).

Action research and its iterative cycles of constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 9) are most effective when they are opportunistic (Riemer, 1977). Riemer states: "Adoption of an opportunistic research strategy enables the researcher to use familiar situations or convenient event to their advantage. They *know* rather than *know about* their area of study. They are insiders" (p. 469). Because action research seeks to understand the lived experience of stakeholders and attempts to solve problems and enact change that is useful, identifying organic opportunities to practice the principles of action research creates an opportunity to make action research ubiquitous to the organization. Additionally, the insider-researcher juggles the demands of a natural tension between "the rigor and the relevance of the research" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 5). Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to this as a "conflict" and a "double burden" (p. 5), and navigating this conflict—and seeing it as an opportunity—is necessary to helping the researcher, the stakeholders, and the organization evolve.

First-Person Action Inquiry

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) state that as an "integrative approach to research" (p. 7), action research incorporates three levels of inquiry, or "voices and audiences" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 7): first-, second-, and third-person inquiry. Coghlan and Brannick define first-person inquiry as "a form of inquiry and practice that one does on one's own…addresses the individual's ability to foster an inquiring approach to their own

life, to act out of awareness and purposefully" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 7). Second-person inquiry pertains to the ability to work with others "on issues of mutual concern (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 7). Third-person inquiry involves communities of inquiry, beyond second-person work with others. Marshall (2016) argues that first-person inquiry is relational and political, aware of contextual and systemic issues, and continuously weaving itself through an infinity loop of inner and outer arcs of attention (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. xvii). For Marshall, first-person inquiry practice is inseparable from second-person (with others) and third-person (with the system).

As an insider-researcher, I engaged in first-person inquiry and practice within my organization. Because my inquiry focus was connected to the people and the system in which I work, and was prompted by the interpersonal and systemic issues that the discovery phase of the project identified, it was incumbent upon me that I understand the environment I was studying. In fact, the idea for the study grew out of my initial non-academic inquiry into what my ongoing relationship to my system would be. Could I become a change agent? What would enable me to become an effective change agent? This line of inquiry practice enabled me to explore how my limitations and failures stymied and impacted the success of the research teams. Since the project began with an external focus, the transition to a focus on first-person inquiry was an example of how the methodology shifted because of what initial stages of the study revealed. I recognize that though the study is coming to a close, my inquiry practice, what Marshall (2016) terms "living life as inquiry," will continue just as the practice of second-person inquiry, what Marshall (2016) terms "learning colleague-ship" also continues.

As the insider-researcher in this study, I was also the primary instrument for capturing and analyzing data, which is both a strength and a weakness. This immersive type of fieldwork "makes possible description and understanding of *both* externally observable behaviors *and* internal states (worldview, opinions, values, attitudes, and symbolic constructs)" (Patton, 2002, p.48). This advantage enables the researcher to collect rich data from multiple sources because of their location within the system of study. A researcher overcomes the disadvantages of being too close to the data by seeking clarification and feedback from co-researchers and stakeholders and by engaging in an ongoing reflexive practice to question their own assumptions, interpretations, perceptions, and beliefs. It is not possible to eliminate all biases; but it is possible to become more aware of them and use other sources of data to calibrate or counter their interpretations. Through my first-person inquiry, I attempted to extend the methods used to eliminate bias when evaluating MBA candidates, questioning my own responses, reactions, and reflections, and then engaging in dialogue with others to learn their perspectives.

First-person action research, its inquiry and practice, can be transformative, both personally and professionally. Several articles for the literature review of this study examined how first-person inquiry was a method used to develop leadership capacity (Coghlan et al., 2014; Githens; 2009; Margolin, 2007) and self-transformation (Burgess, 2006; Mann, 2005). When I began this study, one objective was to use action research to build staff leadership capacity. As the focus shifted, I began to see how I could use the study as an opportunity for my own development as a person, a colleague, and a professional.

Researcher Focus

As the key instrument for collecting and analyzing data, there were demands on the researcher to ensure the use of quality data and a rigorous process of analysis. As an action research study, the researcher *focused on the individual and group learning* about issues being studied and about the research questions. Qualitative research and action research share a view that the research process is fluid and dynamic—that it is *emerging* from iterative cycles of action and reflection. This was an uncomfortable activity for the researcher to allow the research process and what it reveals to change the research plan. For this study, the researcher had to remain open and continue questioning the effectiveness of the research questions until the real/true issues were uncovered. Because there was a focus on the individual learning, the researcher engaged in *reflexivity*. In this study, the use of first-person action inquiry identified in the first research question enabled the researcher to focus on her role in the study, how her personal lenses affected her leadership and facilitation of the groups, and how it impacted her own leadership development through the study. Lastly, the researcher attempted to develop a *holistic* understanding of the issues being studied, to reveal the layers of complexity, to report on the multiple perspectives of the co-researchers, and to understand the factors influencing the situation. Using these elements as a focus of the learning enabled the researcher to problematize the surface issues, engage more deeply with the data, and develop a richer analysis of the issues (Creswell, 2014, p. 186).

Case Study

Yin (2014) presents a two-fold definition for case study: its scope and its features. For Patton (2002), a case study refers either or both the process of the analysis or the

product of the analysis (p. 447). A case study is an empirical inquiry used to understand a real-world situation that involves understanding both the situation—the "phenomena" in Yin's definition—and its context. A case study also has certain features that distinguish from other methods: 1) the inquiry deals with a situation with many variables, 2) yet relies on multiple sources of data as evidence, triangulated for integrity and 3) benefitting from existing theory that will guide data collection and analysis (pp. 16-17). Patton (2002) outlines a 3-step process that takes the data from its raw stage to a final written narrative (p. 450). As qualitative research, a case study takes the reader into the experience without boring them with trivial information.

Yin argues that the case study as a research method is "used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomenon" (p. 4) and he also states that case study research arises out of a distinctive need to understand complex social situations (Yin, 2014, p. 4). Yin posits three conditions that determine when case study has a distinct advantage as a research method: 1) do the research questions ask "how" and "why"? 2) does the researcher need or have control over actual behavioral events; and 3) is the focus of the study on contemporary issues? (Yin, 2014, p. 9). For Patton (2002), the case study is an important precursor to a deeper analysis of themes, patterns, findings (p. 452).

The case study of the two research teams was used to explore the learning journey of the research teams and the researcher. The research questions explored not only what the issues were, but why they existed and how they could be changed. As an insider-researcher in the organizer, I did not control events or conditions, and this is precisely why an action research was chosen as a methodology. By exploring individual and group

leadership development, the case study examined the boundaries on what the researcher and the research teams influenced within the organization. As the key instrument of data collection in this study, the researcher used the case study as a way to tell the story of the teams and the project while also placing herself inside it as a subject of the study.

Participant Selection

The location for this study was the full-time MBA program at the College of Business (COB) at a large, public, research institution in the southeastern United States (SERU). COB has a full-time MBA at its main campus, and a part-time and executive MBA at two satellite campuses. The full-time MBA department is a separate entity from the other two programs, with its own program director, admissions, student services, and career services staff, and its budget is also separate from the two other programs. During the course of the study, the full-time MBA program expanded its dual degree offerings, its curriculum offerings, and launched two new master's degree programs. In addition, there were personnel changes and a reorganization that impacted staff morale and productivity. During these changes, the department lost one staff person to another unit in the college and gained one person in career services, so overall, staffing stayed the same while demands increased. The full-time MBA program director was the project sponsor.

The sample for the study was a purposive, convenience sample chosen specifically to explore how to improve collaboration and develop leadership capacity in a resource-strained environment. Patton (2002) states that purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select information rich cases for in-depth study related to the purpose of the study (p. 230). The sampling was also convenient because the members of the action research teams were also members of the full-time MBA program. For the researcher,

conducting the research within my organization allowed me to study issues that were of immediate relevance to my work and the work of my colleagues. In addition, other interview subjects were chosen using convenience sampling (faculty teaching MBA required courses), and chain sampling of students and alumni of the program. Chain sampling, also known as snowball sampling, occurs when the researcher asks "well-situated" people who they thought should be interviewed (Patton, 2002, p. 237). In addition, during the course of the study, opportunistic sampling was used when student focus groups were conducted as an intervention. Students from both classes were solicited and four focus groups were held. Opportunistic sampling allows researchers to take advantage of new opportunities for data collection during the course of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 240)

Representatives from each of the organization's constituent groups were invited to join the first action research team. The members were director-level staff from different units within the full-time MBA program, a faculty member who teaches in the MBA program, and a student representative for Program Improvement from the Graduate Business Association. The second action research team members were staff from all three units of the department, three director-level staff, one associate director, and one director from the first team participated as an ad hoc member.

During fall 2015, I obtained consent forms from each member of the first research team. The second research team was formed, and consent forms obtained, in fall 2016. Consent forms were obtained during spring 2016 for interviews of faculty, staff, students, and alumni outside the team, and these interviews were conducted during spring 2016. Consent forms were submitted and approved by the IRB. For a broader perspective on the

project, I interviewed the faculty who teach the MBA core courses, the program director

(and research sponsor), and the associate dean (to whom the program director reports).

Consent from these individuals – both team members and interviewees - was obtained

verbally via email and then in writing in advance of meetings and interviews.

In all, five full time MBA staff participated on the research teams with two

students and 1 faculty member (see Table 5). Interviews with five MBA teaching faculty

were conducted and the four focus groups involved 21 first- and second-year students.

Table 5

Research Participants

Team One Participants		Team Two Participants	
Name	**Role**	**Name**	**Role**
Kim	Dir., Career Services	Faith	Dir., Career Services
Lisa	2nd Yr Student, VP of Program Improvement with Graduate Business Association	Mark	Dir. Student Services
Mark	Dir, Student Services	Maura	Dir. Student Experience
Maura	Dir., Student Experience	Monica	Assoc., Dir., Admissions
Shauna	Faculty	Shara	2nd Yr Student, VP of Program Improvement with Graduate Business Association
Sheila	Dir., Marketing		

Data Collection

Patton (2002) identifies three kinds of qualitative data collection: interviews,

direct observation, and written documents (p. 4). Qualitative research methods "facilitate

study of issues in depth and detail" (Patton, 2002, p. 14) and "are ways of finding out

what people do, know, think and feel by observing, interviewing, and analyzing documents" (Patton, 2002, p. 145). The data gathered and analyzed provides the researcher with multiple perspectives, including their own. For Coghlan and Brannick (2014) data is not collected, but generated through the "engagement with others in the action research cycles" (p. 89). The research is not neutral and every action is an intervention, and those actions generate data, whether discovered or created during the process. Data generation occurs in formal and informal settings—meetings, interviews, or conversations over lunch, in the hallway. As the insider-research, I tried to stay aware of the connections that could be made between the formal and the informal and how each type of engagement yielded data.

Additionally, data collection was guided by three questions:

1. What data already exists that is relevant?

2. What data do I generate in my daily work?

3. What additional data needs to be collected or generated for my research?

(Herr & Anderson, 2005, pp. 78-81)

Existing data was collected throughout the course of the two and a half year study and provided a rich set of historical data that helped the researcher understand how the program and its culture had developed. Other data sources were interviews with research team members, faculty, staff, students, meeting transcripts, and researcher notes. Creswell (2014) identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the four basic types of qualitative data, three of which were used in this study: observation, interviews, documents, and audio or visual materials (p. 190). Taking guidance from the emphasis placed on validity by Yin (2005) and Silverman (2001) and on quality by many of the

articles discussed in the literature review section of this study (Arieli et al., 2009; Foulger, 2010; Marshall, 2004; Marshall & Reason, 2007), I endeavored to use multiple sources of information to ensure that quality and validity were achieved.

Observation

Through notes and memos, the researcher maintains a record of observed behavior and activities of the research participants. As an insider-researcher and participant, I maintained an "MBA Admissions Diary" in which I recorded my thoughts and reflections after team meetings and other informal conversations with team members. I also recorded events that were happening in the program and my reflections on them. Patton (2002) also points out that observation allows the researcher to pay attention to non-verbal forms of communication that can reveal information about individual level of attention and participation (p. 290). Non-verbal communication can also be misinterpreted and it is important for the researcher to follow up directly with participants about what any behaviors meant to them. There is also the possibility that people will behave differently because they know they are being observed, or recorded (Patton, 2002, p. 291). The researcher compensated for this by taking notes about team meetings outside of the meetings, so that participants would not think their actions were being scrutinized. I also did not want to rely heavily on my observation skills since I was not confident in them. Creswell (2014) lists this as a limitation of observations (p. 191). This loss of data-in-the-moment also had its drawbacks, but I decided to focus more on meeting transcripts and the corresponding audio than my recollection of people's physical behaviors.

Interviews

Interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study, and they

provided a rich set of data. Two types of interviews were conducted for this study: semi-

structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with faculty, students,

and alumni to gather their thoughts on the full-time MBA program and their general

perspectives on program quality. Critical incident technique interviews were conducted

with all but two members of each research team. These interviews will follow the

structure established by Flanagan, because this will provide me with "a flexible set of

principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand"

(Flanagan, p. 335). Introduced in 1954, the technique is "a systematic and sequential

method of collecting observed incidents, or observations previously made which are

reported from memory" (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998).

Interviews are "intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants"

(Creswell, 2014, p. 190). Interviews can be conducted individually or in groups, in-

person or via Skype, telephone, or other synchronous online format. Regardless of

medium, an interview is a "form of talk" where the involved "parties are engaged in

asking and answering questions" in a "spoken rather than written format to examine

research problems" (Roulston, 2010, p. 10). Interviews have two main advantages related

to this study: the allowed the interviewees to provide historical information relevant to

the research problems and to the context of the study, and they allowed the researcher to

control the line of questioning. Interviews also have several disadvantages. They provide

indirect information that is highly subjective from the interviewees' perspective. They do

not take place in the "natural setting" of the situation since they are formally scheduled

and held. Also, the researcher's presence may bias or influence the responses (Creswell,

2014, p. 191). It is important for the researcher to be aware of these disadvantages and also reinforces the need for multiple sources of data to be collected and analyzed.

Interviews provide useful data about how people construct and live in their social worlds. "Narratives which emerge in interview constructs are situated in social worlds; they come out of worlds that exist outside of the interview itself" (Silverman, 2011, p. 137). Using semi-structured interviews to learn people's thoughts and perspectives on program quality and critical incident interviews to understand the learning process and outcomes of the research team will provide me with narratives about program quality and team learning. These individual narratives, as analyzed, combined or spliced and interpreted will reinforce or counter what the more objective data (of reports and statistics) tell us about the program. "Rigorous analysis of accounts provides two intertwined sets of findings: evidence of the nature of the phenomenon under investigation…as well as insights into the cultural frames people use to make sense of these experiences" (Silverman, 2011, p. 137).

Interviews are also a useful way to gather historical data about the program, even though it may be anecdotal and will need to be corroborated or cross-checked by talking with more people. They are also a useful way to get to know each organization member better, and gain an in-person understanding of their goals for the program and what knowledge (data) on which they have based their ideas and understanding. That may reveal opportunities for further data collection needs that will create a more complete picture of the program's strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview protocols were developed for each of the two interviews types. Figures 4 and 5 detail the interview protocols used for the semi-structured and critical incident interviews.

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. From my role in admissions, I am studying how program quality affects enrollment and other program goals. As a faculty member teaching a core class, I'm interested in learning more about your experiences teaching our students and your thoughts about the program in general. So I want to use this time to give you an opportunity to talk in detail about your experience with us and whatever you want to share.

1. Please start by talking some about how long you have been with the College, what you teach, and how long you have been teaching in the MBA core.
2. How is it different teaching MBA students than undergraduates or other graduate students?
     a. Can you give me an example of X.
3. What are your thoughts about the quality of our students?
4. What are your goals for your students? What are some of the important things they learn from their time in the program?
5. If we wanted to get higher quality students, how might we go about doing that? (probe for challenges).
6. What are your thoughts about the quality of our curriculum and our offerings?
7. Do you believe our students leave equipped to succeed in the workplace?
8. What are your thoughts about the reputation of this program compared to other MBA programs, especially if you have taught at other programs?
9. What indicators of quality do you look for in an MBA program? What signals quality to you?
10. What do you think the College or the administration could do to improve the reputation and/or the ranking of the program? What could the faculty do?
11. So for this college, what are some of the quality indicators that you think we do well with?
12. What are some of the challenges you think we have in terms of quality?
13. In what ways does the college meet those criteria? What could we be doing better?
14. In thinking about the program for the next couple of years, what would you like to see happen?
15. What are some of the long term challenges it faces and how would you propose those be tackled?
16. So we've talked about a lot of things. What would you like to tell me about that we haven't talked about?

I will also be interviewing first and second year students and alumni. Who would you suggest I talk with? I am interested in getting as many diverse opinions and perspectives as possible, both from students who excelled and those who may not have been as academically successful.

Figure 4. Faculty Interview Protocol.

Before too much time passes, I wanted to have a chance to talk with you about your experience working on the team. I would also like to use this time to talk about how our work on the team has impacted the organization, as well as your perspectives on me as a facilitator. I would like to hear your thoughts about our action research team meetings and work together. These questions are open-ended so that you can provide all the detail you want and use as many specific examples as you can recall of what people said, did, how you felt, what you were thinking, and so on.

1. How long have you been with the university?
2. How long have you been with the college?
3. How long have you been with the program?
4. How many roles have you held at each juncture?
5. Give me examples of how our organization has changed since you've been a part of it.
6. Talk about what you knew of the project before joining the team.
   a. How has your thinking changed and in what ways and why?
7. How has our collaboration as a group affected your daily work or the organization as a whole?
8. What would you say were some of the limitations of the team? Both from within the team and from the organization itself?
9. Describe/compare how you think our department collaborated across units before the creation of the Orientation Committee?
   a. Or before the formation of these teams?
   b. Please use examples.
10. Describe/compare how department collaborated after the creation of the Orientation Committee?
    a. Please use specific examples of conversations or situations.
11. Think about a time during our meetings when you felt we had made progress as a group in our understanding of program quality?
    a. Which meeting was that?
    b. What happened to make you think that way?
12. Think about a time during our meetings when you felt we were struggling to come to an understanding?
    a. What happened then?
    b. What was significant to you about that time?
13. Think about a time during any of our meetings when you felt like the team was coming together as a community of practice?
    a. What happened?

Figure 5. Critical Incident Interview Protocol.

Documents

Two types of documents were used in this study: institutional and industry documents collected during the ongoing discovery phase, and documents generated during the study - admissions reports, action research team meeting transcripts, and researcher memos and reflections. Document collection helped the researcher move between the macro and micro contexts of the study. There were also a means of entry into

the system. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) refer to this as a "pre-step" (p. 10) that enables

the research to understand why the project is necessary, assess the external context, the

internal forces that will influence or help drive change, and lastly, this stage was useful

for envisioning what the researcher hoped the program could become, both in how it was

perceived within the COB, and by external stakeholders (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p.

10).

Industry documents. *BusinessWeek* profiles of the program between 1990 and

2001 revealed the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program by the first media

outlet to develop a rankings methodology. The stability and limitations of this

methodology as a proxy for quality have been researched in depth and discussed

elsewhere in this paper. These profiles have several recurring themes: they use an idyllic

and romanticized metaphor of the South as magnolias and *Gone with the Wind*, mention

the program's desire to improve facilities, lack of international opportunities, and issues

with career placement. As the rankings become more competitive, the program went from

being one of the Hidden Twenty to one of the best schools in the region to an MBA for

bargain hunters, and finally, as a runner up ranked #43 in 2001. Except for this 2001

ranking, and a rank of #36 in 2010, the program ranked below #50 in all subsequent

years.

In addition, the researcher collected data for benchmarking reports and research

for this study from two other sources: the Graduate Management Admissions Council

(GMAC) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

GMAC collects information and conducts research related to graduate management

education in the United States and globally. The AACSB is the main accreditation

organization for U.S. business schools and they provide data and research paper and reports on business schools at the graduate and undergraduate level.

Institutional documents. The researcher reviewed four strategic plans for the years spanning 2000-2015, an operational plan for the department for the years 2008-2010, and participated in the writing of three annual reports for the department for the years 2014-2017. During 2014-2015, the researcher worked with the program director to develop benchmarking reports for the dean of the college that provided data on the program's standing in relationship to 26 peer, aspirant, and competitor programs in the United States. In addition, as director of admissions, the research had access to admissions statistics for the years 2000 through the current year. Though not the focus of the study, all these information sets provided a rich context for understanding the program's relationship to the college, support received from the college, and its challenges within the college and as part of its industry.

Documents generated during the study. The study itself generated data specific to the individual level and the team level which correspond to the study's focus on first-person inquiry and cross-unit collaboration. The researcher kept researcher notes in the form of emails to herself and an MBA Admissions Diary. Also, all action research team meetings were recorded and transcribed using a third party transcription service and then the audio and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. This iterative process of reviewing the meeting data enabled the researcher to reflect on her recollection of the events and conversations, refer back to the diary notes and then add additional reflections on the meetings. These reflections often led to follow up questions and conversations with team

members outside of formal meetings, individually or in groups. For the researcher, this created a sense of ongoing engagement and inquiry with the data.

Table 6

Research Design

Research Question	Data to be Collected	Sample	Analysis Approach	Trustworthiness
1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?	Transcripts from team meetings and CIT interviews, research notes and observations	Research team members; myself	In vivo coding first using induction to identify themes and patterns; then deduction to find more evidence of themes	Triangulation, member checking
2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?	Meeting notes, emails, research notes and observations	Team meetings; interviews with constituents; myself	In vivo coding first using induction to identify themes and patterns; then deduction to find more evidence of themes	Triangulation, member checking

Data Analysis

Patton (2002) states that one must apply guidelines for qualitative analysis using "judgment and creativity" (p. 433) because each study is unique. For better or for worse, qualitative analysis depends on the "skills, training, insights, and capabilities" as well as the "analytical intellect and style" of the researcher (Patton, 2002, p. 433). The researcher as instrument is both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness, especially with

respect to action research and first-person inquiry, of any research study. It is the researcher's responsibility to remain aware of that responsibility during the inquiry and analysis that is crucial to establishing the trustworthiness of the analysis and the quality of the data. As Patton (2002) states, "Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study" (p. 433). Patton claims that a study's purpose drives the analysis because different purposes involve "different norms and expectations for what will be concluded and how it will be presented" (Patton, 2002, p. 434).

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) argue that there are three "concurrent flows of activity" in data analysis: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (p. 12). *Data condensation* begins before data is collected as the researcher makes decisions on what theoretical and conceptual frameworks to use, what the research questions are, and what data to collect. Condensation is a process of making the data "stronger" and is part of the analysis because "the researcher's decisions…are *all analytic choices*" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 12). In action research, and as this researcher experienced the study, this condensation process was an evolving and emergent one where the research focus and questions evolved as data was collected and reviewed. Data condensation includes "writing summaries, coding, developing themes, generating categories, and writing analytic memos" (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p.12). For Patton (2002), this is a process of making sense of the data (p. 432).

Familiarization and Coding

Data condensation also includes familiarization and coding. First, the researcher became familiar with the data as a whole. The researcher reviewed and annotated

transcripts, listened to the audio recordings, and wrote reflective and analytic notes and memos to process what the data was revealing. Saldana (2016) refers to these "musings" as a "question-raising, puzzle-piecing, connection-making, strategy-building, problem-solving answer-generating, rising-above-the-data heuristic" (p. 44). For Saldana, analytic memos encompass all forms of researcher memo writing and happen concurrently with coding. In the study, the researcher drafted summaries of each meeting or interview after re-reading each transcript and listening to the audio files. Summaries of meeting transcripts were written to encapsulate what happened and then compared with the researcher's reflections on the meetings. The researcher used the summaries and reflections to engage in another round of reflection and memo-writing. This process continued until the researcher felt comfortable coding the data.

Patton (2002) argues that the challenge of content analysis is making sense out of the complexity of the data. Without developing a coding or classification scheme, there will only be chaos (p. 463). Saldana (2016) details two cycles of coding, first and second. Codes are a "trigger for written reflection on the deeper and complex meanings it evokes" (Saldana, 2016, p. 44). *Inductive analysis* organizes the data into themes, patterns, and categories "from the bottom up". This first step, of inductive analysis, is *emic*, and uses key phrases, words, and actions that are unique to the study participants. This is also referred to as *in vivo* coding. Inductive analysis "allows themes to emerge progressively during data collection" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 81). Miles et al. argue that inductive analysis is more empirically grounded because it demonstrates that the researcher is open to what the data as to say rather than imposing pre-determined codes onto the data set (p. 81).

With interview transcripts, the researcher returned to the text and extracted narrative sections using Microsoft Word—what Saldana (2016) calls "lumping" —that separated the interview into manageable topics for analysis. Codes were generated using a process of induction. After several iterations of coding, the researcher used *deductive analysis* to look for more evidence of the themes in the data (Creswell, 2014, pp. 185-186). The researcher used in vivo coding for the first cycle of coding. In vivo coding uses the participant's own words, selected as words or short phrases, to determine the codes, and so are always placed in quotations. The researcher reviewed each transcript to identify phrases and words that were relevant to the participant by underlining, bolding, and highlighting. Saldana (2016) calls this first cycle process "taking ownership of the data" (p. 69) by letting the language of the text reveal its meaning. These "lumps" were then transferred into separate Excel cells to identify patterns from which initial assertions could be drawn. Patton (2002) refers to this first cycle as a descriptive phase of classifying and coding to produce a framework for describing what has been collected during fieldwork:

> This descriptive phase builds a framework for the interpretative analysis phase when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretations are constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined, and in some cases, theory is generated. (Patton, 2002, p. 465)

Meaning Making

The purpose of second cycle coding is to "develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the first cycle codes (Saldana,

2016, p. 235). The initial codes are categorized by similarity. The researcher used pattern coding in the second cycle to identify emerging themes by grouping passages with similar codes. This second cycle of coding enabled the researcher to identify overarching themes that linked to the research questions. This was a deductive analytic process of meaning making that Patton divides into two stages, first to look for *convergence* in the codes—recurring regularities—and second, to identify *divergence*—fleshing out the categories with new evidence and looking for evidence that doesn't fit the identified patterns (Patton, 2002, pp. 466-467). This is not a linear process; rather, it is both very technical and very creative (Patton, 2002, p. 467). The researcher used an iterative, cyclical process of hand-coding and meaning making that led to the final stage of analysis, the written findings.

Meeting and interview transcripts were imported into Excel and organized by line number, meeting number, team number, interviewee name, category, codes, and assertions. All transcripts and interviews were then combined into two comprehensive documents that could be sorted by any column heading. Once sorted by category, codes and assertions were then reviewed deductively to identify ones that could be grouped. Once these assertions were narrowed down into a smaller set, the researcher then engaged in a third cycle of analysis by engaging a "critical friend," her major advisor, as a collaborative partner. Using a sorting process, both the researcher and the critical friend sorted similar assertions to identify and compare possible themes. This physical and tactile visualization of the data enabled the researcher to take a step back while also digging deeper into the analysis. Conducting this as a collaborative process helped to both validate and challenge researcher assumptions about the data.

Table 7

Categories Used for Excel Analysis

Category	Category Name
FP	First-Person Inquiry
FPB	First-Person Barrier
FPE	First-Person Enabler
SP	Second-Person Inquiry
SPB	Second-Person Barrier
SPE	Second-Person Enabler
TP	Third Person Inquiry
TPB	Third Person Barrier
TPE	Third Person Enabler
COP	Community of Practice
LD	Leadership Development
SEPI	Student Engagement and Program Improvement
Q	Quality

Additionally, the researcher "re-storied" (Watkins, Suh, Brenes-Dawsey, & Oliver, 2018, p. 6) into short narratives specific to the topics covered in each interviews. The "essence" (Watkins et al., p. 8) of each narrative was then condensed into a title, often using the interviewees' own words. In the next review, assertions about each narrative were created to summarize the story. These narrative assertions were analyzed across all interviews and compared/contrasted/analyzed against the assertions drawn from the coding process. The assertions were then sorted and organized to identify the themes running through the data. Erickson (2012) describes this layering method of qualitative analysis as creating a "pyramid of meaning and abstraction" (Watkins et al., p. 13). Assertions are the guides to answering the research questions because they help the researcher get to the meaning of the incident. From meanings, we can articulate the

themes that illustrate our answers to the research questions. Generating meaning in this iterative way revealed deeper connections and meaning by providing the researcher with different angles of view into the data.

Quality and Trustworthiness

Conclusion drawing and verification is the third step and is where interpretations are made and revised until final for the purposes of the study. Conclusions are verified throughout the process of analysis, and can range from the researcher cross-checking an idea by referring to another document or note or by soliciting review from participants and colleagues. Each type of verification establishes validity of the data and findings. Creswell (2014) offers an expanded list of validity measures which include *triangulation* (using multiple sources of data), *member checking* by sharing the final report or themes with participants for their input, and using "*rich, thick description*" by providing detailed descriptions of the finding or the setting so that the results are presented more realistically and through demonstrating other perspectives (pp. 201-202). Another critical component of validity is presenting a clear and detailed description of what Creswell calls the researcher's *bias*, also known as the researcher's subjectivity or positionality in relation to the study itself. This reflexivity and awareness is critical to rigorous action research since the process—the "meta-learning," as termed by Coghlan and Brannick (2014) —is as important as the data generated and analyzed.

Under the umbrella of integrity falls the discussions of validity, trustworthiness, credibility, and honoring the free will of research participants. MBA programs are held to strict standards when reporting quantitative data on admissions and employment outcomes to external organizations. They operate under constant scrutiny and are held to

standards and objectives that no other master's level program in the college adheres to. My job and my reputation among my peers and superiors depends on my ability to accurately, consistently, and transparently report on admissions outcomes. My office reports survey data for six to eight surveys each year related to our ranking and accreditation. My integrity and the integrity of my office is paramount and I applied stringent standards to the data generated by the action research study.

Of fundamental importance is the integrity of the study, the data collected and generated, and my own integrity. To assure that integrity is upheld at all levels and stages, I appreciated the guidance provided by other scholars, related to helping (Schein, 2011), incorporating social justice into action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), Shenton's discussion of trustworthiness (2004), and White and Wooten's (1983) discussion of ethical dilemmas. Reason and Bradbury (2008) use dancers and dance training as a metaphor to describe the circles within which a researcher moves within an organization. I must find my center to "become aware of my own core values" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 204) first, then understand my identity within the organization, and in collaboration with others, make sure "that the values and goals of all participants are clearly stated with a "common task now focused on developing a shared vision" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 205).

> Using the tools of action research, our common goal is to find ways to insure that the key ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as embodied in the shared values of action research—participation in democratic processes, the improvement of human life, and engagement in morally committed action—remain at the core of our practice. (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 209)

I applied a "validity strategy" that incorporated multiple approaches to assessing the accuracy of the data and findings (Creswell, 2014). Of the eight strategies discussed by Creswell, this study focused on "triangulation" (using multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data); "rich, thick description"; ongoing "clarification of my bias"; presenting "discrepant information"; and employed "peer debriefing". Lastly, I have "prolonged time" in the field of MBA admissions, 10 years so far, and have almost seven years within my current organization (Creswell, 2014, p. 201-203).

Also, with the recent focus on outcomes and data-driven decisions, it was critical that members of my organization trusted in the work that the action research team completed. As a member of the organization since 2011, I have developed the "deep-seated understandings necessary to the outcomes of the research process" (Stringer, 2007, p. 93). Persistent observation came from meetings recordings and transcriptions, and my own journaling throughout the engagement process. Using multiple sources of data for triangulation allowed for a more "holistic view of the problem, provide[s us] with a more accurate assessment of the situation, and helps [us] conduct more complete and exhaustive evaluation of the impact of the action/intervention[s]" (Ivankova, 2015, p. 208).

I was fortunate to launch this project at a time when the program was actively engaged in efforts to improve, and my colleagues and action research team members were committed to the success of the program. My team members saw the value of making improvements to the program and the action research study was part of that effort. On a practical level, and as part of my IRB approval, I developed consent forms for those I invited onto the research team and for conducting interviews of team members

and others within the organization. The consent form described the study, their role, study procedures, risks and discomforts, benefits, incentives, confidentiality, and clearly stated that their participation was voluntary, and all participants indicated their consent. I selected team members who shared a common goal, in the abstract, of wanting what is best for the program and the College. The initial forming of the team focused on developing a shared understanding and vision for how to complete our work together. In addition, I maintained confidentiality by assigning all participants and interviewees pseudonyms, as well as a pseudonym for the organization, the College, and the institution, so that interview commentary could not attributed to any specific individual.

Subjectivity

Because of my admissions training, I understood how difficult it was to remove bias and partiality from evaluations. But also because of my training, I knew there were mechanisms that could be put into place to ensure as much objectivity as possible—to judge a thing on its merits and not based on my opinion, impressions, preconceptions, or reactions. In evaluating candidates for admission, one works to eliminate biases by having a defensible methodology and practice. This involves using a system to rate candidates, to have more than one person read an application, to ensure that the interviewer is a different person than the application reader, to ensure that all application readers meet to discuss methodology, cases, to calibrate with one another. This way, the process mediated subjectivity by applying the same methodology to all candidates. Admissions decisions are made by a committee of program staff, some of whom have not interacted with the candidate. This way decisions can be made based on the data collected and not solely based on subjective or personal assessments.

In my admissions work, I move between different roles: director, recruiter, reader, interviewer, and admissions committee member. I brought that expertise and that practice to this research study. Though never perfectly executed, I adhered to a mindful and reflective practice and relied on the expertise of the action research team to collaboratively keep our biases in check and thoroughly explored "alternative hypothes[es], meanings, conclusions, and disagreement[s]" (Ivankova, 2015, p. 274). They helped me review, question, ponder, experiment, and assess both what we mean by program quality, how we want to achieve it, programmatically for our students, and collaboratively, for ourselves.

Positionality

Herr and Anderson (2005) provide useful definitions to understand the "continuum of positionality in action research" (p. 29). As a change agent, I need to be aware of my position in relation to my organization—who I was before I came to this work and who I am as I do the work. Personally speaking, I am a white, lesbian, middle-class female admissions professional with almost 10 years' experience in MBA admissions, almost 19 years' experience working at two different business schools, and almost 26 years of experience in higher education. I am also an only child, a child of divorce, and a daughter caring for an elderly mother. I was a townie who attended private school. I was a Protestant and a child of a divorced mother when I attended Catholic grammar school. I earned a master's degree in English literature, but my current role requires me to make data-driven decisions. I am active in the local LGBTQ community and serve on the college's first diversity and inclusion advisory board. I have always felt like an outsider, both personally and professionally. I would describe my position in

relation to my organization as insider/outsider-researcher. Herr and Anderson (2005) do not discuss this specific positionality because it is, for me, a combination and extension of two positionalities: insider-researcher and outsider-within. These two stem from who I perceive myself to be as a person and a professional, and as Herr and Anderson (2005) state: "one's positionality doesn't fall out in neat categories and might even shift during the study" (p. 32).

As an insider-researcher, I was "committed to the success of the actions under study" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 33). With this research study, and in my daily work, I was a "reflective practitioner who 'learns to learn' about [my] practice and become a better practitioner (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 34). MBA programs are engaged in cycles of continuous improvement, with a focus on outcomes and performance, both for students and for staff. We are all, primarily, doers and we are paid to accomplish things. As a person and a professional, I was and am an "incomplete leader" (Ancona et al., 2007) possessing both strengths and weaknesses. By engaging in leadership with others, I challenged myself to grow and become more self-aware. I hoped that combination provided balance to my study and enabled me to successfully establish a community of practice within the action research team. Lastly, I needed to be mindful of my preconceptions of what the problems and solutions were and that my first intervention— the insertion of myself into this process as an insider-researcher - was a "humble inquiry" where the "essence of the process consultant at the beginning of a helping relationship is to engage in humble inquiry" (Schein, 2011, p. 65).

I also often felt keenly my role as an outsider-within (Collins, 1990) because of my status as a Northern lesbian with experience in a top-10 full-time MBA program

working and living in the South, at a top 50-ish full-time MBA program, in a predominantly heterosexual workplace and culture. These two identities provided me with a "peculiar angle of vision" (Collins, 1990, p. 94) on my organization. These identities were also sometimes a source of empowerment and I was aware of my difference from others, inside and outside of work.

To the best of my knowledge, only one other staff person has experience at a top-10 institution; however, my ideas based on that experience have often faced resistance, and even at times, my expertise disparaged by other college staff. It was nearly impossible to tangibly identify the ways in which my status as a lesbian negatively impacted my professional development. Though Collins is speaking specifically and clearly about Black women scholars, I identified with this statement: "For Black women who are agents of knowledge, the marginality that accompanies outsider-within status can be the source of both frustration and creativity" (Collins, 1990, p. 233). The unique perspectives I have from my position in relation to the system in which I work often frustrated me. Conversely, this frustration was an opportunity to evaluate and analyze my work from a different perspective, to identify the difference between what it is and what it can be. Learning how to bring that vision forward clearly and collaboratively was my leadership challenge since joining the organization.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of the study was its sole focus on one specific full-time MBA program. MBA programs are so very different in enrollment, staff size and organization, resources, program offerings, along with the differences that come from rank and reputation that it will be difficult to use this approach without adapting it to the specifics

of each organization. Another limitation was the positionality of the researcher and the

research teams. Each organization has staff with different and unique experiences and

perspectives that will shape their use of this approach.

CHAPTER 4

THE TALE OF TWO TEAMS

This story began on Friday, July 29, 2011, the first day of MBA orientation for

the Class of 2013 at COB. Though the following Monday would kick-off orientation for

the entire class, the Friday before began with a day of programming for international

students. Orientation is an onboarding and team building experience that sets the tone for

the incoming class, prepares them for their core classes, for the recruiting process, and

sets expectations for what they can expect from the program and what is expected of

them. Orientation is the event, in a small MBA program, which should bring a staff and a

class together. We welcome them to the community and lay the groundwork for their

transformative experience as leaders and professionals.

On that morning, I observed the result of placing responsibility for the success of

orientation primarily with one staff member. Staff participated to conduct their specific

presentations, but the planning was not collaborative. Early arrivers waited outside an

empty room, there were no refreshments, the first session (many sessions in those two

weeks) didn't start on time, staff arrived at different times, the energy in the room was

low, the presentations were lectures with little interaction, and the technology wasn't

ready to go. After two weeks in this new role, this was my first example for how siloed

and non-collaborative the organization was. One of my challenges from that day forward

was to find ways to improve both orientation and collaboration within the organization.

The staff were wonderful, cooperative, and experienced people who were committed to their work and to the students. They just didn't collaborate on this event.

After starting my doctoral program, I began to see how action research could be integrated into the existing feedback and improvement framework in the department and how it could be used to improve collaboration between units while also developing staff leadership and programming for students. When the organization transitioned to new leadership with a new program director, I discussed my project ideas with him. He had been faculty at the college since 2001, but this was his first administrative role with the MBA programs. As part of my own discovery process, and to assist him, I gathered data to write benchmarking reports on application volume, applicant quality, year-over-year enrollment, and financial aid funding, all in comparison to our peer, aspirant, and competitor MBA programs. These reports were aggregated into one benchmarking report and shared with the Dean. This time period was the first phase of my project: data discovery, collection, and generation. With his support and guidance, I moved on to the next phase of my project and formed the first action research team.

In my journal during this time period, I note finding out from Maura that in the 1980s the faculty had voted to shut down the MBA program. "Finding out why there have been decades of animosity towards the MBA program is an important piece of this puzzle. Will need to interview long-time faculty and staff for more information." During this leadership transition in the department and the College, I remember how stressed and scared some staff were that the program would be shut down and they would lose their jobs—Sheila and Kim were very vocal about how worried they were and their stress affected most other staff. For me, though, I saw it as an opportunity for change. I felt that if we as a staff just shared enough of the right information, the Dean would understand our challenges and provide more support. In September of that year, the Dean met with us as a staff after that stressful summer. I remember that he expressed confidence in the program and supportive of changes that could be made to improve. I asked him to be specific about what he meant, but he didn't have a concrete answer. I remember thinking then that it was even more important to gather relevant information and share it up.

The Action Research Teams

Fast forward to summer 2015, four years on staff, one year into this program and into my research project. I had been director of admissions since November 2013 and was now the chair of the Orientation Committee. Our first orientation as a team—the first time orientation that had ever been planned by a team—occurred in August of that year. As a college and a department, we had been under new leadership since July and August of 2014, respectively. The program was focused on achieving the objectives outlined in the benchmarking report compiled by our program director in late 2014-early 2015. Simultaneous to this process of data discovery, I engaged in a literature review to gain a better understanding of program quality and communities of practice. It was now time to assemble a team of co-researchers from among my colleagues in the program and in the college to examine, define, and evaluate program quality. What I didn't know then was how much this project would evolve and how it would impact my leadership development (and also that of my colleagues).

There are ten staff people in the full time MBA program with a program director at 60% FTE. The program director role has always been filled by a faculty member who also has teaching and service responsibilities. In contrast, many of our peer, aspirant, and competitor programs have a full-time staff position serving as program director to oversee daily operations, personnel management, and strategic planning. Our department is divided into three areas: admissions (which I manage), career services, and student services/experience. As a group, we share two suites, the entire side of one floor, of the new COB graduate programs building. The suites are separated by a door which we keep open during the day for staff and faculty to easily move back and forth. Before June 2015, each unit occupied separate office suites in our previous building. The interactions between areas have always been very interactive and cooperative. Now that we are all co-located, we are able to collaborate much more easily and more frequently—if we choose.

Team Recruitment

In June 2015, I consulted with my project sponsor, the program director, to identify potential team participants. He suggested potential faculty members as well as staff and encouraged me to include an alumni member. In the end, I was not able to secure a commitment from an alumnus given everyone's location and/or time constraints. Between fall 2015 and spring 2017, I worked with two research teams comprised of staff from all three units. For each team, I first held individual meetings with each potential member after an initial email exchange. After these initial meetings, I invited key staff members from each unit, one student, and one faculty member to join the research team. I chose each individual because they were all stakeholders in the organization, had

significant expertise in their areas of influence, and felt that each would bring a valued

perspective to the team.

After these individual meetings, I followed up to secure their commitment and

consent. In November 2015, the first action research team was formed, comprised of

seven members, including myself. During the first phase of my project, our charge was to

evaluate the Rubin program quality model and its quality indicators and determine if

those indicators sufficiently represented the activities of our program and its units. If it

did, we could then develop an assessment tool that could provide an internally-driven,

multi-dimensional assessment of program quality than other current assessment tools,

such as used by the AACSB for certification, or media rankings criteria.

> From my research notes of this time period, I note how stressed I was feeling about
> our application volume and quality, and I worried that we would be once again be
> struggling to enroll 50 students. This was my second year as director and I was still
> learning how to juggle the day-to-day issues with having time to work on more
> strategic tasks: ongoing reporting, recruitment planning, and data collection for
> surveys. Some days I felt like the program could improve. Other days, when micro-
> politics of the college interfered in daily work, I felt frustrated and deflated, that we
> would always stand in our way and never get any better.

Team One and Team Two Members

For my first research team, I selected staff in director-level positions within the

full-time program, a COB faculty member who works with the program, and a second-

year MBA student who serves as the Program Improvement representative on the

graduate student government organization. The second research team was comprised of

three staff—two senior, one junior—and the second-year student currently holding the

graduate business association Program Improvement role. Two of the senior staff on Team Two had been on Team One—Mark and Maura.

Team One Members

Maura, the director of student experience, joined COB in 1996 as an MBA student. After graduating in May 1998, she became the assistant director of MBA admissions. In 2001, she became director of admissions, a position she held until April of 2011. Prior to joining the COB, she lived the first half of her life in New Jersey. Before joining the MBA program as a student, she ran a business with her husband. After a 2011 reorganization, she moved to a newly created role as director of student experience, charged with assisting the program director with program and curriculum development, managing the leadership development program for students, sourcing and overseeing projects for two courses, coordinating the case competition teams, and overseeing program accreditation efforts.

The second Team One member, Sheila, joined the COB as assistant director of admissions in 2008 after relocating from the Northeast. Previously, she had worked at two other well-known, but unranked, MBA programs at private universities for a total of eight years. Her career in admissions began in college when she worked for her alma mater's undergraduate admissions office. She became director of admissions in early 2011 when Maura transitioned to her current role. Sheila also holds a law degree from a nationally known institution, though her professional career has been in admissions. Under her leadership, the admissions office made several changes, including transitioning from rolling admissions to application rounds, implemented a new CRM and application system, and began offering campus visit days for small groups, moving away from the

labor-intensive model of planning individual visits. In October 2013, she transitioned to the marketing director role. During the time the team was convened, her position was moved from our department and under the central marketing and communications office and she was physically relocated as well.

Kim, the director of career services for at the COB since 2007, came to the program after nine years in the finance industry and seven years in career services at one of the top MBA programs in the Northeast. She holds an MBA from an MBA program that is consistently within or just below the Top 10. She also holds an MFA in creative writing and has been trained as a career and life coach. She serves on the board of the MBA Career Services and Employer Alliance, a global organization serving graduate business career management professionals and is an organization that monitors the standards for reporting employment statistics. Under her leadership, the unit expanded from two to six staff, and developed programming that focused on activities that drove employment success. With the addition of more staff, the office was able to improve and develop relationships with employers, all of which improved student outcomes for a period of years.

Mark, the director of student services since June 2015, returned to the program after a year leading student services at a local technical college. Before that, he had served as office manager of career services. A native to the state and a graduate of SERU, he has worked since 2010 in higher education, specifically focused on student services and career management. Mark completed a master's in Human Resources and Organization Development in December 2017.

Shauna joined the faculty of COB in 2008 and is the current director of the leadership institute for the undergraduate programs of the COB. She earned her MBA from a competitor program and also worked as a consultant before joining academia. She was chosen for the team because of her experience as a student in a higher ranked program, her research in organizational behavior, and her current perspective as director of the leadership development program at the COB.

Lisa, a current second-year MBA student, was chosen because of her leadership role as the vice president of program improvement in the graduate business association. Before coming to the program, she had seven years of work experience in project management, consulting, and data analysis, so I valued her perspective on the challenges our students faced in preparing for the post-MBA job market.

Team Two Members

Team Two was comprised of six people, five staff, including myself, and one student, Shara, was involved until she graduated in the spring of 2017. I retained Mark and Maura from Team One, and I brought on Faith, the new director of career services, and Monica, the associate director of MBA admissions. Rather than involve a second faculty member, I chose to invite a junior person in the department because she was instrumental in improving collaboration across units.

Faith joined SERU in 2001 and joined the COB as associate director of career services in 2008, hired by Kim. Before that, she had worked in industry in sales, marketing, recruiting, and consulting roles for 16 years, also running a business with her husband within that time period. She earned her Master's in 2006 and her Ph.D. in 2016, both from SERU and both degrees in Human Resources and Organization Development.

Monica, the associate director of admissions, had worked for COB for a total of six years, holding two roles in admissions and one role in special events. She attended SERU and also earned her Master's in Human Resource and Organization from SERU in 2016. Before working for COB, she had worked in the retail sector for about five years. Since assuming the associate director position, she had been instrumental in improving collaboration by coordinating with career services on their summer events and activities, supporting student services with the pre-MBA online coursework, and for her work on planning orientation.

The final member of this second team was Shara, a second-year student and the vice president of program improvement for the graduate business association. She succeeded Lisa in that role and so I invited her to the team to provide additional continuity. Unlike Lisa, she was an international student, and brought a different perspective to the team.

Demographically, both groups were rather homogeneous since all the staff and faculty were white, middle class, college-educated professionals. All but one were female. Two were born and raised in the South, though only one, the male, was born and raised in the state. Three members had work experience at other business schools, including myself, all in the northeastern United States. One member had attended COB for her MBA and then came to work for the program and has held three roles since 1998. Three people on the team, including myself, had served as director of admissions for this full-time MBA program. Everyone on both teams had either earned or was working towards a master's degree.

Before continuing, it is important to note that there were both benefits and disadvantages to working with two teams and to the fluid membership on each. This is what Ancona and Bresman term "exchangeable membership" which "allows the people who compose the team to shift over time so that the appropriate mix of skills and abilities is available when needed" (p. 140). I wanted to engage as many staff as possible in this project, even if only to make them aware of it. I brought it up in daily conversation to try and integrate the action research framework into our daily work. I also needed to accommodate people's other commitments. But due to several factors—graduation, changes in personnel assignments, priorities outside of the team—meeting attendance was not consistent. I compensated for this by inviting Mark and Maura to remain involved with Team Two, and their continued participation helped immensely in keeping each team's mission and focus grounded.

Action Research Process Timeline

After Team One was assembled, we scheduled and held our first meeting in November 2015 and met four times between then and June 2016. Team Two formed during the summer of 2016 and met three times (formally) between November 2016 and September 2017. The initial plan was to meet monthly, but for many participants, including myself, other work priorities intervened. During the life of both teams, the organization underwent several personnel changes and personal conflicts between staff. The change in program leadership in 2014, coupled with the increased scrutiny and data requests from outside the program, left some staff feeling threatened and insecure. My communication with some staff outside of the team went poorly, and quite frankly, many of us were feeling the effects of all the change. During the life of the second team, there

were more personnel changes, more work for fewer people, the summer months are a busy time for admissions, and also the time when others take vacation. All of these factors contributed to rescheduled and meetings because people were not prepared or would not be present.

I entered into this process focused on my role as an insider-researcher engaged in second-person facilitation. As noted in Coghlan and Brannick, the insider-researcher must balance the responsibilities of a facilitator, someone who is not personally concerned with the issues under discussion, as defined by Kolb (2014), with my role as their colleague and be mindful of the established relationships and dynamics, while also combining "advocacy with inquiry" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 37). Overall, as I began this process, my secondary goal was to develop and improve the culture of the organization, in a "collaborative, interventionist form of research" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 54). I also entered the process with my own pre-conceptions about the problem and its solution.

Constructing, Team One: November 2015-June 2016

The four meetings with Team One focused on understanding the literature around program quality and evaluating the Rubin program quality model. These discussions led to sharing information about the challenges faced by each unit because of the demands of multiple stakeholders and a very competitive MBA marketplace. Grappling with the definition of quality and how it is measured led to discussions of each of the limitations and constraints placed on each unit and each staff member because of the conflicting priorities set by the college, the institution, and other external stakeholders. We were constantly measured by someone else's yardstick.

To engage each research team, I needed to orient them to the literature on quality and communities of practice, and walk them through our program challenges from an admission's perspective. I explained the methodologies behind the media rankings, sharing the admissions benchmarking reports, and then led them into a discussion about how we define quality. To help make quality tangible for them in the first meeting, I asked each team to complete a Quality Exercise I created by modifying a NASA Survival Exercise. I provided them with a list of the meta-dimensions, and their definitions, in Rubin's program quality model and asked them each to rank order them from most important to least important. Table 8 outlines those meta-dimensions.

Table 8

Program Quality Model Meta-Dimensions

PQM Meta-Dimensions	Features
Student learning and outcomes: The extent to which students acquire relevant knowledge and skills and attain associated career outcomes	Personal competency development, Student career consequences, Student economic outcomes, Learning outcome assessment
Curriculum: The overall quality of the courses of study provided by the program	Content, Delivery, Program Structure
Faculty: The overall quality of teaching personnel within the program	Qualifications, Research, Teaching, Overall perceptions of quality performance
Placement: The overall quality of career-related programmatic opportunities for students	
Strategic focus: The overall quality of the articulated mission of the program and corresponding strategic planning and positioning with respect to achieving the mission	
Program student composition: The overall makeup and corresponding quality of the student population with respect to academic achievement and professional experiences	Alumni network, Career services, Corporate and community relations
Institutional resources: The overall quality of resources available to the program and its constituents	Facilities, Financial resources, Investment in faculty, Tuition and fees, Student support services
Program climate: The overall educational context, consisting of prevailing attitudes, values, and norms within the program/institution.	Diversity, Educational environment
Reputation: The extent to which the program is recognized by external stakeholders as being of high quality or merit	

Another goal of this exercise was to make everyone's particular perceptions of quality,

and how it is formed, more transparent. The results were discussed in the second meeting

and the team used that as a guide to plan a deeper exploration of each meta-dimension.

Table 9 shows the results of the exercise for each team.

Table 9

Quality Exercise Results

Meta-Dimensions	Team One	Team Two
Student learning and outcomes	1	2
Placement	3	3
Curriculum	2	6
Program student composition	6	4
Reputation	8	1
Faculty	3	7
Strategic focus	5	7
Institutional resources	7	5
Program/Institutional climate	9	6

The goal was to use that deeper understanding to identify gaps in the model and/or

develop a method of conducting an internal assessment of program quality that was a

more accurate reflection of its strengths and weaknesses than the media rankings

revealed. There was parity and disparity in the results, with the greatest divergence over

the ranking for Reputation. Both teams placed high importance on Student Learning and

Outcomes, as well as Placement (though no one in career services values that word). It

was notable that three of the factors over which program staff have the least control—

Strategic Focus, Institutional Resources, and Program/Institutional Climate—were ranked

as highly important. Team Two, which comprised only staff, ranked Faculty lower than

Team One. This constructing phase was stymied by our acknowledgement that the

program's goals and the organizations goals were not in alignment and that the program had multiple stakeholders with competing priorities. The third meeting was short and unproductive because two members were out of town. One member joined by phone, but the connected was so poor, she could not hear enough to participate. By the fourth meeting, these roadblocks, along with constraints on team members' time, led me to finalize our work together, and form a second team with other MBA program staff and one student representative. In December 2016 and January 2017, I conducted critical incident technique interviews with each team member from the first team to capture their reflections on our meetings.

I went through many emotions when I was working with Team One. I often felt like I was grasping at thin air in meetings, explaining ideas I was unable to fully understand myself. I felt stretched thin managing my daily work, dealing with the stress of an underperforming staff member, navigating relationships in the office (badly at times) and finding time to prepare for research team meetings. Frustrated with myself for wanting to avoid them. I wrote this in my research notes between the first and second meetings: "After one meeting with my AR team in November, I cancelled the December meeting because it felt too rushed and I felt unprepared for it. I didn't know what I was asking them to do, so I spent some time over break thinking about that. I've decided I need their individual help creating the part of the assessment that pertains to the work they each do, which will likely be in the form of a survey. I need to learn more about creating surveys. But I also feel like this project exists outside everything else that is going on, and so I wonder how it is supposed to end up useful to the program or the College at all."

Planning, Team Two: November 2016 – March 2017

Although Team Two was formed—each person consented—in November 2016, our first formal meeting was held in February 17, 2017. Two more meetings were held in March and September of 2017. Two first-of-their-kind ideas grew out of the discussions:

to conduct a program climate survey with current students and to conduct a series of focus groups with them to explore issues further.

Besides the holidays reducing people's time in the office, the busiest time of the year for Admissions occurs between November and January. Our Round 2 application deadline is at the beginning of December; interviews and decisions follow on that. Also during this time period, discussions began about a reorganization of the career services unit to address the growing resource needs of the professional MBA programs. Our program director asked for Faith's input on this change. She asked Mark and I to lunch to discuss her ideas about the proposal. I noted in my MBA Diary that this was the first time I had gone to lunch with Faith and also the first time that I could recall that staff representing all three units met to discuss issues affecting the whole program.

In February 2017, Faith transitioned to the director's role for full time MBA career services. Kim, the previous director, transitioned to a role as director of career services for the two professional MBA programs. For full time MBA, this was a loss of one full-time staff person. This reorganization placed a lot of stress on staff and constraints on their time. Faith was unable to attend the first team meeting, but she followed up afterwards in person and via email and reviewed the notes and the literature I had shared in that meeting.

As a result of that reorganization, there were numerous informal "hallway" meetings between March and September 2017 in lieu of formal meetings. These informal meetings—which moved fluidly between project discussions to work-related topics— included everyone in the conversations about quality, program improvements, expectations, and student accountability. During the month of February, Faith was

focused on assuming the responsibilities of her new role, during the height of the spring recruiting cycle, while also continuing to perform her duties as the corporate relations manager. She would continue to juggle those two roles, with the support of one junior staff person, through the end of her time on the team.

> During this time of transition, I was reluctant to press everyone to meet given all the other changes within the office and knowing the stress people were under, especially Faith, who agreed to leave her old position vacant when she moved into the director's role. I thought at the time that this was just another example of the staff being asked to do more with less. So, I decided to take advantage of these hallway meetings—which have never happened before because of the stress in the office and the control exerted by the more dominant personalities. I saw this as an opportunity to bring up action research and my ideas about integrating feedback loops into our planning for events and programming. Another advantage of these hallway conversations is that everyone could listen and participate and I observed how that created space for people to contribute their ideas. I didn't want to stifle any of that. It was also during this time that Mark and I began to work even more closely together and he would often seek my input. I appreciated the opportunity to discuss non-admissions-related topics with him and help him with his work. This felt like time well spent to me and I was looking for any small opportunity to collaborate with others.

In that first team meeting, I introduced Shara and Monica to the project scope, details, and preliminary findings about engagement, quality, explained the concept of a community of practice, and outlined the definition of action research. After the meeting, I sent a follow-up email with more information about the quality dimensions, project definitions, and the student and alumni interview questions. Shara responded immediately and asked to meet specifically about program climate because this one dimension was of specific concern to her and other students. Faith also followed up in person, after having read the materials I sent, and reiterated her commitment to the team and to helping me in any way that she can. These two acts reassured me that this team was more engaged and

would be more productive. In retrospect, I also realize that I was becoming more comfortable as a facilitator as my research focus became clearer.

Between the first and second meeting, in spring of 2017, Mark and I collaborated with Shara in developing a short survey on program climate that the graduate business association sent to students in mid-March. This is the first climate survey conducted by the program, though the graduate business organization conducts a student satisfaction survey each spring. Seventy-three of nearly 100 students responded to the climate survey. Shara provided a summary of survey results to the team. Student opinion was divided about the value added by the programming organized by the graduate business association and most of the responses pertained to that. Other responses spoke to divisions between the two classes. Other comments called for more diverse programming options and events that celebrated cultural diversity. There were also comments that the survey came out too late in the year to allow time for changes to be put into place. Though the team felt that the survey was too rushed to have useful results, it raised issues that we wanted to follow up on in some way.

After team members reviewed the climate survey results, Faith suggested the next actionable step during the March team meeting: would we want to conduct focus groups with current students to gain a better understanding of their "pain points"? Her suggestion grew out of an insight Shara shared in the first meeting: The silos I had observed between the units in our department mirrored how our students experienced their curriculum. Students felt that their courses existed in separate "buckets" and they were not able to connect their coursework to their concentration and career focus. She saw this as a byproduct of how faculty approached their teaching—from their departmental lens, not a

holistic one. This was enlightening for me, and for the team, because it showed that even though we thought we were communicating the alignment between courses and one's concentration in our information sessions and at orientation, that message was not being heard. If students don't know why we require certain courses or how that impacts their job success, then a crucial piece of the student experience is missing.

Meeting Two was a task-focused discussion about how to implement Faith's hallway idea to hold focus groups with students. The goal was to identify the gaps in career and development programming and then connect that data to the program climate survey results. We discussed how to explain what we were doing, what we wanted to achieve, how it connected to the climate survey, and that we were invested in following up. Since this team was clearly task-focused and goal-oriented, my objective was to use this as an opportunity to integrate the cycles of action research into our process. We decided to identify programming gaps that were within our ability to address and use that programming as an opportunity to explain why students needed to learn what we wanted them to know.

For the first time, we as senior staff were having a conversation about improving the feedback loop between ourselves and our students. We were collecting information by soliciting their feedback and evaluating it as a group. As a team, we developed a plan of action and determined the steps for execution. By including students in the decision-making, we were signally to them that we would be holding ourselves accountable, while we expected the same of them. One of the insights from the teams was that we were very good at telling students what we wanted them to do, but very bad at explaining why we needed them to do it. This was a step in that direction.

This was a very energizing and rewarding time for me. I was excited to be engaged with other staff on creating change and excited to watch both Mark and Faith become more confident in their roles. Maura was also more engaged with other staff, asking for input and ideas, and I felt like we were really functioning smoothly as a collaborative team of people helping each other and the program succeed. I felt that the research team activities had played a role in that, and comments from my colleagues reinforced my feelings. It felt like we were doing new and exciting things that had come out of learning how to communicate better and trust each other. The hallway conversations—people coming out of their offices—was a new phenomenon and in these conversations, anyone could share an idea or ask for input, and we often walked away with a plan mapped out. We held several informal discussions to talk through the focus group feedback, weighing ideas and options for what changes to implement. I liked to see everyone participating in these conversations as equals, and to see people laughing and smiling. These types of conversations had never happened before and it had been a long time since everyone was laughing and smiling.

Taking Action, Team Two: April 2017-August 2017

We left that March meeting with a plan in place to schedule focus groups, facilitated by me, and that I would aggregate the information and share it back with the group anonymously. Between April 10 and April 18, 2017, I facilitated four focus groups with first- and second-year students. During this time, Faith assessed and developed a new vision for the career management center that was shared during fall 2017 orientation—a vision that specifically included an iterative 3-step process for working with students.

The focus groups provided us with a lot more useful data than I had expected. Each conversation revealed new ideas and information, when I had expected ideas to begin repeating themselves. I emailed team members a general summary and also details about each focus group discussion (they were recorded, but not transcribed), anonymized to protect student confidentiality. Figure 6 displays a summary of the feedback received during the focus groups.

Student feedback spanned many topics: skills training, curriculum changes, student accountability, areas of improvement for career support, desire for more intra-class social activities, inadequate support for conflicts within student teams, and desire for increased access to alumni. Though none of the feedback was an "admissions problem," it was rewarding to facilitate the focus groups and have an atypical opportunity to talk and listen to our students. After discussing the report, the team decided to develop and implement three enhancements that were within their spheres of influence to affect change: create a series of Friday Features which would be skills workshops, alumni presentations on specific industries or roles, a redesign of the career and communications courses, and an event-focused leadership development framework for students which we decided to call MBA Engage. The first two enhancements fell within career services and the second under student services, but the research team held brainstorming discussions between May and August to talk through ideas and make decisions on specific issues.

Below is a general summary of all points common to the four focus groups (i.e., a consensus). Below that are summaries of information from each group. Below that is a list of the ideas I've had after listening to these groups. Overall, each focus group discussed several common themes/issues, but each one also offered something new to listen to. These were worth doing, and we should think about doing them every year or every other year.

General Summary
Excel: Offer Excel with Foundations, plus a session during Orientation, but everyone agreed that Excel skills development and usage should be incorporated into more classes, especially Finance and Accounting, and that there should be workshops offered to walk through manipulating datasets in industry-specific ways.
Communications Course: This course should be condensed into 1.5 credits and half a semester, possibly coupled with the career course for first years, bring in more "experts" to speak on specific topics and spend less time on each task/deliverable. Those who needed it the most were turned off by the quality of instruction – we need to review course evaluations to get the whole story and decide what to do.
Workshops: There was not consensus on this idea. Some people are available Fridays; some are not due to GA responsibilities. Mornings might work best, as might Monday, Tuesday or Thursday evenings. Do not require students to be at all of them. Possibly offer them for credit as part of the career course (1.5 credits), track attendance, require people to attend a certain amount, set expectations for workshop presenters about what attendance might be; the idea of the topics being student-driven was well received.
Accountability (Attendance, cheating, etc.): All would like to see faculty respond to cheating and enforce standards, including attendance policies. People should be failed or face consequences.
Calendaring/Messaging: Too many emails, not enough events set up with calendar invites, find other ways to distribute information whether it be over the TV monitors or on bulletin boards.

Career Courses: As a whole, people don't get much value from them, they are offered at a time that conflicts with other desired electives, the courses need structure, and to be specific to what each year of students needs in the short and long term. Whatever is done, it was clear that what is being offered now is not working for anyone.
Foundations: Each course needs to be aligned with its core course and that hasn't been the case because of changes in teaching faculty. Stats is the most appreciated because it aligns with Holmes' course. Finance goes too deep. Add Excel.
Career Support: The overall feeling is that career services is not offering structured, individualized support that students need and want, especially to people who are not interested in marketing or finance. They don't know what's expected of them, what the plan is
Brand/Identity: This keeps coming up: who are we, what do we stand for, what do we want to be known for, we offer too many concentrations and aren't great at any of them.
Cross-class interactions: Not happening, need to facilitate using each other as a network, more cultural and social events between the classes besides Happy Hours, create photobook for each class and share it so that they can get to know each other better (because they are not doing it on their own)
Teams: Need more support to handle conflict and non-performers
Case Competitions: Need clear guidelines, clear processes for team selections, outline at the beginning of the year what they are and when. Course credit for longer term ones only.
Alumni access: They feel like they aren't getting connected to alumni, especially within the last 10 years, in ways they need and want. LinkedIn is not a solution; CMC should facilitate these connections, provide templates for emails, structure for conversations, and give people access to those alumni, and to networking opportunities with PMBA and EMBA.

Figure 6. Summary of April 2017 Focus Groups.

Evaluating Action, Team Two: September 5, 2017 (and ongoing)

Orientation ended August 11 and classes started on August 14. When the team met on September 5, we discussed how the meta-dimensions of quality tracked to an open systems model of inputs, throughputs, and outputs. Philosophically, we saw the students as the product produced by the program; how we structured the delivery system impacted their outcomes and everyone's satisfaction. I had been looking at this model on my own since the summer of 2014 and they had seen it during our first meeting. After our learning from the focus group, we revisited the model with new perspectives. We revised the model to match our experience as staff practitioners and delineated our degree of

influence with each quality meta-dimension (in Figures 7 and 8). We also returned to a

discussion of Feldman's article about student engagement.
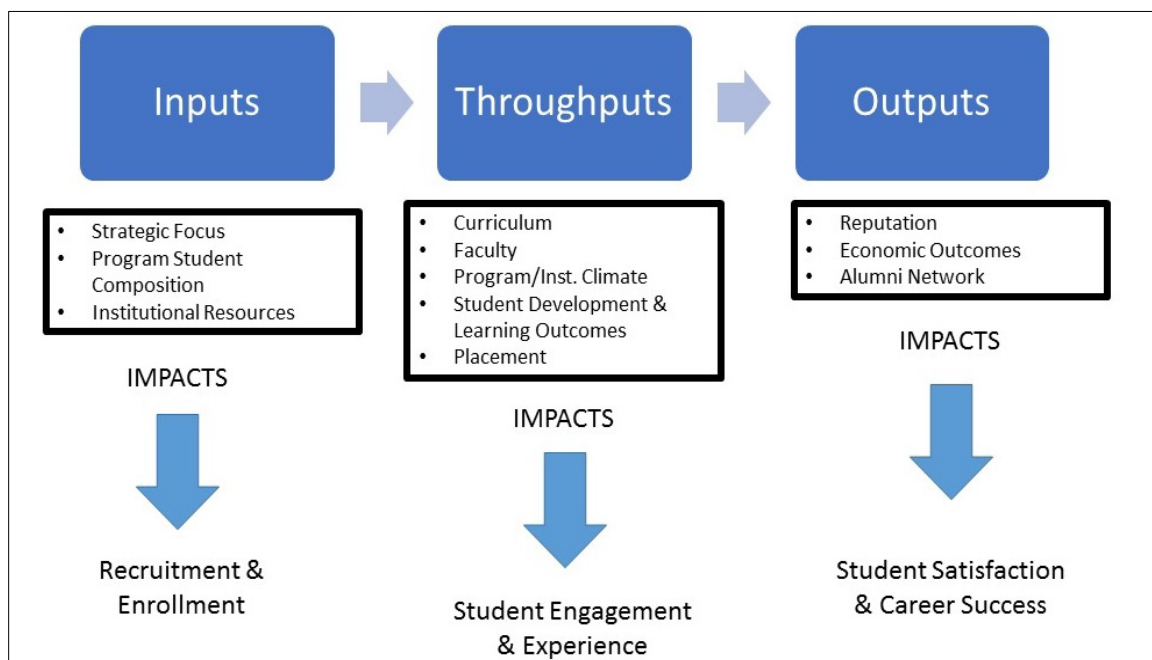
Figure 7. Open Systems Model Aligned with Quality Meta-Dimensions.

In Figure 7, the quality meta-dimensions are listed as organized by Rubin &

Morgeson, (2013). I remember that when I first shared this with the team in February,

there was little discussion as if they didn't know what to make of it then. This second

discussion was interactive, and many suggestions came out of it (in Figure 8) of how each

team member saw their roles, impacts, and even what meta-dimensions should be named.
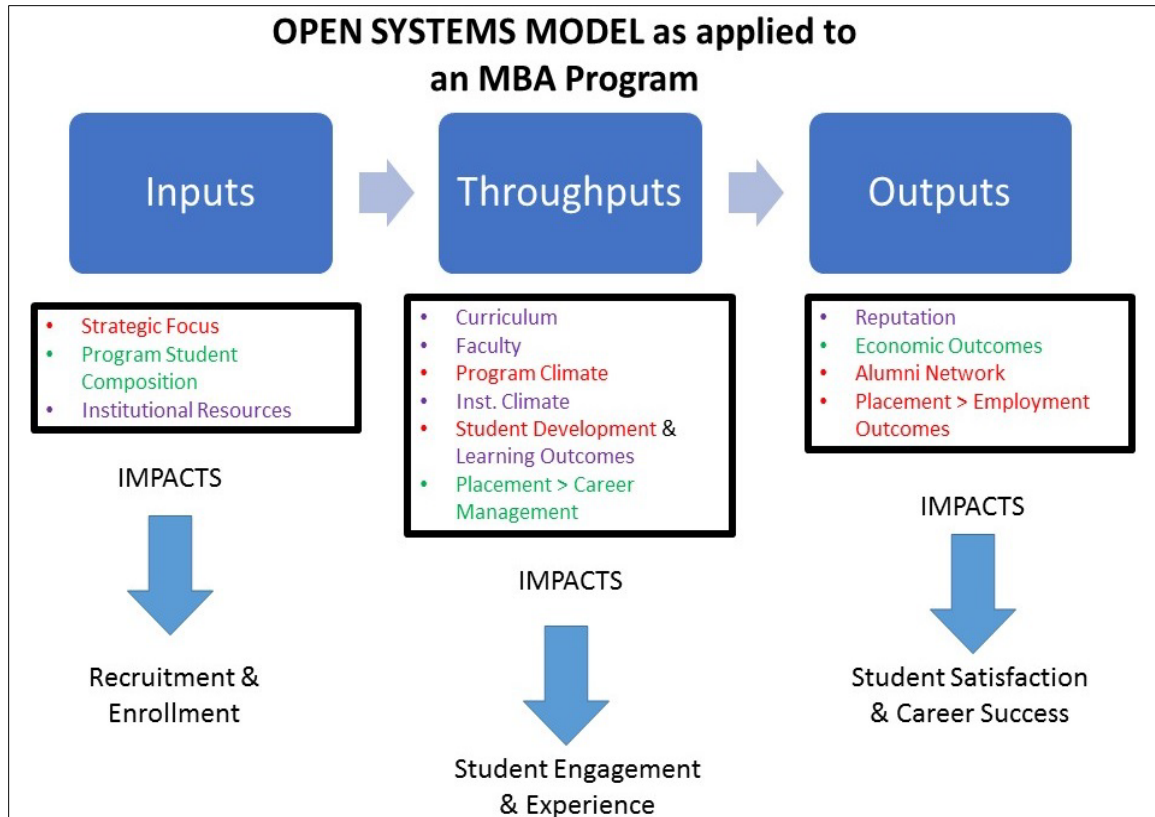
Figure 8. Modified Open Systems Model.

During this facilitated discussion, we agreed upon the factors we can impact within our own units (in green), the factors we can impact by working together (in red), and the factors we need to advocate for to those outside the group (in purple). There are more that we have to collaborate on and advocate for than ones each unit is separately responsible for. Also, Faith suggested that "Placement" in Outcomes needed to be divided into two terms: Career Management under Throughputs and Employment Outcomes under Outputs. Unlike Economic Outcomes, which speaks specifically to salaries, the group felt that employment satisfaction also needed to be considered. Faith also saw career management services as part of the throughputs, aligning her unit's work more closely with Mark's unit. Mark also suggested that Program/Institutional Climate be

separated into two factors. We can exert influence on program climate, but have significantly little influence over institutional climate at the college and the university level.

> The discussion in this session surprised me, in a positive way. I recalled how Team One didn't connect with this model and I entered the meeting worried that trying to discuss it this time would also fall flat. But the reverse happened, and even more surprising, each member was outspoken in claiming the ones they could influence, identifying what we shared responsibility for, and naming what needed to be changed. As this meeting happened, I remember happily thinking, "This conversation has never happened before."

Reflections on Collaboration and Leadership

There are three lenses with which to evaluate the "success" of these two teams: how they each exposed specific barriers to collaboration; to what extent each developed a community of practice; and my development as a leader and a facilitator with each team. In reviewing the work with each team, and my "performance" as a leader and facilitator, there are two questions to consider: How were the teams different in composition and behaviors and why? How did my position within the organization impact my ability to lead and facilitate each team? The dynamics of each team were affected by two primary factors: 1) my position within the organization at the time of each team's activity and 2) the environment in which we work.

Effective Collaboration

Kolb and Gray (2007) identify four factors that create success for collaborations: that "practitioners and scholars should maintain our focus on clear goals, realistic time frames, and sufficient resources, and additionally direct our attention to the ways in

which we can integrate individual and group goals and increase the level of engagement in collaborative projects" (p. 15). In comparing the activity of Team One to Team Two, they mirror my evolution as a facilitator and a leader and as a scholar-practitioner grappling with how to turn theory into action. Each team experienced barriers to collaboration, and each team experienced different successes.

Clear goals. In retrospect, though Team One helped identify gaps in the quality model and the meta-dimensions, the team struggled to understand what its goal was: was it to define or to measure quality? Its progress was stymied by my inability to set a clear goal and then facilitate working towards that goal. The transition between Team One and Team Two happened as my focus became clearer, from a macro focus on quality and rankings to a micro focus on engagement and program improvement. Team Two, formed during a time of organizational change, and when I had become more comfortable in my role as director and more confident as a senior staff member, capitalized on those changes and was task-focused from the beginning because the goal(s) were internalized and directed at program-level activities. Each team member benefited from the Quality Exercise and those discussions within each team did provoke insight for some team members that impacted their daily work.

Realistic time frames. The lack of a clear goal for Team One also meant that I could not provide a clear time frame for the work, and so after a few meetings, people were still unsure of the scope and of how they could contribute. Team Two, since it was task-focused, created deadlines based on student availability for focus groups and the dates of orientation and the fall programming to guide the implementation of the research and information we gathered.

Sufficient resources. My program director supported my project, repeatedly empowered me to make my dissertation a priority, and supported my use of staff time for the team meetings and project work, however, that support did not create more available time for people. Often, for both teams, people's daily work and commitments took priority. As Mark said during the work of Team Two: "If I am going to devote extra time to something outside of my daily work, it will be to my family." Since I had my own unit's deadlines and deliverables to meet, I didn't feel I could impose on people who were volunteering time they didn't have. Most members of both teams did not have time outside our meetings to engage in the literature or to assist with data gathering or analysis. With both teams, there were several mentions of Feldman's article during conversations and we started having frequent conversations about explaining The Why to our students. Team Two's discussions led to the realization that we were very good at telling them what we wanted them to do, but we also expected them to understand why doing it was important for them, for us, or for the program. Staff were more committed to following through and keeping each other updated on activities that impacted each other's work. Once we identified our tasks and goals, we collaboratively decided how to execute on each task and what the follow-up would be. Since the work of the team was designed to benefit each unit in the organization, there was complete buy-in to that process.

Integrate individual and group goals to increase level of engagement. Team One struggled to develop group goals for a few reasons. Two of the members were from outside the organization—a faculty member and a student—and so their professional goals did not align with the goals of individual units or of the program. The faculty

member' goals were teaching, conducting research, and managing an institute while working towards promotion, while the student's main goal was to complete her courses and graduate. The timelines for each of their work responsibilities did not match the timeline for the project or the staff work day. In retrospect, including people from outside the organization impeded collaboration because they didn't understand our work any better than we understood theirs. For Team Two, since all members were staff, finding a common purpose that benefited each unit was much easier. As a result, Team Two members were much more engaged in the project inside and outside of team meetings. I also found it very helpful that two team members had recently completed their own graduate programs. They had discussed their papers and projects with me, and now I was able to go to them for support and one-on-one conversations about my research process and their role on the team. These conversations gave me additional opportunities to explain action research—even as I continued to grapple with its ideas myself—and so, if nothing else, we were confused together.

Role Juggling: Insider-Researcher, Facilitator, Leader

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) detail the challenges faced by the insider-researcher and delineate the interdependent steps from first- to second- to third-person action research. My evolution as a leader within my unit and then within my organization grew in parallel to the scope and impact of this action research project. As a scholar-practitioner, my goal was both to effect change within my organization—to break down silos between units, improve collaboration, and empower senior staff—but to also generate "learning that is robust for scholars and useful for practice" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 8). The first cycle of my development and the development of the

project was first-person research as I gathered data about the organization, and the internal and external forces influencing it. This phase was also a process of "learning about oneself through [this] action" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 8) and it was through my work with Team One that I clarified the focus and scope of the project. Once both teams helped me identify the gaps in the quality model and helped me think through the relationship between quality and engagement, I turned my focus—and the project focus—inward, to those quality indicators over which we, as a team, might have influence.

The second phase, overlapping with the first, was the collaborative work with the teams—second-person activity—and this work, which for me took place inside and outside the team, was balanced against the demands of being an effective facilitator. As defined by Kolb (2014), facilitators "are expected to remain neutral on issues, be fair and balanced, and work for the group's interest rather than follow any personal agenda" (p. 134). With Team One, I started with preconceived notions of what the project could be, but failed to clearly define the goals and objectives for the group. With Team Two, after narrowing my focus, I was able to present the team with ideas and thinking and be open to their input. As one participant stated in their interview: "*Well if you were not so approachable as a director of a separate department because of your work here and recognizing where you were going, I would not have come to you. I would not have ever asked. I simply would not have.*"

The peer relationships on each team also influenced my ability to lead. With Team, One, the power dynamics negatively affected me and Mark. We were both new to our director-level roles, and Sheila, Kim, and Maura had been in there roles for several

years. Mark stated that he held himself back from discussing faculty-specific issues

because of Shauna's membership on the team. I was reluctant to oppose viewpoints

expressed by Sheila and Kim. Whereas with Team Two, Mark and I had grown more

comfortable in our roles and I was determined to support Faith when she stepped into the

career services director role. Her transition was an opportunity to break down another

silo. One interviewee stated:

> *I would say the thing that opened up most was just communication. I mean, the*
>
> *less inhibition about hey, this is happening, what do you think about this? We're*
>
> *all standing in a break room, talking about what's going on and how it can impact*
>
> *all of us, rather than running off and trying to handle it on your own and put your*
>
> *arms around it so that other people don't see that there may be an issue.*

They also attributed the changes we made as a team as part of a "*movement toward action*

learning, thinking a little bit about how the whole process works together."

Another participant who served on both teams stated in their interview:

> *So I feel like, I would say, from watching your leadership develop, the project has*
>
> *made us much more strategic. And I think you have stretched to sort of help ... I*
>
> *don't know, you've just become more of a resource for me as we wade through*
>
> *some things in terms of ... that aren't necessarily admissions. Before this came on,*
>
> *we were talking about ... me and working with Student Experience in our*
>
> *Leadership Fellows thing. And that's not really an admissions thing at all, but you*
>
> *had good insight into historically how we've worked that's helped. I think that has*
>
> *kind of grown out of this project. And learning more about what everybody's*
>
> *doing and how it all comes together.*

These statements from my peers and colleagues validated my effort and reassured me that we had, in fact, developed a team, a community of practitioners sharing knowledge and supporting each other. Working with two teams comprised of members from all three units helped bring about that change in myself, the project, and the organization. The work of Team One and Team Two improved our understanding of the connection between theory and practice.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research study was to create an intentional community

of practice to explore ways to improve cross-unit collaboration for staff in a full-time

MBA program. Over the course of two years, two action research teams comprised

mostly of staff, and including students and faculty explored their ideas and expertise

related to program quality and the how staff collaborated across their respective units.

Also during these two years, the researcher used a process of first-person action inquiry

to gain a better understanding of her own personal leadership development.

These research questions guided the study:

1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional

   community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?

2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?

This chapter reviews the findings from an analysis of action research team

meeting transcripts, critical incident interviews with team members, semi-structured

interviews with faculty, students, and alumni, and researcher notes, memos, emails, and

reflections. These findings, as displayed in Table 10 below, are organized around the key

themes that emerged through the data analysis for each research question regarding 1)

how an action research approach facilitated the conditions needed to improve cross-unit

collaboration, and 3) how I, as the insider-researcher, explored and made meaning of my

own leadership journey.

Table 10

Summary of Research Questions and Key Themes

Research Question	Themes
Research Question 1: How can using an action research approach support the creation of an intentional community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?	1. Overcoming powerlessness 2. Developing new skills 3. Improving reflective practice
Research Question 2: How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?	1. Learning from failure 2. Learning colleague-ship

Research Question One: Improving Cross-Unit Collaboration

Three themes emerged from the data for the first research question that explored

how an action research team could improve cross-unit collaboration within the program.

The themes were "overcoming powerlessness," "developing new skills," and "improving

reflective practice." Participants frequently used metaphors to describe their feelings and

experiences. I will explore each theme, its related metaphors, and provide illustrations

from the data that support these themes and connect them to the research study.

Overcoming Powerlessness

"I can't remember where the landmines are in this anymore, but they could be there."

Table 11

Metaphors for Powerlessness and Overcoming Powerlessness

Theme	Participant Metaphors
Overcoming powerlessness	Landmines, roadblocks, frog in the water, being blown in the wind; the ceiling has been raised, freedom to step on toes in a kinder way

When work with the first research team began, the focus of the study was to examine the factors that defined program quality, and to understand them in relation to our program. The first research team was comprised of five staff, including myself, one student, and one faculty member. The second research team began with five staff and one student and ended with four staff, including myself. Prior to the study, staff had many discussions about how to differentiate the program, or meetings about the specific tasks we were each working on, but we had not, to my knowledge, ever discussed the quality of our program, or what we each thought that meant. We also had never shared "inside information" about program challenges with students. Working as separate units, we each focused on our own tasks and issues. We had few staff meetings and they were structured around "reporting out"—one-way conversations—not sharing.

The research team meetings brought people together to discuss an abstract idea, program quality, something outside themselves and not directly related to their daily activities. This non-threatening approach enabled people to share perspectives, identify

challenges, and establish trust. Each team focused their discussions on the meta-dimensions of the program quality model. Focusing on an external idea helped people share how they felt about their place in the organization. But even then, for one participant, "*getting started*" was a struggle because they "*always look[s] at everything through the lens of people want our employment results to be better*" and acknowledged that they came at the discussions "*defensively*" because they worry that "*there's criticism in there somewhere.*"

Participants used several metaphors to describe their feelings of powerlessness. One mentioned looking for the "*landmines*" in how their work would be criticized and another participant asked the group what we could do about "*the roadblocks we put up?*" as a reference to the lack of cooperation the program often faced from other departments within the college. A third participant explained how they felt like "*the frog in the water*" because gradually they realized that "*the majority of your time is being spent on something that you're not measured for, that is taking time away from what you are measured for, and contradicting the other things that other people up and down the hallway are doing for the full-time MBA program.*" These metaphors illustrate that many staff experienced their work as something that could physically hurt them, and as a result, their responses to feedback and requests was reactive, not proactive.

Participants spoke to feeling constrained by how decisions were made and resources were allocated. As I explained the project and the origins of my ideas for study in the first meeting of the first research team, one participant started to laugh and told a story about attending a conference after joining the program.

Because I complained so much the first time I went to a conference and was

hanging out with another person who had also left my previous institution and we

were like, "We should come up with something to present," and he said, "How

about what it's like to leave a place that has everything and go to a place that has

nothing." Yeah, have we been whining too much?

Everyone in the room laughed at this story and it vividly expressed how powerless staff

often felt. Laughter can be used to deflect conflict, stress, and other negative feelings. In

this moment, shared laughter illustrates how staff cope with the limits they face. Another

participant referred to their experience on the first team as bringing "*out the*

powerlessness, I think, and the frustration that we all felt" because staff do not control

external measures of success, and as a result, feel like "*we're kind of being blown in the*

wind." For another team member, powerlessness derived from not being heard, from

one's input not being solicited or valued:

What became very clear during these discussions, particularly in meeting three, is

that as contributors to the group, all the individual roles that interact with the

program, is that we all have ideas about what should be considered or what

should be done or what should be being looked at. That input is not being heard

up the food chain.

In fact, in the second meeting of the first research team, I brought up some ideas about

organizational decline, in response to which, one participant stated, "*We're probably an*

organization in decline." Again, there was laughter, and no one spoke in disagreement.

For some, the first research team's discussions were productive and empowering.

One participant stated that there's "*not a lot of breakthrough material in here I don't*

think, so it made me feel more confident that we can tackle this. It was actually pretty empowering." Other participants also felt empowered by what they had learned from others. From the student's perspective, they found the discussions "*eye-opening*" and a "*learning experience*" because they were exposed to information about challenges the program faced that were not usually shared with students. For another member, participation on the team had broadened their perspective on their work, made them think about "*where do I contribute in this picture*" and also gave them the "*impetus*" to expand their efforts in a more focused way. For the junior staff member on the first team, they felt that participating on both teams had helped them "*operationalize*" their job: "*And then now it's crystal clear to me what my role is. Not that I was ever ... it didn't help me figure out what my role was but it helped me sort of visualize it and name it in a way that I hadn't before.*"

During the critical incident interviews, the student member and one of the staff members spoke to a sense of powerlessness in relation to other team members. One staff participant was new in their role and junior to other staff. They often held back from speaking because of their status in the group. They were particularly concerned about speaking up with a faculty member present and very concerned with how they would be perceived stating that they "*were a little reluctant to talk out loud, throwing stuff out into the room with [them] there because again, I'm still new in this role and I recognize that the faculty ... While I may disagree with some of the stuff, I still probably don't know the entire scope of what they're charged with.*" Another participant mentioned the difficulty of "*figure[ing] how to engage [the student]*" and felt that "*we talked over them too much.*"

Building trust also involves breaking down silos. One participant stated, "*Every time I've come out of my silo I guess I've realized how we can work together and how much of that probably gets missed.*" Another participant felt "*we were more siloed ourselves before the first time*" and described their experience on both teams as "*helping us be really clear about goals and how we can work together to make better things happen...That the outcomes they're [staff in other units] striving for can't be done alone.*" Discussions in the team meetings had a direct impact on communication outside of meetings because there was now "*less inhibition*" about discussing an issue and "*how it can impact all of us, rather than running off and trying to handle it on your own and put your arms around it so that other people don't see that there might be an issue.*" As another participant stated in the critical incident interview:

> *I feel like the ceiling has been raised. There's a freedom to look at things differently, ask questions that we didn't ask before, maybe step on toes in a kinder way, but stating things that we may not have said before, and I think that's important. I think that freedom ... What do they call that in the literature? The psychological security?*

Examining an idea in the abstract—quality—was the vehicle for creating a safe environment for staff to share perspectives, identify common challenges, and establish the trust needed to work more collaboratively. Overcoming powerlessness as individuals and as a group is a movement from internalizing issues and feelings to building a safe environment for those ideas to be shared and supported. The next two themes pertain to external expressions of action and communication.

Developing Skills

Table 12

Metaphors Related to Developing New Skills

Theme	Participant Metaphors
Developing new skills	Rowing the boat, blocking and tackling, the river is out of control, no marching orders, falling out of the plane, struggle to get our hands around it, manage the boat, unpack the themes, drilling down, power in naming

The second theme to emerge related to improving cross-unit collaboration was the idea of developing new skills. Once staff made steps to move past paralyzing powerlessness and started developing more trust, we were then able to develop the skills we needed to exert more influence and control over our environment. Creating this new "toolkit" that could be shared enabled us to better balance competing and conflicting priorities, and also to start thinking more strategically and in ways that considered the whole organization rather one unit of the whole.

As with the theme of powerlessness, staff used metaphors to describe the actions associated with using new skills: "*rowing the boat*" and "*blocking and tackling*." The discussions of the first research team established the groundwork for how staff thinking evolved with the second team. Both teams identified the same challenges: student performance, resource allocation, and lack of clarity with the program's strategic focus largely related to its having multiple constituents with competing priorities. One set of constituents was focused on reputation with certain priorities: central administration, the dean, the legislature. There was another set of constituents whose perception of our

reputation was derived from our student quality: alumni, employers, and the media rankings. The third set of constituents had priorities that are sometimes in opposition to the others, but whose needs drive program activities: faculty and students. As one participant stated, "*There's really almost a triple bottom line. It's very challenging to meet three different sets of expectations*." Without the skills to balance those priorities, program staff remain in "*survival mode*" and reacting rather than acting or being proactive.

> *The staff and the program director and everybody who's involved in operating the program is operating within this very resource-constrained environment and trying to do what they think is best for the program, what is demanded of them from the students, and what is demanded of them from the faculty.*

During the first meeting with each team, I asked them to complete an exercise by ranking the quality meta-dimensions from 1-9. After each person completed the exercise, the results were shared. This exercise generated good discussions and participants felt that it was "*informative to our work going forward in terms of really thinking about who values what and or why they might choose to value that.*" Another participant felt that "*it was a really simple and effective way to see that several of us were coming from very different perspectives*" and it gave them "*a better appreciation of how thoughtful, from a more longer term strategic perspective, that we're trying to be.*" The relevance of learning what people know and value was a sentiment shared by several participants, and one participant felt that "*talking through all that stuff and our conversations about what's important and how the individual pieces connect made me feel like we were asking the right questions … we're not as dysfunctional as I thought*."

In the fall of 2016 when the second research team formed, the program was undergoing another reorganization, employment stats for the graduating class were below expectations, and staff were handling a lot of negative feedback from students who were dissatisfied with some of their classes and faculty. Two staff members from the first research team continued with the second research team which added continuity. As the study progressed, the project focus was shifting from an external focus on an abstract idea, quality, to an internal focus on what aspects of the program they could influence to manage the reorganization and student dissatisfaction.

This was a shift from the abstract to the concrete. In the first meeting of the second research team, I began by explaining the project scope and focus, outlining definitions for community of practice, action research, and program quality. The student member, in their role as vice president for program improvement with the graduate business association, began the discussion in the first meeting of the second research team by asking how external organizations objectively evaluate program characteristics. One of their first questions was, "*Would you suggest improving the program from within?*" they then provided feedback about how students perceived the curriculum:

> *I've understood that much of the curriculum that's offered, they think it's pretty much siloed. They think these courses that exist are very much in buckets and they're not able to connect those courses to their concentration…As far as I know the faculty only teach them from their department's points of view.*

With these questions, one of our constituents was making a direct inquiry into an aspect of the program that directly impacted her experience. The staff present were some of the people charged with meeting student expectations. In fact, her concerns echoed those

voiced by the student member of the first research team, who had been the previous vice president for program improvement and had expressed their frustration with the curriculum by stating that: "*the departments here do whatever the hell they want and give us whatever professor they want*" which they felt could be *"both a resource issue and a lack of will."* As the student explained their issues with the curriculum, I thought, 'What tools did we have to address these issues?' In some ways, these questions triggered the team to react, focusing on a new "crisis. This time, however, the difference was that we had developed a mechanism and a process for weathering them: the collaborative environment created by the action research team. As a member of the second research said when interviewed, "*When the river's out of control, we can manage the boat. Let's just focus on the boat.*"

Without a mechanism for group discussions at a strategic level, issues remained open-ended. And without clear and consistent direction from senior administration over the years, the program had no "*marching orders.*" One participant stated in their interview, "*So much of what our 'strategic plan' is really an operational plan.*" But even though program staff at times lack direction from the top, they did think strategically, but within limits. One participant referred to this in their interview when we were talking about data-driven decision-making:

> *Potentially what we might have needed to do if we were really going to dig into things, which might not have been within the scope of their project, was potentially then go out and engage in that data collection and that analysis. That was not necessarily our charge, nor was it feasible I think for the group, given the constraints again that everybody is operating within.*

Within these constraints they also believed we could contribute to the strategic vision:

> *If we were truly able to spend the time to look at things and come up with a methodology and that was invested in, we could come up with a dollar figure, a head count, a budgetary amount, and a potential time period. We could say, 'With these three things involved, give us a shot at righting the ship and turning the ship around and moving things.*

The iterations of these discussions about quality and differentiation led to discussion about student engagement and helped the thinking of the team to evolve and expand into other topics. In the first meeting of the second research team, one participant contributed to a discussion about student engagement by asking:

> *The engagement piece is how you pull all of these things together, what I'm learning in class, can it be applied to business?... Even if I get the concept of I can see how that works, does the program provide experiential learning project-based work to put that to practice?*

This higher-level thinking was mentioned most often in interviews with participants from the second research team. One participant, who worked most often with alumni, and who was a member of both teams, witnessed the evolution of the teams' thinking and how it impacted staff cohesion and discussions outside the team meetings:

> *And actually, if I were to sum up the difference [between the two teams] I would say what I see is our senior staff taking more leadership, taking more ownership of the issues that we're dealing with, and finding ways to be more effective.*

Staff were empowered to tackle Big Ideas, "*unpack the themes,*" as one participant stated, and also to convey that thinking to the program director. Gaining this confidence, they

felt, evolved the teams' focus evolving from "*survey and opinion*" to having an "*action orientation.*" This transition provided her with a "*tremendous amount of insight and understanding*" in defining what we want and how the curriculum is dependent on its "*delivery system.*" They stated: "*So how do we work with the delivery system to get the things we want, and the behavior we want?*"

This sentiment was echoed by another participant who was a member of both teams. In their interview, they felt that the project had touched on "*the student cycle through the whole program*" and *"the project made us much more strategic.*" They also stated that the movement from the first to the second team was a movement from digging into the ideas with people who were "*idea generators*" to a more focused group of "*tacticians*" who could go out and do the "*blocking and tackling*" needed to implement those ideas. They also spoke about program matters from a systemic viewpoint by saying:

> *I feel like we have a better sense of what everybody's trying to do because the other thing that has sort of come out of working more closely with you is this fundamental understanding that, if you know what happens on the back end, it's easier for you to sell it and speak to it on the front end.*

Another participant on the second team, in their interview, mentioned how the research team's work helped them to see individual program activities and events as part of a process, rather than isolated pieces. Some events, like orientation, had become more "*collaborative*" and as a staff we were seeing each event as a "*doorway*" to the next. For them, this change had a lot to do with "*the movement towards action learning, thinking a little bit about how the whole process works together, and taking a step back rather than following in the processes that have always been in place.*" Becoming more strategic and

tactical as a group of staff was a process of "*drilling down*" on ideas and "*unpacking them*" because as one participant stated, "*You just can't fall out of the plane, right?*" This process helped the teams, and the program staff, "*narrow [their] focus to what we can do.*"

Narrowing our focus was a way to take charge—have agency—in declaring what our priorities were as a program, as a staff, and working together to determine how to set goals and accomplish them with the resources we had. It also meant shifting the team's focus from its internal processes to include an external focus. One participant stated in their interview that shifting to an external focus "grounded" the team and that an external focus is also important for an MBA program:

> *I mean, if we consider our students a product and our companies are customers, then we absolutely have to shift our focus from the internal to the external. Or we need to be going back and forth, I think, very fluidly, very flexibly.*

Our new skills—this new toolkit—generated from collaboration had its own power. As one participant stated when interviewed: "*I'm learning too that there's power in naming something.*"

Improving Reflective Practice

Table 13

Metaphors Related to Improving Reflective Practice

Theme	Participant Metaphors
Improving reflective practice	The ceiling has been raised, building with the end in mind, shuffled off to the next thing; building without the end in mind, ideas can go back in the oven when needed

The third theme to emerge from the data analysis was about how we as a team, and a program, improved our practice of reflection before taking action. In the first meeting for research team one, I began by explaining the project and that one of the goals was to "*develop a culture of reflection.*" One of the team members dryly commented, "*They don't know much about our culture, do they*?" Everyone laughed—in fact, meetings of the first research team were full of laughter—but the comment underscores the stressful climate for program staff.

After the process of working with two research teams, we had started to develop new skills for managing our actions. There was also an observable change in what we learned by collaborating and how we talked about it together. Suddenly, staff would congregate in the hallway to discuss an issue, ask for input, share information, or develop a plan or process to try out. In their interview, one member of both research teams stated, "*I'm not sure where the pivot point was with the second ... Was it just that we started coming together and putting our heads together on common issues?*" Participants on the second team also reflected on the benefits of continuing "*to meet and talk about issues,*"

as one stated in an interview. During another interview, one participant shared that we had changed the culture to be much more collaborative and those conversations "*were much more targeted. There are less conversations about things we'll never be able to change.*" In fact, they expressed a new confidence in program staff: *"it's not that we're the best, but I can't point to a limitation from what we have in terms of our team.*" This illustrates the confidence staff were gaining in shared expertise. This improved practice outside the teams grew out of coming together as a group to share expertise, integrate feedback, and develop a common purpose for effective action.

One way in which I observed how our thinking evolved was, again, through the metaphors used by participants when talking about the project outcomes: "*the ceiling has been raised*" and "*building with the end in mind.*" Building with the end in mind is what staff tend to do in their daily work because it is tactical and effective. However, on the research teams, that was not the case. One participant reflected in an interview that "*beginning without the end in mind is so contrary to business thinking*" and that "*it made the project bigger and more unwieldy and it just kept growing because different things kept feeding into it, but I think that's what makes it successful.*"

Team meetings established a new process for sharing perspectives and information about challenges, what one participant referred to as "*pain points…they're thinking through*", and also a means for sharing expertise. Just as we'd developed the ability to think more strategically by collaborating, it created a mechanism for problem-solving.

> *Our organization, I think we're much more strategic. And I mean that specifically in terms of, we sort of identify a problem and then we will sort of brainstorm, and*

> *then we will put something in place to address it. It doesn't mean we're always*
>
> *right, it doesn't mean we have the best strategy, but we name things better, we*
>
> *identify things better, and we throw something at it.*

This quote also illustrates the shift from people working in isolation and feeling threatened that they would be criticized or not heard to a culture where staff were comfortable experimenting with ideas together and comfortable being wrong in front of others.

In another interview with a participant from the second team, they reflected on our new willingness to inquire into our own practice:

> *There's a freedom to look at things differently, ask questions that we didn't ask*
>
> *before, maybe step on toes in a kinder way, but stating things that we may not*
>
> *have said before, and I think that's important.*

This participant also believed that by developing this collaborative culture and opening up communication between units, we would be better positioned to help each other grow as professionals. They also reflected that working collaboratively would help identify "*blind spots…that I don't see*" because of the tendency within the culture to "*work on our own little dynamic.*" They also saw how identifying a common purpose would be the next level of the project outcomes "*when we start recognizing all of those things that are strengths and weaknesses across the board, there may be more that can be done collaboratively that will benefit the program.*" We would be able to communicate about the blind spot and "*consider some sort of procedure, some sort of assistance, structure.*" The ability to ask for and accept help not only is evidence of established trust, but a willingness and ability to learn, to develop, and to share in a common effort, or purpose.

When speaking of their challenges, members of the first team referenced the amount of feedback staff received, often as criticism, from students and faculty, or other staff. As collaboration improved through communication, the willingness to seek feedback improved. In their interview, one participant said that "*ideas don't just sit*" because they "*can go to you, to Faith, and get real feedback…and if it needs to go back in the oven, it can, if it receives positive feedback from y'all I can go to the program director*."

Collaboration improved the impact staff had on students, too. By soliciting and integrating their feedback, we had moved from thinking about them only as products of the program, as if "*the students and their concerns are an afterthought*," to helping students feel more invested as members of a community. As one participant stated:

> *Much less about their evolution and professional development in a graduate program, it has been a tremendous improvement in seeing how these students are members of this organization whether they just pass through for two years or not, and helping them invest a little bit further in the college, in the MBA program, in themselves I think is the biggest thing that this project has impacted.*

As a staff, we expanded our perspective on our work to include developing our students as a community, not just individuals who we expect to perform well. We couldn't ignore our commitment to those outcomes, but we were more likely to achieve them if we saw students as our partners in the effort. A member of the second research team reflected that one important outcome of working more collaboratively was in finding ways to gather and make use of feedback from a broader swath of the student body:

This is how we've recognized we can most effectively do our jobs and go forward. The inputs that we get from our different constituents, we've always had some trouble getting a clear answer from students because we have the vocal ones and we have the ones that want to draw attention to certain aspects of the program, where there are too many quiet people that are maybe even the majority that don't get to influence the way things are done.

Staff also began to see their work as an iterative process, not linear, and that they were only able to reflect on the whole process at the end:

I think in so many really great projects, you have to be through them to go back and recognize what those things were, what those milestones were because when we were doing them, we just had head down, doing it, and not recognizing what would influence a change or take us off in a different direction. So that sort of backward look at everything kind of brought it all together, and I feel like that's what has to happen maybe in action learning because I think you have the idea of moving forward where you're going to go, but it wasn't until we revisited that we recognized that it didn't go where we intended it to go. It went in a little bit of a different direction, but more positive direction, and then started a whole direction from there. It is an iterative process, but I don't think you can see it until you're through it.

We had also shifted from what one staff member called "*a culture of last minute planning*" which negatively impacted perceptions of the program within the college to a more forward-thinking staff that better understood the student life cycle and was more strategic about planning and messaging to external constituents, including students. When

interviewed, a participant on both teams said that we were now doing "*what's necessary to move our program forward to the extent we can*." This same participant, in an interview conducted prior to the start of the first research team, mentioned times when they "*wished we had time to reflect on ways to improve that going forward. You feel like you were shuffled off to the next thing.*" They often used to feel like they were "*running around like a chicken with its head cut off.*" Through involvement on both teams, this same staff member realized that "*the questions I'm asking in my work definitely relate to the quality of the program.*" And finally, in an interview with a participant from the second team, they said:

> *As I said, I think the team will grow, and it will become everybody. Everybody will be part of this invested group of individuals for the success of the department. And I think there's a tremendous reward in seeing impact within, right? It will part of our work. Recognizing how other people are influencing outcomes, and how it's all related, gives it meaning.*

Summary of the Findings from Research Question One

The first research question examined how program staff improved collaboration and moved towards creating a sustainable community of practice by overcoming their feelings of powerlessness within the system, developing new skills to balance priorities and think strategically, and how they created a safe space to learn how to better share, reflect, and engage with each other to work towards common goals and desired outcomes. The data connected to the three themes that emerged—"overcoming powerlessness," "developing new skills," and "improving reflective practice" —illustrate how the teams' ability to communicate openly evolved and how each theme helped

individual members shift from internalizing issues and isolating problems to sharing

expertise through open communication. The language used by staff had shifted away

from "I" and to "we," inclusive of the group, and implying that we were better aligned in

our efforts.

Sustainable communities of practice form voluntarily or intentionally by

individuals occupying a shared domain who mutually engage on common issues and

problems, and through that engagement they develop a shared repertoire of knowledge. In

the case of this full-time MBA program, the cultural practices reinforced the thinking that

each unit was a separate domain without shared interests. By creating a space for

information and knowledge sharing, they began to see the connections between their

units and how their work, each event, activity, and action, was an interconnected process,

not a succession if isolated incidents. Creating a sense of community also provided staff

with emotional support and validation during a period of tremendous stressful change. As

the facilitator of the teams, and a director of one of the units, this was a challenging time

for me as well. What I learned from my failures and from my colleagues will be

examined using the data for research question two.

Research Question Two: Leadership Growth Using First-Person Action Inquiry

The second research question examined how the researcher developed as a leader

during the course of the study. In particular, the approach used for this self-examination,

or examination of self-in-context, was first-person action inquiry. How could a practice

of reflection that examined how the researcher related to the system and its members

inform her growth as a leader? By analyzing data from emails, researcher notes and

memos, and meeting and interview transcripts, the researcher identified two main themes:

"learning from failure" and "learning colleague-ship." In this section, I will explore each of these themes, provide illustrations from the data to support the findings, and connect these ideas back to the focus of the research study. I will begin with the theme "learning from failure." Though grounded in data, this section is a personal account, so I will try to balance "academic language" and reflection in the first-person.

Learning from Failure: "There is one golden rule in the dojo: Leave your ego at the door."

Personal context: Past and recent past. Failure is, if nothing else, humbling. One of the most useful skills from my years of martial arts practice and study was developing my awareness of when my ego was driving my actions. For me, ego is driven by the fear of not being perfect or doing everything perfectly. When I tested for my first degree black belt at the age of forty, I tested with one other person, a man younger than me who had been a wrestler in college. He was built like a bull—stronger and faster than me. For that entire day of the test, I would be competing with him. This meant that I was going to spend the whole day failing. I had trained for six years for this one day, and if I didn't have a solid mental strategy, I would fail. Fail the test and fail myself. What did I do? I gave myself permission to fail and focused on surviving—not quitting. And I did fail. He beat me at every challenge except one. At the end of the day, the only person bleeding was my friend and opponent (not because of me), and we both passed the test. For six years, my instructor had said to me, "Dee, you don't have to win. You just have to survive." Until the end of that test day, I didn't truly understand what he meant.

But I have often found it hard to apply lessons learned in the dojo to my "real" life, especially when it comes to ego. In analyzing the data for this section, I discovered

one overarching theme: failure to communicate. I embodied that theme through the two sub-themes for this section because they are connected to the importance of communication. Like any skill, communication needs to be practiced.

Role stress. Along with connecting past experiences to the present, during the course of the study, like all of us, there were personal issues to navigate. About halfway through the study, I drew a timeline because I wanted to see how the roles I play intersected with the project: daughter and only child, friend, employee, supervisor, team mate, colleague, and individual. During the program orientation in May 2014, my aunt died tragically from a fall, leaving my uncle and their daughter behind. My mother was greatly impacted by this as well. In 2015, a relationship ended badly. In 2016, a friendship ended badly. My mother was hospitalized twice in 2016 and twice in 2017, and had two procedures and one surgery the first time, and two surgeries and one procedure the second time. After the 2016 election, I lost three good friends. At the end of 2016 and through 2017, I had a few physical issues to manage, none of which I'd experienced before: a frozen shoulder, a bout of vertigo, recurring stomach issues, and loss of appetite. All of these happenings impacted my ability to attend to issues and responsibilities at work, and creating the timeline helped me be more mindful of my own context. I have added to the timeline as the project progressed. For me, it added perspective because I view the interpersonal conflicts as failures—failures to communicate well.

To create the version of the timeline seen below, I used paper, colored pens and pencils, and a ruler. I didn't find an electronic version of a timeline that would work, plus I enjoyed creating it myself the first time and re-creating for sharing here.

Flashback: When I was a child and spent afternoons at my grandparents, I would sit at the dining room table drawing with colored pencils. While my grandmother moved about the house in her apron and blue Keds completing whatever housekeeping task she did on that particular day of the week at that particular time, I would color and the only sound I remember is the sound my hand made moving across the paper on the flannel backed vinyl tablecloth. I have not used colored pencils in many years, but I keep them on a shelf in my office. It seemed fitting to use them for this exercise.
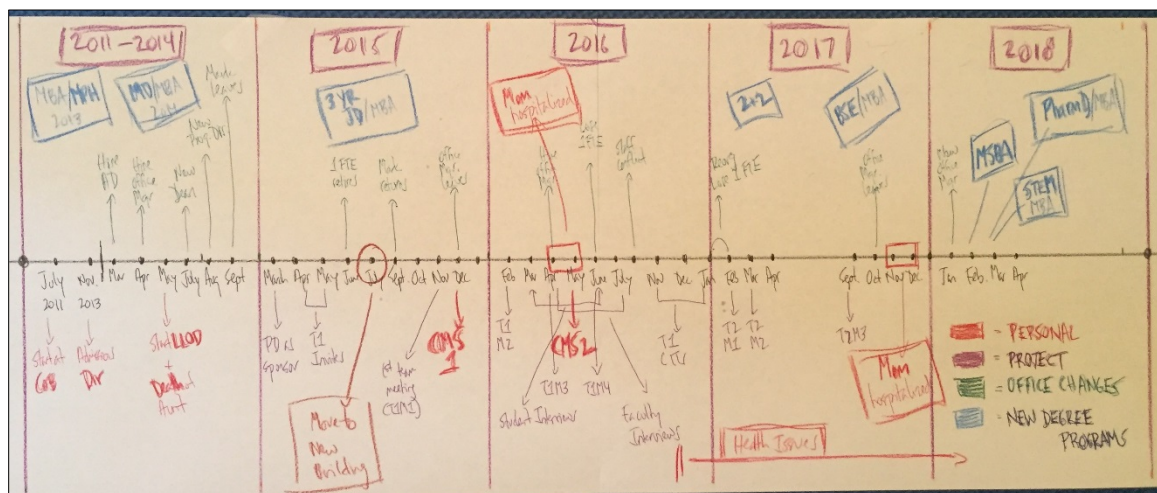
Figure 9. Timeline.

As I reviewed the data used for this section, I had to do something outside my usual practice: I had to think solely about myself. In fact, I am so clumsy at thinking about myself that I neglect to remember that, as a member of the system, I am just as likely to be a part of the problem or its solution as anyone else. This has been a humbling journey and as I prepared to write this section, I remembered something one of the team participants said in an interview:

I think in so many really great projects, you have to be through them to go back and recognize what those things were, what those milestones were because when we were doing them, we just had head down, doing it, and not recognizing what would influence a change or take us off in a different direction. So that sort of backward look at everything kind of brought it all together, and I feel like that's what has to happen maybe in action learning because I think you have the idea of moving forward where you're going to go, but it wasn't until we revisited that we recognized that it didn't go where we intended it to go. It went in a little bit of a different direction, but more positive direction, and then started a whole direction from there. It is an iterative process, but I don't think you can see it until you're through it.

If I turn the lens to look at myself, I see that being or becoming a change agent within my organization demanded that I become fully aware of my impact on others and that I needed to be fully present during my engagements with my colleagues. As I explored this theme of "learning from failure," I uncovered the gaps between who I thought I was or wanted to be and how I presented and performed. To learn from failure, I needed to develop my communication skills and improve my reflective practice. In the paragraphs that follow, I will provide examples of these failures and my inquiry into them.

As I begin this paragraph, I am thinking about how much time and space I have used framing this section instead if digging in to it. I do not like to talk about myself. What's that quote? "It's hard to see the picture when you are inside the frame." So I will delay a little more by looking at more artifacts.

Organizational context. Before I start analyzing my failures, I want to step back and describe the organizational context to frame the larger picture. One of the insights I gained from reviewing all the data and reflecting was how poorly we communicate as a department. The full-time MBA program had four program directors since 2000, and two since I arrived in 2011. All of those were also faculty with teaching and service responsibilities, so they were directing the program part-time as an overload.

Artifact one. When I started at COB, there were no departmental meetings. The current director was also overseeing the professional programs and teaching. Each unit ran itself; information was shared between unit directors and then down to staff within units. In an interview, a participant stated: "*And so he had to let us operate as little independent fiefdoms so that we operated without him.*" Under that director, we had one meeting a year, before the holidays, when he took us out to lunch. For the first of 2014, the department had no program director and then the current program director took over in August 2014. Under this director, we met once or twice a semester. Most recently, our newest staff member, after attending a few meetings related to programming and planning, pointed out that we do not run efficient meetings. If there is an agenda, we don't stick to it. No one takes notes and follows up on assigned tasks, meetings run over time, and they often wrap up abruptly because we all have to be somewhere else. In other words, we communicate poorly as a department because we don't know how and don't practice the skill. More telling? I had not realized that until she pointed it out. This was reinforced by remembering a conversation with one of the team participants. We discussed that we do not have regular meetings, which was an "ah-ha" moment for me.

Artifact two. I have two examples of communication failures at the organizational level and of the cultural disconnect between faculty and staff. One: Between March and April of 2016, several COB faculty were charged with collecting data about diversity within the college. A request for admissions data was sent to our program director who shared the request with me. I spent many hours compiling data manually and providing revised data sets, which were sent back to the faculty member through our program director. The faculty member did not communicate directly with me, to explain exactly what questions she wanted to answer, and I did not reach out to her. Why? It did not occur to me to cross the divide between faculty and staff. I relied on our program director to be that bridge—or buffer, depending on the situation—because he is primarily faculty, but also a member of the staff. Two: I interviewed the program director on November 1, 2017 to learn more about the program and its challenges and successes from his perspective. Prior to becoming program director, he had been asked to serve on the University's Program Review and Assessment Committee to review the MBA programs (a review completed every seven years). This was his first comprehensive exposure to the MBA program and he heard about faculty anger and frustration with the program and how it interacts with the rest of the college. For him, "*it was clear that there was a big disconnect*." This committee collected all their information and wrote their report about the program without talking to any staff. The report was shared with the current program director, who was asked to comment and respond, and it was not shared with staff.

Reflections on failures with Team One. I invited people to join Team One during the spring of 2015 and our first meeting was held in November of 2015. During

that summer, one staff member had retired and the program moved into our new building in July. Construction was not completed until the start of classes, so we shared space with the painters, construction workers, and audio visual technicians until the first day of classes, walking around ladders and carts and paint cans.

Failure number one. Between when the team was formed and its first meeting, I committed one of the worst communication blunders of my career, and certainly the worst since joining COB. To protect the privacy of confidential information in admissions, I was uncomfortable keeping the door open between the admissions suite and the rest of the program offices, especially from traffic by current students. I sent an email over the departmental listserv explaining my reasons and intent and closed the door. This email was not received well by some and it did not communicate my ideas in the way I had intended. In other words, I offended and hurt co-workers and some faculty who felt that I was excluding them. As I look back at it now, I was re-creating a silo that even I had professed should not exist. By wanting to protect my own space (ego), I acted without consulting others (ego), and caused a conflict and a headache for my program director. I never spoke directly to anyone about this before sending the email or after. Other communications were sent to students and staff to clarify how we should move about the suite. As I look back, I see this myself as this foolish person standing there all outraged that people are walking through "her" area (ego). I apologized to the program director, and he resolved the issues by running interference, (especially with any affected faculty), but the damage had been done. When the first team held its first meeting, that blunder was only two months old.

Leading with assumptions. I started a diary after that first team meeting. I made note of what I had done to prepare, shared in the meeting, and what I had sent in follow-up. During the meeting, participants asked questions about the project scope and goals, and in this entry I wrote:

> *It was interesting that a) I hadn't explained myself well enough or been heard well enough when I talked about operationalizing the model and b) that people in the room seemed to agree that we could go either way with the work.*

"It was interesting to me." Here is evidence that I assumed everyone would immediately understand what I was explaining and agree with my line of thinking. This is a second example of me thinking I was communicating clearly when I wasn't. I also noted that participants asked for more information "*all of which surprised me and for which I am very thankful.*" Had I really set the bar that low for my own colleagues that I didn't expect them to help me? I also made note of the fact that one participant stated that "*we want to do what will help you accomplish your goals.*" Before that meeting, I distinctly remember being concerned about how much I could ask of people and how much time they could devote to it. At the end of the meeting, when we discussed next steps and plan for future meetings, I said, "*I don't want to drive people into the ground.*" Participants agreed to meet monthly or more often to get work done, but then qualified that with statements about upcoming commitments. One participant stated, "*Let's not meet for the sake of meeting.*" I remember thinking that I needed to be mindful of people's time because they were already setting boundaries around their availability. But I didn't voice those concerns; instead I said, "We'll see what we can work around," which is a

sufficiently vague statement as to convey nothing about what I was really thinking. I think I do that a lot.

Hiding frustration. My memories of work with the first team are littered with tiny frustrations. To evaluate my perception, I reviewed emails that were sent and created the table below, so that I would have a visual and more objective measure of what each team had done.

Table 14

Emails Exchanged with Team One, November 5, 2016 – June 9, 2016

Date	Topic	Action
11/4/15	1st Meeting	Provided agenda in advance
11/5/15	Follow up email	7 attachments and a Doodle for next meeting; asked for feedback from team
12/8/15	Email to reschedule 12/9 meeting	I was unprepared; didn't want to waste people's time
2/3/16	Email to schedule a February meeting	Sent Doodle to schedule meeting
2/17/16	2nd meeting	No follow up from me; one participant had to leave early
3/26/16	Email to team	Created 10 Google docs, sent link and Doodles for April and May meetings
4/5/16	Email to team	Confirmed April and May meeting dates and resent Google doc link; asked for input about potential interviewees and received one response
4/5/16	Email from Lisa	Didn't see Doodle links for April and May meetings; not available due to case competition and vacation after graduating. Not available for 4/13 and May meetings after all
4/5/16	Email from Sheila	Not available for May meeting date due to schedule change
4/5/16	Email from Kim	Will be at case competition with Lisa on 4/13
4/5/16	Email from Kim	Able to join 4/13 meeting by phone
4/13/16	Email from Shauna	Will not make meeting at all because other meeting running over
4/13/16	3rd meeting	This is the day after my mother was hospitalized; one participant called in, one absent
5/7/16	Lisa graduates	Leaves team
5/18/16	Email to team	Asked to reschedule: 2 people cannot attend and I needed to prepare for CMS 2 defense and dissemination presentation
5/19/16	Email to team	Confirmed meeting for June 7
6/6/16	Email to team	Meeting reminder
6/7/16	4th meeting	Shared dissemination presentation for feedback; one participant late and had to leave early
6/9/16	Email to team	Meeting follow-up sharing interview protocols for input

Between the first and last meetings of the first research team, I exchanged 18 emails with them. What I see is our collective pattern of "busy-ness" that often meant I was unprepared and some participants were absent, arrived late, or left early because of other commitments. When I reflect on that now, I see my unpreparedness as an expression of my frustration with our lack of "progress" as a team. After the first team adjourned, I compiled a document of narratives from each meeting and included a short summary of each. My summary for the second meeting uses some language that hints at this frustration (in bold):

> *Most of the time was spent **going back and forth** about how to define or measure each quality indicator and understanding the difference between the two, the goals of the project, then deciding how to work on evaluating the PQM, deciding to work on it virtually in a Google doc, and trying to understand what I needed for this project, and I **spent my time trying to explain our goals with examining quality more than sharing info**.*

But I know that I never spoke directly to anyone about how I felt. After the third meeting, I was very frustrated with the team, and also with myself. I wrote:

> *This meeting was really a wasted opportunity. [One participant] came prepared and started off the discussion. [Another] was on the phone, but later admitted she couldn't hear anything, and the recording got stopped accidentally when I got a phone call during the meeting. But essentially, no one had worked on the task, was prepared, and the meeting lacked a clear direction, and frankly, I didn't know what to do.*

"The meeting lacked a clear direction." Reading this now, I reacted by thinking: Was it supposed to lead itself? Apparently, at this point in the process, I couldn't point the finger at myself for why the team was stumbling even when I was writing this reflection for myself and to myself. Also interesting was a statement made by one participant near the end of this meeting: "*We're here. We haven't done anything useful yet, but we're here*." The missed opportunity in this meeting was right here, to hear this participant's acknowledgement of our apparent lack of progress, which must have been a concern for her. This was an opening for me to acknowledge my frustrations, and be honest about feeling like the project was stuck. Because I was uncertain about my project focus and failing as a facilitator because of it, I stayed silent, externalized those frustrations and projected them onto others.

Self-deprecation. In reviewing the transcripts for all team meetings, I noticed a pattern of self-deprecation, especially in meetings with the first team. I used self-deprecating language to undercut my credibility and the importance of the study. I use self-deprecating humor frequently with staff, during presentations to prospective students or others. It is a very long-standing bad habit. It is a very hard habit for me to break. When my colleague pointed it out to me last week, immediately after I did it this time, she was right to do so, and it reminded me of an exchange I had with my karate instructor several years ago. I was working with a partner practicing a technique, and I was making mistakes. I was focusing on the mistakes and how frustrated I was getting and not the technique itself. He stopped me and said, "*Stop. Now do it again, without the angst.*"

In team meetings, the self-deprecation seems to be used to mask my lack of confidence in the study. So I used language to down play the importance of what I was saying. And I didn't waste any time. At the beginning of the first meeting, I said:

*It's designed to be an action research project, so alongside traditional research, this is a workplace based project that will involve a community of practice, of people, of individuals, **hopefully you folks**, will be the ones, **unless you quit after you leave today**.*

Shortly after that statement, I said:

*Now **I have more data than anyone wants to look at today**, which is why I didn't want to overwhelm people or just give you too much to do because we all have so much to do.*

Looking at it now, I think I was embedding self-deprecation in my language to hide my fear that my colleagues would not support and help me. I repeatedly told them they didn't have time to work on the project which gave them permission to attend to other priorities. So I undermined myself from the start. I tried very hard to ask participants for input in feedback during meetings and in email communications, but I sent conflicting messages with this misplaced humor. In spite of that, participants still endeavored to be helpful. In the second meeting, one participant said, "*We need some actionables. We're trying to figure out what our next steps are for you.*" In fact, in the first meeting, one participant tried to engage me, as an equal partner, and with humor. They were completing the Quality Exercise, and I was slow to complete it and she said, "*You have to be able to do the things you want us to do.*" When I step back and look at this data now, it seems like

my team members continued to try to be helpful while I slowly gave up on myself and on them.

With the second research team, I came across more confidently, and I only find evidence of similar self-deprecation in two places in the first meeting transcript where I used the word "little" in reference to the meeting agenda and the project definition document I provided each team to frame the study for them. "*I have a little agenda*" and "*What my project is this other little page here.*" Why was I more confident with this team? In retrospect, I think the power dynamics of the first team held me back. Two if its members dominated discussions. I was unable to facilitate in a way that tempered their strong personalities and my conflicted relations with both of them outside the team. I see the evidence of this in the MBA Admissions Diary that I kept during the study. For the most part, I recorded facts and information about what was happening in the program. I tried to document those events so that I would remember the context of what the department was going through in parallel to the team dynamics. In an October 11, 2016 entry, I referenced a meeting with myself and other staff about social media and other ideas.

> *As the four of us talked together about solutions that would really solve the problem, it occurred to me that two of these three people are my real action research team. These are the people I go to for help and support and they make things happen ... plus, they are fun people to work with.*

I realized when writing that entry that the research team was comprised of the people I thought should be on it at the time. When it became too difficult for me to successfully facilitate those meetings, I turned away from the problem and moved on to another team

of people with whom I was comfortable and with whom I had established trusting

relationships. I took the easy way out because I had lacked the self-awareness in the

moment to avoid my own landmines. Though I exchanged a similar number of emails

with the second team, and exhibited the same failings, my feelings about my experience

with that team are more satisfactory because of my pre-existing positive relationships

with them.

Table 15

Emails Exchanged with Team One, January 31, 2016 – September 5, 2017

Date	Topic	Action
1/31/17	Email to team	To select 3 meeting dates for the spring to meet monthly
2/17/17	1st meeting	One member not present, but followed up in person
2/17/17	Email to team	Follow-up email with 4 documents: project definitions, quality dimensions, interview protocols for input
2/18/17	Email from Shara	Asked to meet about program climate survey
2/22/17	Email from Shara	Asked for input on survey questions
3/15/17	Email to team	Asked to reschedule; didn't prepare because of R4 deadline
3/22/17	2nd meeting	
3/24/17	Email from Faith	Ideas about how to structure focus groups; discussed over email
3/24/18	Email from Faith	Sharing PPT of vision for her unit for input
4/10/17	1st focus group	Met with students about programming gaps
4/11/17	2nd focus group	Met with students about programming gaps
4/13/17	Email to team	Unable to hold April meeting due to other commitments
4/17/17	Email to team	Sent Quality Exercise for them to complete
4/17/17	3rd focus group	Met with students about programming gaps
4/18/17	4th focus group	Met with students about programming gaps
4/21/17	Email to team	Focus group summaries for review and discussions
4/24/17	Email from Shara	Sent results of program climate survey
4/24/17	Email from Monica	Sent Quality Exercise results by email
5/5/17	Shara graduates	
6/25/17	Email to team	Sent Rubin chapter; asked for input about team process and learning and on Rubin chapter
7/4/17	Email to team	Sent results of Quality Exercise for both teams for input
9/5/17	3rd meeting	Debrief about programming changes; adjourning team; Monica unable to attend

As I transition to this next section, and in preparing to write it while I "slept on it" last night, quotes spoken by my colleagues during meetings keep floating to the top. Though two of them were spoken in reference to our work with students, the meanings of all three quotes ricochet back at me, and at us, as a group. In an interview, one participant stated, "*Students don't understand the value of repetition*" and another participant stated in their interview, "*They don't know what they don't know*." The third comment was made in reference to our group process when a participant reflected on the "*power of naming*" something. If I think about these quotes in relation to my efforts to be a change agent and grow as a leader, the evidence shows that I have not learned much from repetition except to keep making the same mistakes. I know that to break habits, I must change my behavior. Learning about what I need to change through analyzing the evidence was an important step for the rest of my leadership journey. Leadership is also about how well one works with others. In this section, I will explore how I have come to understand my role and responsibility in being a good colleague.

Learning Colleague-ship

I take the phrase "learning colleague-ship" from Judi Marshall when she stated "living life as inquiry is not something we often do well alone" (Marshall, 2016, p. xx). We have to be willing to work with those who will question us —friends willing to act as both friends and enemies (Marshall, 2016, xx). From an analysis of interviews with colleagues who participated on the research teams, and reflections on other interactions with them, I will discuss examples that illustrate how I am learning to be a better colleague. I will also provide examples of what I have learned from them.

Not an admissions problem. When I started at COB in 2011, the mantra was "that's not an admissions problem." Historically, the admissions office had been the catch-all for inquiries when the staff size was much smaller and functions and responsibilities were combined. Since the separation into three units, admissions staff worked to focus on their core mission: to recruit, select, and enroll a qualified class. On the surface, that makes sense. In reality, it lent itself to creating silos and inhibited collaboration, especially around programming and events that impacted all units. When I became admissions director, I still knew the office had to adhere to that mission closely to succeed, but I also believed there was a need and an opportunity to provide support to other staff to help them succeed. In a program of our size, collaboration across units would be a key to improving our culture and the student experience.

Supporting others' success. As stated earlier, the research team meetings provided a space and time for program staff to share information, expertise, challenges, and provide support with problem-solving. One of my first "ah-ha" moments occurred during an interview with one of the participants on the first research team. As one of the more senior people on staff, they possessed a lot of institutional knowledge and I was learning to value her insights more and more. We were discussing whether or not our team had successfully created a community of practice and her response encompassed the staff as a whole entity. The team meetings had "highlighted" the need for regular staff meetings. They continued:

>*just for communication and understanding of what's happening in each*
>
>*department, what level of what they know about student perceptions of the*
>
>*program, where we're falling down, where we need to do things, where we can*

support each other. I think communication is something that we generally lack...

but maybe as a group, as a team we should do it ourselves.

I remember thinking as they spoke, "*Here I am, one year into this study on improving cross-unit collaboration, and it has never occurred to me that we, as a senior staff, should give ourselves permission to meet.*" When I interviewed this participant after the adjourning of the second research team, we revisited this topic. I referred back to the previous conversation, told them that I'd heard their idea and had mentioned it to others. I wanted them to know I gave them credit for the idea. Their response was disarming:

I thought about that for a long time, and just didn't ... I never know how I come across to the group. So I don't want to be pushy, and I have a tendency to bulldoze with ideas. So I just wanted that to kind of bubble up. And I was really delighted that you kind of went forward with it. I saw you hear that.

For me this was a moment when perception met reality and we were able to see each other more clearly than we had before. From this point, I started to appreciate them even more as a colleague and valued what I could learn from them in a way I hadn't before. In this small effort to help an idea grow, I felt appreciated in return. Later in the interview, they stated that the project had "*helped [me] emerge as a leader.*"

Another participant from both research teams was also able to offer up a longer view of our work together. They referred to the change in approach by the admissions office because I had "*stretched admissions into the other areas ... and beyond what has traditionally been admissions into, now we sort of come to you with like ... these behavioral issues, or we're seeing this problem*" They connected my development as a leader to how the "*project has made us much more strategic.*" In addition, they felt that I

had "*become more of a resource for me as we wade through things in terms of...that aren't necessarily admissions.*" It was also validating that they gave "*kudos to the project*" for "*bring[ing] everybody and let's get some perspective and let's see where we're at. In some ways that grew out of the project team, I think, the collaboration.*" This statement demonstrates the interdependence of our leadership growth and the improved collaboration between units.

I discussed another example of how being a better colleague created a bridge between the team meetings and our work together when interviewing another participant of the second research team. They recalled a time outside of the project context when they had asked myself and another staff member to lunch to help them talk through an issue. They had an issue, but no solution and I knew that helping them succeed would benefit the whole team. After listening to them explain the situation, I remember just trying to make a point of affirming that the problem was a real problem, but that they should also feel empowered to offer up solutions. They said:

> *I don't think I ever would have asked for a change if you didn't say, "You have to ask. You have to put it in terms others will understand, and outline different ways that you could move forward."*

They admitted that before the lunch, their thinking was to "*create a new silo*" and after the lunch they were able to present two options to the program director and discuss both with them. In my response to them in this interview, I offered a reflection that I hadn't noticed until now. It's hard to condense, so I will quote the bulk of what I said:

> *I have to examine that too because I think at the time with that [first] team, I was really looking higher level, like I was like, "We're going to look at program*

quality, we're going to use this to assess our ... We're going to develop a way to assess our program differently." It was really high level, and it wasn't working. Like it just was so big that people didn't really know how to make it work at the level that we're dealing with every day...So I didn't know where to go, and so as I kept developing the ideas of the project, I started to look, thanks to my advisor, too, but sort of look at it more like ... She suggested what about this cross unit collaboration piece, and what about this leadership development piece, which made it something within our sphere of influence. It brought this team down to what can we influence, and then what can we do. It became much more task oriented, and in some ways for me, much more positive. Let's find a way to do something, and you task the team with the focus groups, which I think was really the linchpin, the catalyst for a lot of other work together. Then we came back ... I mean, in that last meeting that we held, we were looking at the open systems thing again. For me, that was a great conversation, like really to go back and then look and see what we could do, and what we couldn't do, and sort of how that all connects.

Though long, this quote encapsulates the action research process for me. At this point in the study, the project focus had shifted, the methodology shifted, the teams had changed, and though nothing had moved forward in a linear fashion, I truly thought we were making forward progress as a team to change the way we worked together. Most recently, three other interactions helped make me more aware of my role and responsibility within the organization and each incident occurred at a different level of the organization and spoke to three of the roles that I occupy: employee, peer, and supervisor.

Employee. One day in mid-February, I had lunch with the program director to discuss the launch of a new degree program. Near the end of the conversation, they surprised me with two statements. One was that they viewed me as a leader in the organization and that they relied on me for that leadership. The other comment was caught me off guard it was so unexpected. They advised me to take care of myself instead of always taking care of others. I'm still sitting with that because it was such a thoughtful statement and not something I expect to hear at the office.

Peer. I have worked with one member of our staff since 2012 and so we have grown to know each other pretty well. It was their comment one day at the end of February helped me see the self-deprecation in the data that I shared earlier in this section. It was a simple exchange, really. I made a self-deprecating remark in front of others, and they told me I should stop doing that. To be a better colleague to them, I need to follow their advice. This analysis, and their comment, helped me see how I am pulling all of down when I do that.

Supervisor. In January, I hired someone to fill the office manager role in admissions. This is the fourth person I've been responsible for hiring and supervising. They are new to the team and I am trying to pay attention to how the associate director and I make space for them to be an equal contributor to our little team. It's my responsibility to help them develop professionally. To an extent, this also means I need to keep up and be open to new ideas. For example, last week they recommended we coordinate our work using Trello and Slack. I signed up for accounts so that we can improve the way we work and collaborate.

Summary of Findings for Research Question Two

The second research question examined how first-person action inquiry could be used as a framework for examining my growth as a leader during the course of the research study. The specific question was: How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth? Through an analysis of meeting and interview transcripts, researcher notes and memos, and emails, two themes emerged regarding "learning from failure" and "learning colleague-ship."

The data suggest that using first-person action inquiry enabled me to engage in a deeper process of self-examination and self-awareness through a reflective practice that analyzed my relationship to the system and the individuals within my organization. It helped me gain a better understanding of how I handle role stress, how I can work to improve my communication and facilitation skills, and continue to be a helpful colleague. When I loaded trucks for UPS 20+ years ago, one of their slogans was, "Communication is the Key to Our Success." I've never forgotten that slogan and after this study, I have a deeper understanding of how important good communication is. Because a leadership journey never ends, these "findings" are really a beginning.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

This action research study was prompted by the challenges a small full-time MBA program at a large Southern university faced with enrollment and employment outcomes. The purpose of this action research study was to create an intentional community of practice to explore ways to improve cross-unit collaboration for staff in a full-time MBA program. Over the course of two years, two action research teams comprised mostly of staff, and including students and faculty, explored their ideas and shared their knowledge related to program quality. These conversations created space for staff to talk about their challenges and led to better conversations about shared challenges and opportunities for increased collaboration. Also during these two years, the researcher used a process of first-person action inquiry to gain a better understanding of her own personal leadership development. The researcher investigated these questions:

1. How can an action research approach support the creation of an intentional community of practice and contribute to improved cross-unit collaboration?

2. How can using first-person action inquiry guide leadership growth?

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings from Chapter 5, then presents two conclusions based on those findings. This chapter also discusses implications for future practice, makes recommendations for future research, and concludes with my reflections on the study. The first research question examined how program staff improved collaboration and moved towards creating a sustainable community of practice by

overcoming their feelings of powerlessness within the system, developing new skills to balance priorities and think strategically, and how they created a safe space to learn how to better share, reflect, and engage with each other to work towards common goals and desired outcomes. The data connected to the three themes that emerged—"overcoming powerlessness," "developing new skills," and "improving reflective practice" —illustrate how the teams' ability to communicate openly evolved and how each theme helped individual members shift from internalizing issues and isolating problems to sharing expertise through open communication. The language used by staff had shifted away from "I" and to "we," inclusive of the group, and implying that we were better aligned in our efforts.

The second research question examined how first-person action inquiry could be used as a framework for examining my growth as a leader during the course of the research study. Two themes emerged from the analysis: "learning from failure" and "learning colleague-ship." Using first-person action inquiry enabled me to engage in a deeper process of self-examination and self-awareness through a reflective practice that analyzed my relationship to the system and the individuals within my organization. It helped me gain a better understanding of how I handle role stress, how I can work to improve my communication and facilitation skills, and continue to be a helpful colleague.

Three conclusions were reached: 1) fostering reflective practice within a performance-focused organization leads to improved collaboration and empowers staff as leaders; 2) first-person action inquiry develops greater awareness of how an individual influences and is influenced by the surrounding system; and 3) the importance of viewing quality as a process. This research contributes to the scholarship and practice of

leadership development and organizational change by attempting to bring three lines of inquiry and research together: communities of practice, first-person action inquiry, and quality in full-time MBA programs. The study illustrates the challenges encountered when attempting to develop reflective practice and team learning within a performance-focused organization and explores the conditions needed for creating a sustainable community of practice within a business school setting. The study also illustrates the complexity of being an effective change agent and in breaking down organizational silos and leads us to examine what determines "quality" in first-person action research.

Fostering Reflective Practice Improves Collaboration and Empowers Staff

Our understanding of communities of practice continues to evolve as researchers and scholars experiment with how, where, why, and when they are practiced. Wenger's definition of community of practice evolved over time with his own practice. Wenger (2000) defined communities of practice as "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise" (p. 139). There are three crucial characteristics: 1) they share a domain of interest, 2) they engage in joint enterprise, and 3) they share knowledge and expertise (Wenger, 2000). In another 2000 article, Wenger and Snyder focused their discussion on communities of practice within companies and pointed to three reasons for why they were not more prevalent at the time: 1) the term was new to business "vernacular," 2) only a small number of companies were experimenting with them and 3) "the organic, spontaneous, and informal nature of communities of practice makes them resistant to supervision or interference" (p. 140). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) next discussed the role CoPs played in developing knowledge strategies that would help the organization execute business

strategies (p. 7). For businesses, communities of practice play a role in both sharing

knowledge (an internal-facing activity), but also in stewarding knowledge (an external-

facing activity) for the larger organization (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, p. 14).

Ancona and Bresman (2007) argued that external facing teams (x-teams) functioned best

using a distributed leadership model. These x-teams share knowledge outside the team,

and they also promote their ideas through advocacy and ambassadorship.

The majority of the literature examined for this study explored communities of

practice comprised of faculty, two focused on IT and library staff, and one study

examined university-community partnerships. There were six common factors that can be

applied to the challenges faced within this study:

1. Attention to and resolution of power dynamics and differences (Annala &
   Makinen, 2017; Hart et al., 2013; Hong & O, 2009)

2. Development of a shared sense of ownership and common identity, goals, and
   purpose (Cox, 2013; Hong & O, 2009; MacPhail, Patton, Parker, & Tannehill,
   2014; Strean, 2016; Loertscher, 2011)

3. Alignment with the goals of the larger organization and support from the
   larger organization (Mak, 2015; Yang & Williamson, 2011)

4. Individuals must find value in the learning and commit to remaining engaged
   over time (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2015; Strean; 2016; Yang,
   2009)

5. Importance of interpersonal connections that promote professional
   development (MacPhail et al., 2014; Yeo, 2016)

6. Cultivate the ability to navigate differences and appreciate diversity of thought and experience (Strean, 2016; Yang & Williamson, 2011)

These same factors, if not overcome, can limit the success of a community of practice. This study shows that each of these factors can be mediated or facilitated using an action research approach.

Action research and first-person action research, as discussed by Coghlan and Brannick (2014) and Marshall (2016), are both concerned with enacting change within organizations. To name and work towards achieving a desired future state, an organization must understand their current state and what they want to change. The cycles of action research guide this process by creating the space for a group to identify their shared challenges, (current state), and develop common goals and purpose (desired future state). This pre-step, as discussed by Coghlin and Brannick (2014) creates the foundation for the actions and interactions that follow. To achieve a desire future state, the members of the CoP must engage in action research cycles to plan for and work towards their desired future state for the CoP and the larger organization.

First-Person Inquiry Develops Greater Awareness

Marshall (2016) approach to "living life as inquiry" explicitly integrates first-person inquiry with systemic thinking. Her approach is informed and bounded by her life as an "entangled academic" and a qualitative researcher (Marshall, 2016, xvi-xvii). Her approach is relational and a person is always operating within a context and her inquiry approach is "about living out systemic thinking" (Marshall, 2016, xviii) and she argued "how the research is framed is also influenced by the specific context within which it is conducted, and the issues of power that operation across it" (p.5). Her systemic view as

an action researcher parallels Senge's (2006) systems approach to personal mastery and team learning to enact organizational change. Like Marshall (2016), Senge (2006) argues that the individual is not a separate entity from the system in which it is located; rather, it is both influenced by and an influence on the system (p. 75). Each individual is part of the feedback process, not separate from it (Senge, 2006, p. 77-78).

Importance of Viewing Quality as a Process

When seeking to effect organizational change that benefits internal stakeholders and also satisfies the demands of external stakeholders, it is important to differentiate the desired product from the process used to achieve that product. By placing value on the quality of interpersonal interactions (engagement) within the organization, we are effectively that to achieve success defined by external measures of quality (such as GMAT/GPA, percentage employed at graduation, at three months, and average salaries, for example), organizations must view quality as an iterative and ongoing process internally. Doing so enables internal stakeholders to focus on the quality of their experience with the organization and their interactions with each other. The figure below reflects this view of a system within a system.
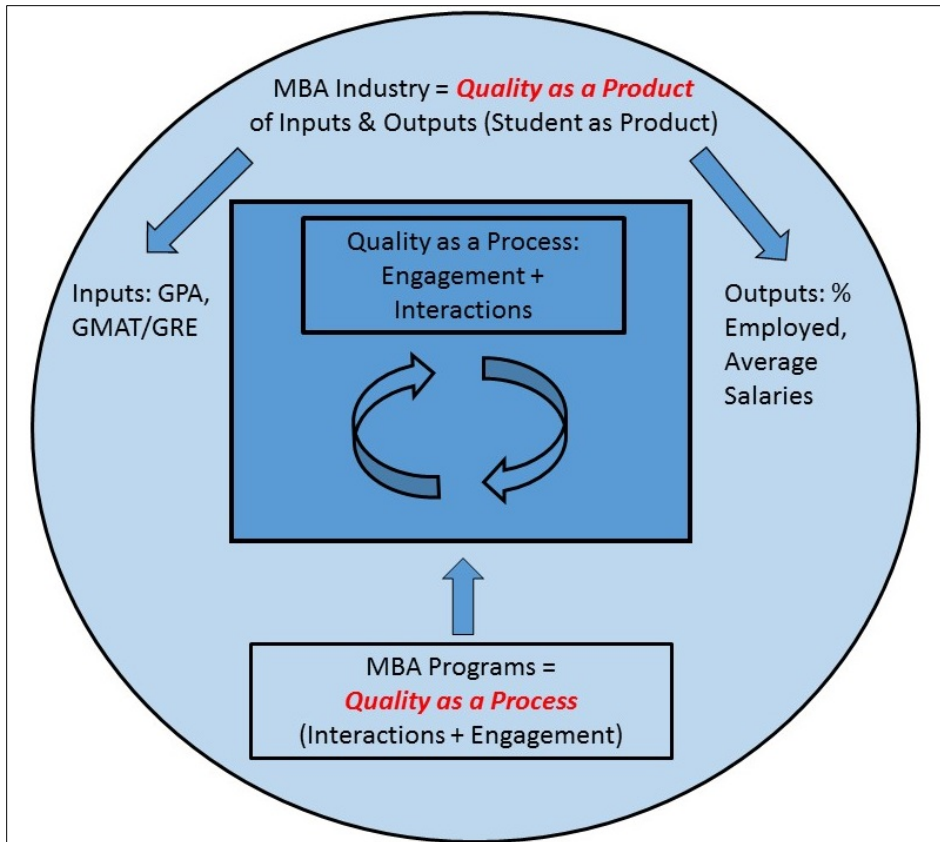
Figure 10. Quality as Process (Internal) and Product (External).

Taking a systemic approach to first-person inquiry enabled me to understand my impact on the system and my role in it. Before the study, I had bystander's view of the program, which kept me at a safe distance from taking ownership of my role and responsibility to the system. Once I broadened my perspective, I began to see how my failures impacted the organization and my professional growth. I also began to identify ways in which I could become a better colleague and use that awareness to alleviate some of my role stress and conflict.

Learning to view the program as a system of interconnected processes enabled the team to understand that quality is a process, not an abstract entity to be studied separate from our individual and group actions. Our discussions concluded that many of the meta-

dimensions of the quality model didn't fit our experience as practitioners or our organization. We modified the model to fit our system and then shifted our focus to the spheres over which we had influence. By moving to this approach, staff gained confidence in their expertise and expanded from an event-based focus to laying claim to their areas of influence and expertise. According to Senge (2006), an events-based focus is reactive not proactive (p. 21) and prevents "generative learning" (learning to create) rather than learning to predict (p. 23). Metaphorically, this is shifting from being the frog in the water to learning how to "slow down and see the gradual processes that often pose the greatest threats" (Senge, 2006, p. 23).

Just because the list of elements that contribute to quality practice is long, complex, and difficult, does not mean we abandon all hope. We do, however, have to avoid the trap of "converting ideals into expectations" (Senge, 2006, p. 135) and burning ourselves out with disappointments in ourselves and others. Achieving quality in our interactions is an ongoing process. Improving quality in this way also leads to improved collaboration because individuals are aware of their role in the process and their influence on the system and able to think more strategically and less reactively. In a recent email from the director of another unit, they stated:

> *First and foremost I feel the learning achieved through your project has informed*
> *significant shifts in communication between the four internal divisions in*
> *MBA. All of them positive. The most notable change in my opinion is rather than*
> *each operating to achieve their own goals with little understanding of how their*
> *activities impact other divisions, we now have a stronger understanding of what*

success looks like within each; and a mutual understanding of how to work more

collaboratively.

The results imply that creating communities of practice, developing a practice of

first-person inquiry, and improving the quality of a group's interactions are

interdependent. In attempting to create an intentional community of practice, the study

revealed the difficulties of creating shared values and improving collaboration without

addressing power issues (Githens, 2009). One must also navigate the "paradox of

participation" (Arieli et al., 2009) when building participative relationships in a resource-

constrained environment. Secondly, the results demonstrate that quality is not an

abstraction, or an independent identity or ideal, but that developing quality is a process.

Holding quality up as some Holy Grail distances the researcher and the organization from

engaging in an introspective and honest evaluation of individual and group leadership

capacity. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the researcher needs to engage in a

process of critical reflection through using first-person action inquiry to examine their

assumptions, beliefs, and actions. Without striving to balance all three, the quality and

integrity of either endeavor is diminished.

The themes explored in the previous chapter, as derived from the data,

demonstrate parallels between action research at the group level and at the individual

level. The first research question explored the themes of powerlessness, skills

development, and improved reflective practice that enabled a group of individuals to

improve their collaboration. The second research question explored how I, using first-

person action research, learned from failure and learned to be a better colleague by

overcoming my own sense of powerlessness, developing new skills, and improving my

own reflective practice. Both action research and first-person inquiry benefit from using a systems, or systemic, approach, and it is important to view quality as a process not a product. In the next section, I will discuss each as areas for further research.

Implications for Future Practice

Importance of Adopting a Systems Approach

As discussed in Chapter 5, the COB and the full time MBA program function as a matrix of organizational silos, little "fiefdoms" as one of the participants stated in their interview. By using an open systems framework to shape each team's discussion of quality helped to facilitate a better understanding of each unit's role in the student lifecycle and to understand that our work was more than a series of disconnected events. Participants expressed how we were all rowing the boat together, that onboarding student is a process, and that the program we delivered to students was part of a larger delivery system. Our conversations on these topics and quality helped staff begin to think more strategically and take a more strategic approach to collaborating across units.

Importance of First-Person Action Inquiry for Leadership Development

As discussed in the literature, quality in first-person action inquiry practice is guided by several factors related to how it is conducted: developing awareness, identifying underlying values and assumptions, understanding the context, engaging critical friends, examining power dynamics, treating feelings as observable data, and balancing rigor with relevance. For Marshall (2004), quality (aka validity) in action research requires attention to practices and disciplines that make the reflexive activity transparent and accountable. This "living life as inquiry" approach is guided by these awareness strategies that enable one to navigate the system (Marshall (2016). For Arieli,

Friedman, and Agbaria (2009), quality practice depends upon identifying values and assumptions and understanding the contextual conditions that enable or impede full participation. Burgess (2006) highlighted the importance of remaining aware of one's positionality within the system as one navigates multiple roles. For Foulger (2010), the quality of the inquiry is strengthened by engagement with a critical friend who could help the researcher overcome the dilemmas of being isolated as a sole researcher, make explicit tacit knowledge, and manage help winnow through the data. Githens (2009) related the researcher's struggle to balance the role of facilitator and leader, with special attention to power dynamics as they impact developing a collaborative community. Heen (2005) makes a case for feelings as data, as a relevant piece of the whole inquiry practice. And Hillon & Boje (2007) argued for a balance of rigor and relevance when conducting action research so that one develops a scholarship of practice that is also applicable to real situations.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings for this action research study provide ideas for future research into organizational change in the following areas: 1) communities of practice, 2) first-person action research, and 3) balancing rigor and relevance in action research. My intention with this study was to add to the scholarship on communities of practice comprised of staff in higher education, specifically business schools and MBA programs. Research on the value of informal, unplanned interactions (in this study, the hallway meetings) would benefit our understanding of how to create and sustain communities of practice, whether intentional or voluntary. I also believe there is more research to be explored to pursue questions related to first-person action research and organizational change. First-person

action research (what Senge terms "personal mastery") can be further explored as related to leadership development in a higher education context. I also believe there is more to examine in regards to rigor and relevance in our action research scholarship practice, especially in performance-focused organizations where action and outcomes take priority over learning and process. Further research into balancing the rigor of action research with a desire and need to make such research applicable to its participants is needed to promote understanding of the intrinsic value of action research to organizations.

Reflections

In *Hope in The Dark*, Rebecca Solnit states:

If there is one thing we can draw from where we are now and where we were then, it is that the unimaginable is ordinary, that the way forward is almost never a straight line you can glance down but a convoluted path of surprises, gifts, and afflictions you prepare for by accepting your blind spots as well as your intuitions.

Believe it or not, I've made time to do a little Reading of Other Things each night before I sleep. This quote struck me—and I read it as I was writing Chapter 5—as relevant to my own journey even though she is speaking about large scale social changes. Coincidentally, in one of our classes, there was an exercise to select a stone with an inscription. My study group mates selected one for me inscribed with the word "Hope." First-person action inquiry and action research are hard, and every day I can find a reason to give up on both. For Solnit, hope is "about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act" (Solnit, 2016, p. xiii), rather than "the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine" (Solnit, 2016, xiii). This research

process has been partly about accepting my own blind spots and learning to use them as a catalyst for ongoing inquiry and change.

Often during the study, I questioned myself and what I was doing. How does this matter? How will this help? How much can ask of my colleagues? How do I explain these ideas better? How do we adapt the community of practice model and action research to our workplace? Does adapting the models ruin their value for research even if it makes them less wieldy for us? Is this going to make any difference? However, I can be very patient and persistent, and so can my colleagues. It took my office four years to get the Yellow Ribbon Program for veterans approved by the University. It took me four years or so to change how we coordinated orientation. My admissions colleague and I waited three years for our IT department to see the value in migrating to a newer CRM and application system. Sometimes, patience and persistence end in small successes. But real organizational change? Was that possible? I think we made progress towards changing the culture of our organization.

> *First and foremost I feel the learning achieved through your project has informed*
> *significant shifts in communication between the four internal divisions in*
> *MBA. All of them positive. The most notable change in my opinion is rather than*
> *each operating to achieve their own goals with little understanding of how their*
> *activities impact other divisions, we now have a stronger understanding of what*
> *success looks like within each; and a mutual understanding of how to work more*
> *collaboratively.*

This comment gives me hope that we are better equipped to handle future challenges because we genuinely trust and care for one another and we each want the best for the program.

When I started at COB, one of my colleagues referred to the program as "the island of misfit toys." This was a dark assessment that implied we were all too damaged and imperfect to function well as a group. At first, it sounds like a funny thing to day, but behind is a nihilism that destroys any desire to work towards change. This project began with an external focus on program quality and a grand ambition to find the key to helping our program improve by both internal and external measures. I began by thinking all the work and all the problems were outside of myself, only to realize, as I gathered and analyzed data and transitioned between teams that understanding my positionality as an insider-researcher was crucial to being able to improve collaboration across units. I was "tilting at windmills" until the focus of the study shifted.

Not all of our problems are solved. We will continue to grapple with the tension between learning and performance, both as a staff and in what we ask from our students. Senge calls this "creative tension" which is much more positive way to name "stress," and "frustration." In a very tangible way, the action research teams incorporated action learning into their process. I specifically use "action learning" rather than "action research" for two main reasons: 1) a participant on the second team used the term "action learning" to refer to our collaborative practice, and 2) we adapted our practice to the demands of our environment. Learning to move "fluidly and flexibly," as stated by one participant, between an internal (process and shared learning focus) and an external (actionable) focus helped the second team, and program staff, balance the demands of a

performance-driven workplace. In an email from one of the participants of the second research team, they outlined three reasons for our tendency to privilege action over learning (abbreviated here for space):

> *Performance is often easier to measure objectively than learning, and therefore a more likely metric to prove improvement in the Program's metric-driven culture. If we are not continuously improving we are not competitive … Our customers also measure our performance in a variety of ways. Students expect a customized experience specific to their desired outcomes, whether the outcome is a job, an assistantship/financial assistance while in school, significant latitude on how to cobble together an academic concentration, or input on faculty teaching style. Employers value well-prepared students who demonstrate the right mix of hard and soft skills. Hard skills usually fall in the learning camp. Soft skills are all about performance in context. Learning for learning sake may still be considered a noble cause within the larger higher education context, but carries little institutional value within MBA. If learning doesn't have a direct impact on one of the outcomes by which our department is measured: job placement, admissions criteria, alumni engagement and satisfaction, and student success in the internship, its value is difficult to quantify to our upper administration, and in the marketplace.*

I think we have the tools to continue working towards a balance between theory and practice, rigor and relevance. When the door is open, and the ceiling is raised, we can jump out of the plane, manage the boat, and right the ship, get our arms around the issues,

and avoid the landmines. Though we may still be seen as misfits or prima donnas, I think

we are better equipped to do the right things the right way.

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