Sensemaking and Sensegiving: Leadership Processes of New College Presidents

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of how new college presidents simultaneously learn about the organization while being in charge, how situational demands shape this process, and how leaders shape how others think. Traveling to over fourteen campuses, I completed eighteen semi-structured interviews with new presidents who were organizational outsiders and first-time college presidents. An equal third of these interviews were completed at baccalaureate colleges, master's college and universities, and research universities.

Motivations for this study include: 1) understanding why such a large percentage of presidents are hired as outsiders, estimated at around 80 percent in higher education compared to 40 percent in business (Blumenstyk, 2005); 2) why the tenure of college presidents seems relatively short (around 6-7 years) and if that really is a problem or is it a reasonable pace for organizational renewal and leadership transition; 3) understanding the experience of being in charge of an organization while also being a newcomer, and 4) to contribute to the theoretical perspective of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995), which, put simply, is how people think (sensemaking), and how people attempt to influence how others think (sensegiving).

Utilizing grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), some critical findings include how presidents use strategic ambiguity, cautiously know and doubt their knowledge when they begin, and find trusted individuals to help them interpret the organization. Appreciating the complexity and contingency of each president's

experience, I also found a multitude of contextual factors that influenced their entry process, including enrollment declines, predecessors with various weaknesses they were hired to overcome, and institutions that felt "stalled" or had low collective self-esteem. Despite the multitude of complexities and contingencies that shaped their entry process, when organizations perceived they were functioning at moderate or poor levels, they looked outside themselves for new direction and insight. Since all the presidents were outsiders, they were relied upon to offer new meaning and direction.

This new meaning and direction came in several forms, such as priority-setting, framing, setting forth an inspiring future image, constructing crisis as a means to initiate change, and re-labeling and re-organizing. As newcomers, I also found presidents simultaneously acting as "lay ethnographers," unknowingly using many of the methods of ethnography to understand the tacit, contextualized knowledge of the culture. There were also qualitatively different descriptions of their efforts to make sense of the organization among presidents at small baccalaureate colleges and those at large research universities, with presidents at the smaller institutions more likely to describe coming to a consistent, core identity, while presidents of larger institutions learning to manage a complex organization.

I also found a reliance on peers and mentors to reduce uncertainty, and presidents considering the cohesion of their senior administrative team as critical.   Several barriers to sensemaking also emerged, including: 1) the isolation of being in a formal position of authority where people are unlikely to tell you the truth; 2) constituents expecting presidents to be highly deliberate, meaning presidents had little affordance to "think out loud," and 3) the rapid stream of experience which offers little time for thinking and

reflection. Finally, I found a large disconnect between the certainty and clarity with

which presidents spoke and the ambiguity and complexity described in the organization

theory literature. This disconnect was evident in descriptions of strategic planning and

the use of the language and rhetoric from management bestsellers.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research explores how new college presidents, hired as outsiders, make sense

of the situations they are in, while simultaneously articulating the state of the university

and where it should go in the future. Sensemaking and sensegiving are used as

theoretical constructs to signify an interest in meaning—both how it is constructed

through the deliberate effort to understand events (sensemaking) and how it is sold to a

target audience (sensegiving). Within this perspective there is a different, perhaps more

limited role for leadership—one characterized as less heroic and concerned with the

mundane business of making our way as best we can. Outwardly, this view of leadership

is concerned with labeling and persuasion and in giving meaning to others by articulating

reality (sensegiving).

To study these phenomena, the entry process of new college presidents is

examined. These situations offer an empirical condition where there are heavy demands

to "get up to speed" while simultaneously being in charge. There is also a practical

interest in this process because these events are considered to be critical in the evolution

and functioning of institutions of higher learning. Organizations often spend a year

searching for a new president, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and endure tumultuous

staff turnover and changes in the senior administration. This happens more frequently

than it might, and if one sees a reasonable connection between the quality of administration and the quality of the education and knowledge production of universities, then the topic deserves attention.

Furthermore, recent surveys suggest there is much room for improvement in the entry process of new presidents. For example, a survey of 2,148 presidents in 2006 by the American Council on Education found that 25 percent of presidents believed they had not received an accurate and full disclosure of the institution's financial condition; 20 percent reported they had not received a realistic assessment of the institution's status; 19 percent felt the board's expectations had not been disclosed; and 20 percent felt the search process did not disclose the institution's expectations (American Council on Education, 2007). Additionally, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey of 2005, only 41 percent of the 764 respondents felt "very well prepared" for their first presidency. These numbers suggest there is a great deal of surprise and unexpected events that trigger the deliberate effort to understand.

Furthermore, most presidents come from outside the organization making them likely to experience a great deal of surprise and time to "get up to speed." In 2005, the *Chronicle* found that only 19 percent of 764 presidents were insiders to the organization (Blumenstyk, 2005), with a major problem for outsiders being to understand, fit into, and change the culture of the organization they are entering (Bornstein, 2005; Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Gregorian & Martin, 2004; McLaughlin 1996). This sparing number of insiders has remained constant over the last 35 years. A study completed in 1970 found that only 24 percent of a study of 1,222 campuses had an incumbent president who was previously employed on the campus (Hodgkinson, 1970).

The propensity to hire outsiders as chief executives in higher education is unlikely to change for a variety of reasons. Comparatively, corporations hire around 60 percent of their chief executives from inside the organization (Blumenstyk, 2005), but why are only 20 percent of chief executives hired internally in higher education? Is it an irrational quest for a charismatic CEO (e.g. Khurana, 2002)? First, many outsiders are chosen for their perceived ability to increase the prestige of the organization by having a degree from a more prestigious university. Higher education has a rigid status hierarchy that takes decades to alter; therefore hiring someone from a higher status organization is an accessible means to alter this hierarchy. Second, insiders often accumulate impaired personal relationships that hinder their ability to lead. In a professional bureaucracy, college presidents lack extensive authority and must rely on relational means of persuasion (Bok, 2002; Mintzberg, 1979). Outsiders lack the impaired personal relationships that may have resulted from decisions made as a dean or a department chair, potentially making them more able to persuade faculty members about institutional needs and initiatives.

Third, in a selection decision, search committees usually can obtain (or know) intimate details of an insider's "faults," while this information is less available about outsiders. Therefore, ambiguity about the outsider is exploited as hiring committees can "fill-in" gaps of knowledge with idealized notions they may carry, giving outsiders an advantage in the hiring process (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). Finally, in small organizations there may be a limited number of willing administrators to assume the chief executive position, making it more likely an outsider will be chosen. All of these reasons suggest there is little chance organizations will hire more insiders in the near future, thus

studying the entry process of outsiders takes on more significance as it will likely remain a prominent practice.

In addition to most presidents being outsiders, many chief executives in higher education come from non-traditional backgrounds such as business, government, law, or other non-profit organizations. In a survey of 2,594 college and university presidents, the American Council on Education in 2001 found that 15 percent of all presidents came to their position from outside of higher education (Corrigan, 2002). Thus, when a large portion of presidents are organizational outsiders or take the helm from outside the industry itself, the topic of understanding how to reduce the tumult of the entry process is even more vital.

Before describing the specific research questions of this dissertation, I offer a brief conceptual introduction to the research to familiarize readers with sensemaking and sensegiving which are the conceptual anchors to this dissertation. I then offer a brief overview of the remainder of the dissertation before reviewing the literature.

Introduction to Conceptual Approach

As Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005, 410) say, "To focus on sensemaking is to portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, 'what's the story?'" In past research and autobiographies, many new presidents articulate a similar experience (Gross, 2007; Chace, 2006; McLaughlin, 1996). For example, Robert Weisbuch, the new president at Drew University in 2005 says, "In just a few weeks as president, already I have been stunned by the amount of unexpected information that I

receive, information that doesn't so much run counter to my beliefs as to constitute whole new ranges of concern" (2005, C3).   In coming to understand these new ranges of concern, I define sensemaking as the deliberate effort to understand events. It is typically triggered by surprises or unexpected events that make us doubt our prior understanding.

For example, Mary Sue Coleman, who began her presidency at the University of Michigan in the summer of 2002, describes her approach as a newcomer. She says,

> Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived ideas about where you are going to take an institution to which you are new, because you simply cannot know. You can't know enough about a new environment to recognize where the strengths are and where you might need to push the institution to grow. It takes you a couple of years to figure it all out. It is like a big puzzle (Gruber, 2005, 341).

Mary Sue Coleman began in office when the University was defending its use of affirmative action in the Supreme Court. She could have spent every waking minute reading background material, yet the general counsel's office "bracketed" and "bounded" this ongoing flow by preparing materials of key issues and arguments. She made sense of the arguments through her identity as a female scientist and eventually spoke authoritatively about their meaning (Gruber, 2005; Spreitzer, Coleman, & Gruber, 2007). She also displays an attitude of wisdom by knowing that she did not know (Meacham, 1983, 1990; Weick, 1998), and this attitude is articulated in her metaphor of the organization as a "puzzle." The metaphor of a puzzle helps one recognize the incompleteness of knowledge, yet gives one confidence in its eventual completeness. In this sense, it is a wise metaphor because it allows one to proceed cautiously, knowing that knowledge is fallible and incomplete, yet helps one move forward with certainty to collect knowledge one piece at a time.

The outcome of sensemaking is an understanding that becomes a springboard into action. As Mary Sue Coleman says, "In a surprisingly short time, I was able to master the essential history and facts of the cases and speak authoritatively about our use of race in admissions" (340). At this point she moved to sensegiving, in which she was influencing the meaning construction of others. She says, "When I spoke on April 22, 2004, I said now is the time to move forward. I have specific plans and initiatives that I want to put out in front of the university community" (342). She shifted from meaning construction to persuasion and influence. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe a similar transition in their case study of a new college president. They say,

> The president has adopted a sensegiving mode. Now he was taking staged actions that conveyed to the university the nature of his vision, the values underlying it, and the actual changes that he wanted to achieve as a result. The clear intent was to provide a viable interpretation of a new reality and to influence stakeholders and constituents to adopt it as their own. Thus, rather than making sense of an ambiguous situation for himself, he was now in a mode of making sense for others, i.e. of supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected by his actions (443).

While sensemaking is about how individuals and collectives think, sensegiving is *intentionally* trying to change how other people think. This behavior is more conspicuous among those in positional leadership roles, making it relevant for studying college presidents. Sensegiving as a term is mostly used by those approaching inquiry from a sensemaking perspective and focuses our attention on the outward communicative agency of individuals. As indicated in studies of new college presidents, in their first year they are expected to make sense of their experience and begin to interpret organizational reality for others (Birnbaum, 1992). They have to simultaneously "get up to speed" and begin to speak authoritatively about the future of the organization.

In speaking about the organization, presidents are in a conspicuous position to label and name things—to declare meaning. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002) say,

> A manager is as much an agent of change as everybody else is, the only important difference being that a manager is endowed with 'declarative powers' (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, 143)…Being endowed with declarative powers, managers are *ex officio* in a privileged position to introduce a new discursive template that will make it possible for organizational members to notice new things, make fresh distinctions, see new connections, and have novel experiences (579).

What Tsoukas and Chia (2002) say about managers is perhaps more relevant to presidents. Their powers may rest in their ability to shape meaning more than anything else (Birnbaum, 1989a; Cohen & March, 1974; Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). In Neumann's (1995) study of a new college president, she calls declarative leadership the "credibility of interpretation" which defines them as leaders. However, while presidents are in an *ex officio,* privileged position to introduce new discursive templates, they are still communicating with a living, interpreting audience. Thus, while in many cases they may have an intended meaning, the activity of sensegiving may instigate the search for new meaning. In this study, sensegiving is considered the *activity* of influencing audiences in the direction of a preferred definition of reality. By focusing on the activity itself, one bypasses the complications of assessing whether a target audience adopts a particular meaning.

Ultimately, through an understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving, this study examines how presidents develop plausible, working descriptions of organizational issues and enact effective or ineffective leadership. In a previous study, there is some evidence that sensemaking played a critical role in the success or failure of a presidency. In Birnbaum's study of 32 college presidents, four were considered exemplary based on

retaining faculty, trustee, and administrative support (1992). These four presidents were

found to be more "cognitively complex and therefore able to interpret institutional life

through multiple perspectives" (Birnbaum, 1992, 100). Of the presidents who maintained

an average level of support throughout the study, a decline in sensemaking was partly to

blame. As Birnbaum (1992) states:

> [Average presidents] entered office believing that their ability to influence
> others depended on understanding the perceptions of reality held by
> constituents. But as they gained experience, the need for presidential
> sense-making decreased. They were likely to become increasingly
> focused on task accomplishment and give less attention to interacting with
> faculty before making decisions (101).

This study uses a more nuanced, expansive definition of sensemaking than Birnbaum

(1992), but is done with the same concern with how theory can explain practice and vice

versa (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Pearce, 2004; Raelin,

2007; Weick, 2003a).

Research Questions

One of the main problems I address in this dissertation is a theoretical deficiency

in our knowledge of sensemaking and sensegiving in an academic context. In small

measure, a sensemaking perspective has informed research on academic leadership

(Birnbaum, 1992)—particularly in viewing college presidents as "intuitive scientists"

(Birnbaum, 1986). Furthermore, sensegiving was first articulated as a component of

strategic change in a university context (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), however most of the

theoretical development of these perspectives have occurred outside the context of higher

education. This research seeks to develop the theoretical potential of these concepts in

the field of academic leadership that is mainly comprised of memoirs, personal accounts,

and prescriptions—delivering a more theoretically-driven account of processes that have been superficially treated in past studies (Birnbaum, 1992).

To this end, the main research question guiding this study is: When presidents are hired as organizational outsiders, what sensemaking and sensegiving do they engage in over their first year?   In other words, what do presidents describe as surprising, challenging, puzzling, and confusing when they begin? How do they reduce this surprise, challenge, puzzlement, and confusion? Through this process, how do presidents formulate and influence others toward a desired future image—an image that guides interpretive processes for both organizational members and the presidents themselves?

There are three sub-questions to this research:

1. How do presidents cope with being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice?

2. How do situational demands influence this simultaneity?

3. How can our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving be enlarged given the experiences of new presidents?

The first sub-question assumes that presidents simultaneously figure out the organization and set forth initiatives. I am seeking to understand what this experience is like. How do they manage the process of being newcomers to the organization while they are simultaneously in charge? Second, the situational demands in which presidents are hired are examined. Were they hired amidst financial turmoil or declining enrollments? Were they hired for a specific expertise or vision they mentioned to the selection committee? And how do these situational demands influence their descriptions of the entry process? Finally, given the interviews, my final sub-question is to examine

how sensemaking and sensegiving can be enlarged using new college presidents as an empirical referent.

Plan for Dissertation

The plan for the remainder of this dissertation is to first review the relevant literature to help the reader gain an understanding of the "sensitizing concepts" of this research (Blumer, 1969). Germane to my study population, I first examine research on the college presidency, particularly the extensive longitudinal research in the late 1980s of the Institutional Leadership Project. Next, I review the sensemaking literature from both a macro, organizational approach (Weick, 1995) and a micro-cognitive lens (Louis, 1980). I then explore naturalistic decision making, which offers insights into how people cope with uncertainty as they make decisions in real world contexts. I then review how researchers have employed the term "sensegiving" and what their research has taught us. Finally, I conclude the literature review with a discussion of the executive succession literature, with particular emphasis on Gabarro's (1987) study of the dynamics of taking charge.

In chapter three, I review the research approach, including a brief discussion of research paradigms. I then describe the study population, data analysis procedures, and validity concerns and limitations. The remainder of the dissertation is then dedicated to the findings of this study and is divided into four chapters. The first looks at how presidents cope with simultaneously being in charge and learning about the organization, and how situational demands shape this process. The next chapter is a more focused look at sensemaking processes in the college presidency, particularly how they answer the

questions: What's the story here? What do we do next? And why am I here? The last

chapter of findings is about sensegiving and how the activity of persuading others toward

a new reality can be refined and conceptualized. The final chapter of this dissertation

offers a summary of this research and several surprises I found, including a strong belief

in strategic planning, ambivalence toward symbolic leadership, and a reliance on the

language of business bestsellers. I also explore implications for theory, practice, and

future research that were sparked by the interviews.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several streams of literature have grounded the theoretical perspective of this

dissertation. These include: sensemaking (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995); sensegiving

(Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991); naturalistic decision making; research on the college

presidency (Birnbaum, 1992); ideas of leadership in an organized anarchy (Cohen &

March, 1974); reflective practitioners (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983); and the

executive succession literature (Gabarro, 1987). To understand the vocabularies and

insights of these literatures and how they influenced the formation and analysis of the

current study, each will be reviewed in turn.

Research on the College Presidency

What we know about the college presidency is largely informed by three major

sources: the publications resulting from a longitudinal study of college presidents

conducted by Robert Birnbaum and colleagues (Bensimon, 1989; Bensimon, Neumann,

Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1989d, 1992, 1999; Neumann,

1995); memoirs of college presidents (Chace, 2006; Duderstadt, 2007; Elkins & Callcott,

1981; Gardner, 2005; Shapiro, 1998; Vest, 2005); and individual studies conducted for

doctoral dissertations (Dodge, 2001; Eddy, 2002; Glover, 2005; Mowbray, 2000; Siegal,

2001). The college presidency is a heavily researched area in the field of higher

education, with an assortment of publications ranging from highly practitioner-oriented

(Atwell, Green, & Ross, 2001; Bensimon, 1990; Martin & Samels, 2004; Padilla, 2004,

2005; Zimpher, 2004) to more theoretical treatments of the college presidency (Cohen &

March, 1974, 1976). This review covers the major findings within the research literature

that are most relevant for the proposed study.

The Institutional Leadership Project

        The Institutional Leadership Project (ILP) examined leadership at 32 colleges and

universities from 1986-1991. In total, 404 people were interviewed during visits in 1986-

87 and another 358 were interviewed from 1988-1989. The ILP was led by Robert

Birnbaum and was held at the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and

Finance at Teachers College, Columbia University. The purpose of the ILP was to

understand how people in leadership positions establish goals, transmit values,

communicate, develop agendas, and assess their effectiveness (Birnbaum, 1989b).   The

research put considerable emphasis on cognition—the ways leaders think, such as their

cognitive frames, strategy, and implicit leadership theories—making its findings

particularly relevant for this research. The ILP considered leadership as a process of

influencing perceptions of reality, and viewed institutions as "cultural systems in which

leaders and others construct social reality through the interpretations they make of

equivocal events" (Birnbaum, 1992, 22). This approach is in accordance with the

ontological assumptions of this research study—that the study of leadership is primarily

an interpretive approach to knowledge rather than a positivist examination of an objective reality.

Given this cognitive approach, many of the studies classified the modes of thinking of college presidents. For example, Birnbaum (1989c) explored the implicit leadership theories of college and university presidents by reviewing what proportion of presidents who described their role in five theoretical groups: trait, power and influence, behavioral, contingency, and symbolic (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989). Birnbaum found that a large proportion of presidents describe leadership as behavioral (96.9%) and power and influence (87.5%). The other three theories—trait, contingency, and symbolic—were spoken of by 25% of the presidents (Birnbaum, 1989c). Furthermore, the two most mentioned behaviors were setting institutional goals (75%) and moving people to action in support of those goals (66%) (Birnbaum, 1989c).

In a similar study, Bensimon (1989) classified the proportion of presidents who described their leadership in the four frames of Bolman and Deal (1997). Interviewing 32 presidents, the author recorded a frame if a leader made at least two statements in its domain. The author found that thirteen of the presidents espouse only a single frame (40%), eleven espouse two frames (34%), and seven espouse three frames (22%). Only one president spoke with statements from all four perspectives. Of those relying on a single frame the majority used either the bureaucratic or collegial aspects of leadership. Of those who spoke in two frames it was primarily a combination of the collegial and symbolic perspectives. If they used three frames it was almost always the collegial/political/symbolic to the exclusion of a bureaucratic approach (Bensimon, 1989). A key finding in this study is that newer presidents tended to think in fewer

frames than longer-tenured presidents, indicating that on-the-job training led to more complex framing of issues.

Examining strategic frameworks, Neumann (1989) reviewed the proportion of presidents using a linear, adaptive, or interpretive strategy. The research question guiding the analysis was: "What did President X do early in his or her term and why? And what is President X currently doing and why?" The answers comprised both an *initial* and *current* strategy with responses coded as linear, adaptive, and/or interpretive. A *linear* approach is oriented toward goals and the structures needed to achieve those goals and is concerned with the sequential action involved in planning. An *adaptive* approach is concerned with aligning an organization with environmental demands to ensure a constant inflow of resources, and an *interpretive* approach is primarily concerned with "creating desired perceptions of the organization and spending much of one's time explaining and clarifying so that organizational actors carry out their roles in a meaningful way" (Neumann, 1989, 140-41).

The sample of 32 presidents was divided into a *new* and *old* category based on having tenure of greater than or less than five years. Neumann found that new and old presidents were equally likely to be divided among linear, adaptive and interpretive strategies at the time of the study. Therefore, presidents were equally focused on the interpretation of events, adapting to the environment, and a linear, goal-oriented approach (Neumann, 1989). However, older presidents primarily described an initial, linear strategic approach when they began in the position. This indicates that they began with linear strategic initiatives and moved to the more complex, interpretive nuances of strategy later in their tenure. Although this finding could partly be the result of the

presidents considering their past actions to be more rationally ordered than they were as events unfolded, it lends some support that presidents become more complex leaders as they gain experience.

Additionally, Neumann and Bensimon (1990) examined the interview transcripts to uncover the presidents' "personally constructed understandings and beliefs about the nature of reality" (680). The researchers were concerned with how presidents perceived their role, approaching the data to find theories rather than having *a priori* theoretical categories. In summary, they found one type of president who was an "initiator" that was concerned with making a contribution to the state, country, and humankind. The president acted as an institutional spokesperson or ambassador and was concerned with anticipating the external environment. These presidents relied on their executive officers for the internal management of the organization (Neumann & Bensimon, 1990). A second type of president had a financially stable institution and focused on internal concerns such as the needs of the students and faculty. The remaining other two types of presidents led during financial crisis, but they differed in their focus in solving the instability. One type of president was externally-focused and more concerned with obtaining short-term resources for the institution to remain solvent. These presidents primarily delegated internal authority to executive officers so they could focus more on resource acquisition. The final type of president focused internally to solve the problem of financial instability by program review and structural redesign.

One insight from Neumann and Bensimon's research is that a president's role is shaped by his or her personality and organizational context. Theoretically, this means they find both trait theories and contingency theories to be descriptive of leadership. In

their research, the type of institutions and its financial condition influenced the type of president an organization had. In general, a large research university was more likely to have an externally-focused president, who was concerned with being an ambassador to the outside community. A small liberal arts college was more likely to have an internally-focused president, as these institutions usually have less national presence and may be situated in smaller communities.

In an in-depth case study, Neumann (1995) outlines five stages of the evolving relationship between a new president and campus participants. She is concerned with the *processes* and the *experience* of a new president's entry, both from the president's perspective and the constituents on campus. The stages she describes include: (1) the president entering and making sense of the new setting (defining the setting), (2) the president selectively adjusting the setting (redefining the setting), (3) the president stirring the setting (stirring the setting), (4) campus participants discovering and responding to changes the president makes in their shared setting (campus response), and (5) the president addressing these responses, including their effects on him or her (calibrating).

Neumann abstracts these five stages from the case study. In her case study, the new president came to understand the campus culture as very cautious, especially financially (defining the setting). The president then began to "redefine the setting" and "stir things up" by describing the value of experimentation, making mistakes, and not being frightened or too conservative. This was exhibited in being less conservative with the budget and beginning to spend and expand. Predictably, the campus responded, both positively and negatively. Some faculty felt a new momentum, while others described a

loss of meaningful tradition. In a follow-up interview with the president, he began to

"calibrate" and described his realization that he needed to balance his personal

inclinations toward risk with the college's attachment to tradition. In sum, Neumann's

study offers a rich case study of sensemaking and sensegiving, although she does not use

these terms. Particularly valuable is her second stage of interviews with campus

constituents and the president. This allows her to describe the campus response and

calibration. Critically, however I found there to be little difference in her description of

"redefining the setting" and "stirring things up," unless the former can be equated with

talking and the latter with action, although she does not make this distinction.

The breadth of the research based on the ILP data adds a detailed, nuanced, and

multi-perspective approach to the study of leadership in colleges and universities. It also

displays the complexity of leadership research (Chaffee, 1989), in that the data was

analyzed from many different perspectives which led to many different results. This

highlights that the conclusions reached are highly influenced upon the perspective or

methods taken, indicating the tight interplay between theory, methods and results in the

study of organizations and leadership (Van Maanen, Sørenson, & Mitchell, 2007).

Leadership in an Organized Anarchy

One of the most prominent studies of the college presidency is Cohen and

March's *Leadership and Ambiguity* (1974) in which they interviewed 41 college

presidents. In their study, they first set forth the assumptions and limitations of eight

metaphors of colleges and universities. These metaphors "develop and elaborate a

language for describing events within organizations and for evaluating and modifying

leader behavior" (29). From their perspective, researchers overuse the administrative, collective bargaining, and democratic models of governance, while they under use the competitive market, anarchy, independent judiciary, and plebiscitary autocracy models of governance. Cohen and March say, "The model one has of the system of governance dictates a presidential style. The appropriateness of the style, however, is determined by the adequacy of the model" (1974, 37).

Among the 41 college presidents in their sample, they found that perceptive presidents felt current metaphors of leadership fit poorly with reality. They conclude that none of the models "seem to capture fully the character of higher educational institutions and their governance" (79). Therefore, Cohen and March argue for a view of organizations as:

> Sets of procedures through which organizational participants arrive at an interpretation of what they are doing and what they have done while doing it. From this point of view, an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work (81).

This "organized anarchy" is characterized by uncertain goals, a familiar but unclear technology, and inadequate knowledge about who is attending to what. The metaphor of colleges and universities as "organized anarchies" is interesting because it challenges assumptions (Davis, 1971; Thomas & Tymon Jr., 1982), such as the prevalence of agreed-upon goals, a clear technology, and a stable level of participation.

The conception of organized anarchy also overlaps with Weick's enactment (1979) which views action as preceding cognition. Cohen and March (1974) similarly argue that "participants arrive at an interpretation of what they are doing and what they have done while doing it" (81). This reverses and complicates traditional notions of

rationality where deliberate thought and cognition precedes action. Additionally, both Weick (1995) and Cohen and March (1974) see human behavior as stemming less from calculations of consequences than from the fulfillment of an identity (March & Weil, 2005). Identity is a major emphasis in Weick's articulation of sensemaking (1995) and the fulfillment of identity is the primary component of behavior in an organized anarchy, in which people with solutions are looking for problems or people with issues or feelings are looking for decision situations.

In addition to their contribution to organization theory, Cohen and March (1974) describe the implications for leadership given that colleges and universities are like "organized anarchies." They say that presidents face four fundamental ambiguities—the ambiguity of purpose, power, experience, and success. Regarding ambiguity of purpose, they say that "presidents live in a normative context that presumes goal clarity and within an organizational context that denies it" (1974, 197). Presidents operate in a context where intelligent administrative action is assumed to be driven by the rational pursuit of clear goals (March, 1984). Second, presidents face ambiguity of power. While presidents do have more ability to shape events on campus than most others, they are likely to possess less power to get things done than they first believe or that others attribute to them. Third, presidents face ambiguity of experience—they can make spurious inferences from past experiences that give them erroneously high confidence in their theories of the world. College presidents are likely to make faulty inferences because of the social support around them and how others view the presidential role. Finally, presidents face ambiguity of success. There are imprecise measures of a college's health and there is no chance for promotion, except for a more prestigious

presidency, from which a president can come to the conclusion that they unambiguously succeeded.

   Leadership and Ambiguity (1974) greatly impacted the field, largely in its tempering of notions of heroic leadership. It led to series of publications in the 1980s that refuted the claims of presidential weakness and reasserted the efficacy of presidential leadership (Kerr & Gade, 1986). However, the Cohen and March clarified the interpretations of their work in the preface to the second edition (1986) by describing how the assertions in their book were more conservative than peoples' interpretations. For example, they do not think presidents are powerless, just that presidential power is more limited than most people imagine. Additionally, they do not see decision process in universities as completely random, just different from conventional theories of choice. Their book, along with related publications (March, 1984), help articulate the non-rational aspects of administrative life, thereby allowing a better link between theory and experience.

Sensemaking

The next area of research that influenced this study is sensemaking. Sensemaking is about how people think, and has been articulated in many ways, from micro-cognitive functions of individuals (Craig-Lees, 2001; Klein, Phillips, Rall, & Peluso, 2007; Louis, 1980; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988) to social, organizational approaches (Weick, 1995). The central focus of sensemaking is the construction of reality and its consequences; the perspective derives from the schools of thought of pragmatism (James, 1907) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). In the study of organizations, its theoretical development is largely attributed to Weick (1979, 1995), with its foundation in the work of James (1890/1950), Dewey (1910), Mead (1934), Festinger (1957), Schutz (1967), Garfinkel (1967), Berger and Luckmann (1967), and Blumer (1969).

Blumer's (1969) articulation of symbolic interactionism is largely convergent with sensemaking from an organizational approach (Weick, 1995). In fact, it is considered to be the "unofficial theory of sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, 41). Symbolic interactionism has three core principles: (1) people act toward things, including each other, on the basis of the meanings they have for them; (2) these meanings are derived through social interaction with others; and (3) these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and handle the objects that constitute their social worlds (Blumer, 1969, 2).

Sensemaking from Weick's (1995) perspective encompasses a vast array of literatures and theoretical insights, and denotes a pragmatic approach to inquiry that draws from various sources to enrich analysis. A primary concern of sensemaking is how

people interpret the social world with sensemaking and interpretation often treated synonymously, but Weick (1995) distinguishes between the two. Briefly put, sensemaking is broader than interpretation in its concern with how cues are singled out for interpretation in the first place. In selectively perceiving the world, sensemaking is interested in how we author as well as interpreted situations. These processes are captured in the notion of self-fulfilling prophecies and that "believing is seeing" (Weick, 1995).

Importantly, the word "sensemaking" is used rather than "decision-making" to move analysis from isolated events to more comprehensive, ongoing flows of experience. It moves us to a more interpretive, ongoing world-view from a rational, static picture that delineates actors from an objective reality. Instead, sensemaking moves our thinking to the co-creation of the environment, how actors are constructing meaning in this co-constructed world, and the influence of actors' self-fulfilling prophecies. Furthermore, a focus on decision-making, with its assumptions of objectified external environments, is more likely to activate a search for blame about who made a "bad" decision relative to an external environment, rather than focus attention on the flow of subjective experience leading to an event (Snook, 2000; Weick, et al., 2005).

A sensemaking perspective also emphasizes action, as we en*act* our environment, while decision-making de-emphasizes action in favor of deliberate, rigorous evaluation of choices (Brunsson, 1982). Other scholars have criticized decision-making for its glorification of purpose and reason in human affairs (Chia, 1994). Instead, a sensemaking perspective views human behavior as an unfolding process and attempts to reverse the traditionally held assumption that decisions are the causal triggers for a

particular course of action. To its critics, decision making is seen as a means of imposing order on a stream of events and is the "product of a *post-hoc* rationalization process" (Chia, 1994, 794). Decision making is "our projection of purposive and intentional behavior onto those we observe and analyze" (Chia, 1994, 795).

A sensemaking perspective attempts to address this imbalance in organizational theory by viewing behavior as more indeterminate and less purposeful. Instead, sensemaking downplays people as rational actors. It posits that much of what we do is only verbalized retrospectively (Weick, 1995). With the sensemaking maxim, "how do I know what I think until I see what I say?" We act in order to discover our preferences. We are largely in the throes of action that only make sense in retrospect.

Finally, the level-of-analysis within studies of sensemaking is not neatly partitioned into individual, group, and organizational level. From a sensemaking perspective there is a complex interaction between levels-of-analysis within people's thinking, and ultimately an "impossibility of separating them" (Dervin, 2003, 139). Individuals discuss events using a mix of vocabularies from different levels. For example, Weick (1995) delineates six vocabularies that act as the substance for sensemaking. These include: ideologies at the societal level, third-order controls at the organizational level, paradigms of occupations, theories-of-action of individuals, traditions as the vocabularies of predecessors, and stories as the vocabularies of sequence and experience. With the words people use to make order of the world drawn from many different sources, a clear delineation of levels-of-analysis becomes problematic. Instead, they are considered to be a convenient heuristic developed by organizational scholars, but

keeping levels-of-analysis rigidly separated has suspect analytic value primarily because few practitioners would describe their world in such a manner.

To further understand a sensemaking perspective, I begin by describing Weick's articulation of the seven properties of sensemaking and then discuss Louis' (1980) more micro-cognitive approach that focuses on the analytical occasion of surprise. It should become clear that sensemaking is not a theory, per se. It is a theory of theories—a meta-theory. It is a perspective on human behavior that synthesizes a vast array of literatures and insights. Thus, no clear summary can succinctly express what sensemaking *is*, however the assumptions taken by researchers from this perspective can be examined.

Weick's Articulation of Sensemaking

Sensemaking can be described as how groups and individuals socially construct meaning of an ongoing flow of experience (Weick, 2005). Weick (1995, 1999) outlines seven properties of sensemaking to help think about this process. These seven properties are analytic vocabularies to explore how a group or individual disengages from their original story and adopts a new story that is more sensitive to a particular context. These seven properties act as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969).

Social context. Sensemaking is interested in the social context in which meaning is constructed. Therefore, thinking of sensemaking as only an individual process will induce blind spots (Weick, 1995). The social context can be in face-to-face interactions (Weick, 1993a), or in thinking through other's perspectives while deliberating individually (Blumer, 1969). Sensemaking is less likely to breakdown and lead to more effective action when there is regular face-to-face interaction (Weick, 1993a). In the

context of this study, new presidents may be particularly vulnerable in this regard as they mention a sense of isolation and lack of peers to validate their impressions (Kerr & Gade, 1986). The emphasis on the *social context* is meant to highlight the relational manner in which thinking and behavior occurs.

Identity. Sensemaking is grounded in the multiple identities of the individual and group members, with the need for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency affecting the process (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Weick, 1995). The property of identity focuses our attention on the fact that thinking (and sensemaking) is dependent on the human carriers and environment in which it is based. Identity at the individual levels translates to "who am I?" and at the organizational-level, "who are we?" In the case of new presidents, their past influences their sensemaking to remain consistent with previously formed identities as well as their desired future identity. Their sensemaking is also influenced by the organization's identity, which is constructed through its "organizational saga" (Clark, 1970, 1972). Thus, sensemaking occurs within the parameters of individual and organizational identity.

More fundamentally, however, is the linking between who we are and how we know. As Thayer (1988) states:

> We are led, in our minding of the world, in our social affairs as in our individual lives, by whatever is weightiest in us. We are led not by what *is*, but by who we *are*. And we are, no more and no less, that set of possibilities that is given in how we are able to comprehend, and how we express, the world. Who we *are,* and the world we *know,* are two aspects of the same thing (259) [Italics in original].

A sensemaking perspective emphasizes how we construct the world from notions of who we are; it focuses our attention on the human carriers of thought, and action driven by the fulfillment of identity.

Retrospect. Sensemaking emphasizes retrospect, or how we look back and attribute meaning. The perspective is interested in how individuals examine reflectively their own actions in order to discover what they have done and the meaning of those actions (Weick, 1977). This argument can be explained through how people discuss their careers. As Weick (1979) states, "Careers usually turn out to be a set of actions that are career-interpreted after the fact rather than career-planned before the fact. Behavior isn't goal-directed, it's goal interpreted" (195). The implication of retrospect is to use future-perfect thinking by placing future events into the past to interpret what *will have happened* (see Weick, 1979, pp. 194-200). This practice leads to richer, more descriptive scenarios for reflection.

Arthur Levine, who began as the president of Bradford College in the summer of 1982, offers an example of retrospect by describing his first year:

> Intersession offers time for reflection, and boy, do I need it. I am so busy in the job of doing—meeting, writing, speaking—that I don't have enough time for thinking, even reading…I've tried scheduling reading and thinking into my calendar, but the press of events seems always to consume these time blocks. The break between terms is a godsend—allowing for evaluation of the past semester and planning for the future (1984, 15).

Levine's words indicate that to some degree his actions precede thought. He then reflects upon the past semester to evaluate the meaning of those actions. This notion of retrospect is counterintuitive because, in general, we like to think of ourselves as rational, strategic actors, who plan out a course of action and then proceed according to plan.

Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) aptly describe the competing models

of human beings as rational planners versus individuals who primarily reflect on

our past actions:

> The customary model may be summed up in the statement, "Think before
> you act." This is what people generally mean by conscious deliberation.
> It is also the model that is formalized in decision theory: The actor is to
> anticipate the consequences of possible courses of action, assign a utility
> to each, and choose that course with the highest expected utility. We can
> agree that this model captures some aspects of reality. But our preceding
> discussion suggests that a more appropriate model may often be, "Act and
> reflect on your action." This is almost a reversal of the conventional
> model, and might be caricatured as, "act before you think." The point is,
> of course, that intelligent action is informed by highly skillful and
> complex reasoning, most of which is tacit. It is necessary to act and then
> reflect in order to discover what reasoning informed the action. A second
> more generally recognized reason for acting "first" is that action serves as
> a means of exploring a situation. Action produces information that can be
> used for the design of future action (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985, 52).

This quote describes both the property of retrospect, but also the emphasis on

enactment, which is another core property of a sensemaking. In sum, the property

of retrospect emphasizes how we act and then discover our preferences,

principles, values, and beliefs at the end. With an outcome in hand, we

retrospectively construct the values and beliefs that make sense out of this

outcome.

Cues. Sensemaking focuses on extracted cues (i.e. notice information)

which are then related to a person's frames and categories from past experiences.

As Weick (1995) states:

> Frames tend to be past moments of socialization and cues tend to be
> present moments of experience. If a person can construct a relation
> between these two moments, meaning is created. This means that the
> content of sensemaking is to be found in the frames and categories that
> summarize past experience, in the cues and labels that snare specifics in

the present experience, and in the ways these two settings of experience are connected (111).

What is important about cues from a research perspective is that it is central to understand what people are noticing (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), for it becomes the input to the sensemaking process.

Ongoing. A sensemaking perspective emphasizes that the nature of things is a continually developing process, meaning we are always in the middle of things (Mintzberg, 1973; Weick, 1995). Therefore, "to understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments" (Weick, 1995, 43). In other words, individuals "bracket" or "bound" the *ongoing* flow of experience (Schutz, 1967). The important point about ongoing is to stress the human condition of constant immersion in the flow of events. A sensemaking perspective prioritizes the assumption of fluidity rather than stability—that everything is always in the process of becoming what it is (Thayer, 1988). Sensemaking assumes that humans and their worlds are constantly evolving and becoming and thus offers a different entry in the search for systematic understanding of the human condition.

Plausibility. Informed by cognitive psychology (Fiske, 1992; Kruglanski, 1989; Swann, 1984), a sensemaking perspective emphasizes that human reasoning is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. As Weick and colleagues state (2005), "To deal with ambiguity, interdependent people search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on" (419). This means that as we go through daily events, when we are confused and something does not make sense, we reduce this dissonance through a plausible explanation, it may or may not be accurate, but the plausibility resolves the dissonance so that we move on. This does not mean that accuracy and increasing precision are not

important, it simply means that, for the most part, people are "good enough perceivers" (Fiske, 1992; Kruglanski, 1989; Swann, 1984). As Kahneman (2003) states, "People are not accustomed to thinking hard and are often content to trust a plausible judgment that quickly comes to mind" (699).

Karen Gross, who began as the president of Southern Vermont College in 2006, illustrates this point. She says: "A lawyer president…said that on any day, a president has to decide (pick your number) 30 things. With 28 of these things, it doesn't matter what one decides. What is important is that one decides something—even if wrongly" (2007). She makes the point that a plausible interpretation is the best we can hope for. However, the quote falsely gives the impression that a president would "wrongly" make a decision. A decision would only be labeled "wrong" after the fact. At the time, all presidents would believe they are making the right decision. Nevertheless, the point is that presidents face an extensive flow of experience, they "settle for plausibility, and move on" (Weick et al., 2005).

As a perspective, sensemaking more richly describes how things are rather than how they should be. This distinction is needed in the case of plausibility. While sensemaking richly describes how things are, if forced to choose, a sensemaking perspective would place more value on the usability of a presumption rather than its precision (James, 1907). Therefore, the plausibility of a presumption that provokes action and causes a person to wade into a situation is more important than the accuracy of that presumption (Weick, 1983). The managerial implications of this prioritization are to move forward and take action rather than obsess about accurate decisions.

Karen Gross' illustrates this reflection upon her first year as a college president. She says:

> New leaders need to recognize that some decisions will need to be made quickly (think firefighter on a hillside with brushfires), and that one will not always decide them correctly. Know ahead of time that that is going to happen—even when one surrounds oneself with thoughtful advisors. When an error occurs, fix it if necessary and possible or leave it alone, learn from it and move on. That's another key: a new leader needs to keep moving (2007).

She is making the point that the accuracy of solving an issue should not hinder movement forward, which captures the managerial implications of plausibility and enactment.

Enactment. Sensemaking also emphasizes how individuals enact sensible environments (Weick, 1995). In other words, "order is present, not because extended prior analysis revealed it, but because the manager anticipated sufficient order that she waded into the situation, imposed order among events, and then 'discovered' what she had imposed" (Weick, 1983, 228). In other words, we primarily take actions and then justify why those actions were taken. In this manner, enactment is an anti-rationalist concept (Westwood & Clegg, 2003), which posits that actions proceed rational planning. Instead, "attitudes are draped supportively around actions that are tough to undo" (Weick, 2003b, 186).

A sensemaking perspective views the environment as more invented than discovered. Enactment can be understood as acting according to the specific understanding of the situation, which is believed to be true. As Weick states, "The process of sensemaking…is better understood by examining what is in people's heads and imposed by them on a stream of events than by trying to describe what is 'out there'" (1977, 271). This conceptualizes the environment in the social constructionist,

interpretive school of thought (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

This perspective differs from common descriptions of the environment as concrete and

external to the organization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985;

Weick, 1977). In more recent articulations of sensemaking, enactment is considered in a

reciprocal relationship with externalities (Weick, et al., 2005). Thus, we construct our

environment but it is also shaped by ecological changes.

A critical assessment of enactment would be that it overstates the subjectivity of

the world by downplaying the importance of objective environments. While no theorist

would defend the absence of an external environment, most writing on enactment leads

one to believe in the primacy of the subjectively constructed world (Taylor & Van Every,

2000). However, writing about enactment is partly a response to the heavily

materialism/realism that is assumed by many organizational scholars (Weick, 2003b). As

Taylor and Van Every (2000) state, "Weick's theory of enactment tends toward idealism

because it plays with the idea, to a greater or lesser extent, that the out there is in fact a

reflection of the in here. His theory of enactment is marked, ontologically, by an

assumed primacy of the interpreting mind" (261).

Summary and Conceptual Model of Weick's Sensemaking

The seven properties listed above are "sensitizing concepts" to analyze behavior

from a sensemaking perspective. As noted above, the properties intermingle—

particularly enactment, retrospect, plausibility, and ongoing. In sum, they bring our

attention to (1) the ongoing nature of social life, (2) that analysis should be focused on

the social context, (3) that we often act before we think and then reflect upon our action,

(4) that reasoning in everyday life meets the test of plausibility rather than accuracy, and

(5) that noticed cues are the input to sensemaking.

Figure 2.1 displays a conceptual model of sensemaking that integrates the seven properties with organizing (Weick, 1979). Organizing is seen as the reduction of equivocality and emphasizes ecological change, enactment, selection, and retention. The enactment-selection-retention model is a variant of Campbell's evolutionary epistemology (1974), which views knowledge creation through the natural-selection paradigm. In brief, it posits organization life as the production of various meanings that are selected and retained. Retained interpretations are similar to an organization's culture which influences the future variations in meaning and selection.

The conceptual model in Figure 2.1 suggests "emphases" and not "stages" or "steps" because the properties of sensemaking "do not always occur in a lockstep sequence and because more than one emphasis tends to operate at any point" (Weick, 2001, 96).

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Model of Properties of Sensemaking and the Organizing Model
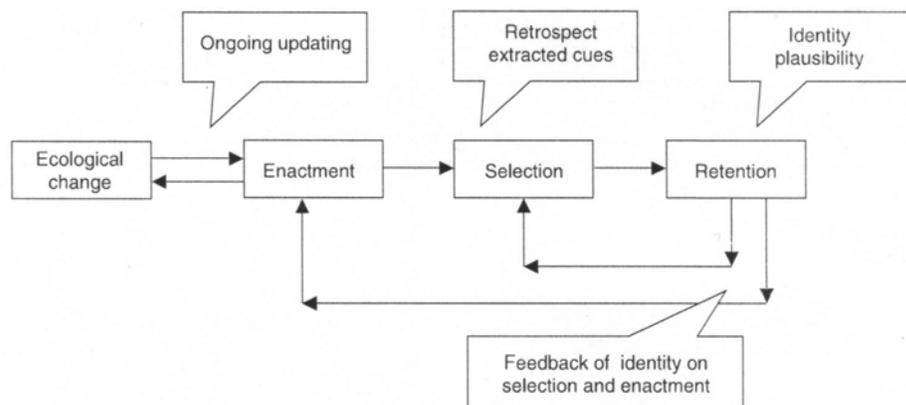
Source. Jennings and Greenwood (2003; adapted from Weick 1979, p. 132).

The model depicts how sensemaking is driven by the reciprocal relationship of enactment and ecological change. Objective environmental factors shift while we bracket this ongoing flow of events with our retained identities, values, predispositions, and past experiences. This "bracketing" imposes an order on ecological change and becomes the input to sensemaking. Enactment theory also suggests that the arrow points toward ecological change, as we become the authors of our own experience (Weick, 2003b). For example, if we believe the environment to be highly competitive, we enact competitive postures which then make our competitors respond in kind, thus creating an environment that is highly competitive.

From this reciprocal interaction between ecological change and enactment, a meaning is selected through retrospective evaluation and social processes (Weick, 1995). We talk to others, learn their interpretations and select a meaning to the question "what's the story?" A selected meaning is retained for its plausibility and its relationship to our identity. Meanings are more likely to be retained if they offer a chance for self-enhancement, self-consistency, and self-efficacy (Weick, 1995). These retained meanings feedback to influence our enactment and selection of meanings.

Louis' Organizational Entry and Sensemaking

The next articulation of sensemaking that was foundational for this study is Louis' model of organizational entry. In comparison to Weick (1995), Louis offers a more micro-cognitive view of sensemaking. Her model is driven by the analytic occasion of surprise, and she outlines three processes that occur after organizational entry: detection, diagnoses, and interpretation (see Figure 2.2). The first process, detection, offers a way

to conceptualize the cues that new presidents notice when they begin. The cues are conceptualized as *changes, contrasts*, or *surprises*. *Change* is defined as objective differences in major features between new and old settings. For example, a change may be moving from a research university to a small liberal arts college. There are objective differences between the two settings. *Contrasts* are subjective differences between new and old settings. A contrast is unknowable in advance and is person-specific. A *surprise* represents the difference between a person's expectations and actual occurrences in the new setting. Louis says, "It is when coping with surprise that newcomers seek cultural information. Surprises trigger sense-making processes in which individuals rely on and revise their own definitions of the situation, as well as local sets of shared meanings" (1990, 116). Kerr & Gade (1986) found that new presidents were most surprised by the intensity of the board's internal politics, the existence of "untouchables" at high levels of the administration, and the importance of the immediate predecessor.

Figure 2.2: Model of Organizational Entry and Sense Making (Louis, 1980, 242)

Inputs to Sense Making:
- Others' Interpretations
- Local Interpretation Schemes
- Predispositions and Purposes
- Past Experiences

Newcomer Enters Organization → Change → Surprise → Sense Making → Attribute Meaning → Select Behavioral Response / Update Expectations and View of Setting

Contrast

Key Activity: Detection   Diagnosis   Interpretation
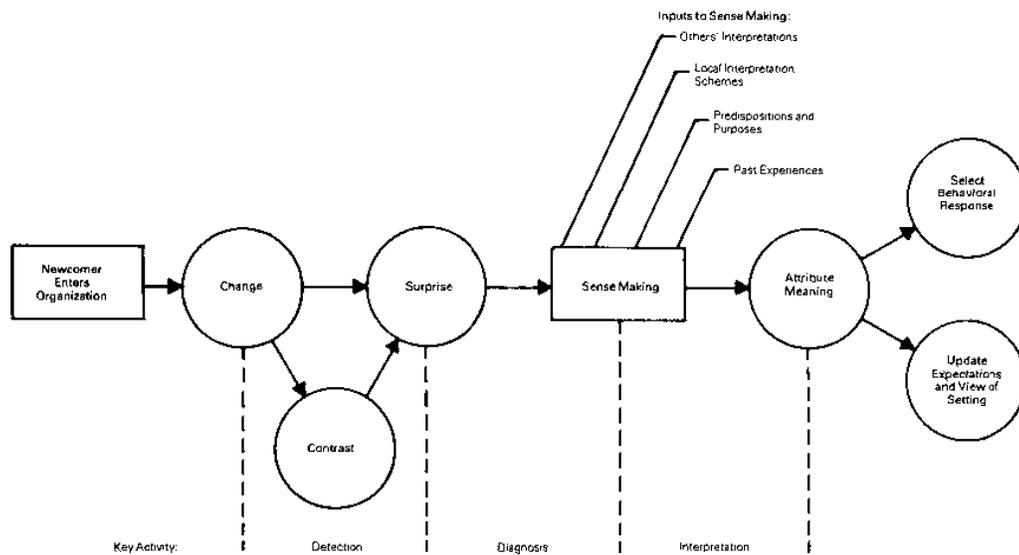
As *changes, contrasts*, and *surprises* are detected the process of diagnosing and interpreting these cognitive events is called sensemaking. Through sensemaking individuals develop explanations for why these events occurred and what they mean. Louis outlines several inputs which shape the explanations and meanings attributed to *change, contrasts,* and *surprises*. These include: past experiences, personal predispositions, local interpretive schemas, and information and interpretations from others. The attributed meanings then lead to behavioral responses and updated expectations (Louis, 1980; see Park & Folkman, 1997 for a similar model). This model is useful for both its clarity and the coding of the various stimuli. Furthermore, one can see the overlap between the four inputs to sensemaking and Weick's articulation of social context and identity. The weakness of the model is its linear and non-dynamic nature and lack of feedback of attributed meanings into the detection phase. As people update their expectations and views of seeing this will impact what they notice as a surprise.

However, the main contribution of the article is its placement of surprise as the trigger to sensemaking—a contribution widely noted by corresponding theorists.

Schön's Reflective Practitioner

Ancillary to the sensemaking literature, Donald Schön's *Reflective Practitioner* (1983) offers a more individual-level focus of how professional's think in action. In his book, Schön describes how professional make sense out of situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique, and value-conflicted. In these situations, professionals cannot apply their technical knowledge of how to deal with unambiguous situations (e.g. a dentist completing another root canal.) Instead, complexity and uniqueness spark reflection-in-action. Schön's work links a sensemaking perspective with how professional think in everyday situations.

The idea of reflective practitioners is particularly relevant to college presidents who mostly deal with situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique and value-conflicted. No standard professional knowledge exists to apply standard solutions. The simpler problems are handled lower in the hierarchy while the unique and value-conflicted problems rise to the chief executive position. As Schön (1983) notes, when situations are complex and uncertain, practitioners engage in a process to *set* the problem. Thus, he describes problem-*setting*, rather than problem *solving*:

> In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. In order to convert the problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work…When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the 'things' of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what direction the situation needs to be changed.

Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them [italics in original] (1983, 40).

Problem-setting overlaps conceptually with Weick's description of enactment with both ideas concerned with how we author situations, primarily through bracketing and labeling. For example, at the beginning of his presidency at Emory University, William Chace initiated projects to unify the faculty appointment process across different schools and departments and decrease the confusion of the physical environment by developing a campus master plan (Chace, 2006). Chace says, "Both of these initiatives were emblematic of what had to be done if the university were to secure a sense of itself. And this is what presidents do much of the time: they take what they find, select problems they believe can be solved, and bring together others to focus intently on those solutions" (2006, 278).

Given he is writing a memoir, Chace describes reflection *on* action. What Schön writes in his book, however, is reflection-*in*-action. Reflection-*in*-action, as Schön describes it, is what occurs when practitioners set the problems to begin with. For example, Chace chose to initiate two projects after arriving, but in taking office he engaged in a process of setting problems and seeing if they could be solved. Chace chose, among the numerous problems he set, to pursue a unified faculty appointment process and a campus master plan. In the moment, however, Chace underwent a process of setting different problems and came upon the campus needing to "secure a sense of itself." This process is what Schön describes as reflection-*in*-action.[1]

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[1] Alternatively, Cohen and March (1974) would say he had solutions—unifying the appointment process and developing a campus master plan—and constructed a problem these solutions could solve.

Schön describes how practitioners use evaluative criteria in choosing to continue with a problem as it is set. The evaluation of the problem-setting is grounded in the practitioner's appreciative system and whether the problem-setting is able to keep inquiry moving. The questions that practitioners use to evaluate their problem setting are: 1) Can I solve the problem I have set? 2) Do I like what I get when I solve the problem? 3) Have I made the situation coherent? 4) Have I made it congruent with my fundamental values and theories? And 5) Have I kept inquiry moving? (1983, 133). These questions describe the sensemaking process this is used to evaluate problem-setting.

Schön's work helps further advance the conceptual grounding of sensemaking as practitioners face situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique, and value-conflicted. In light of these situations, practitioners engage in a process of reflection-in-action to set problems. They evaluate problem-setting based on their appreciative system and its ability to keep inquiry moving. Reflection-in-action could largely be seen as synonymous with sensemaking; however the focus of Schön and Weick differ. Schön's work is largely focused on professionals who face problems that cannot be solved by textbook knowledge. This differs from Weick (1995) who is more broadly concerned with social processes in organizations. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of conceptual and ontological overlap between the two. Both are concerned with interpretive processes; the triggering of conscious thought based on what is puzzling or unique; and an interest in actual behavior rather than what practitioners are "supposed" to do. Furthermore, they both take a step back to pre-interpretive positions that question the process through which things assume meaning.

Naturalistic Decision Making

While sensemaking, as articulated by Weick (1995), is largely an organizational approach to understanding how people think (or how collectives think), naturalistic decision making (NDM) has a micro-cognitive focus of professionals in the field. Similar to Schön's research on how individuals make sense out of situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique, and value-conflicted, NDM is interested in how professionals handle time pressure, uncertainty, ill-defined goals, and high personal stakes (Lipshitz, Klein, Orasanu, & Salas, 2001; Orasanu & Connolly, 1993). The research program has examined contexts such as fire-fighting, healthcare, and the military and is marked by a process-orientation, empirical-based prescription, and context-bound models (Lipshitz, et al., 2001). NDM distinguishes itself from behavioral decision theory by focusing on field settings as opposed to laboratory research, and from organizational decision making (ODM) by reflecting individual cognitive processes as opposed to ODM which mainly examines social processes that are constrained by organizational goals and norms (Gore, Banks, Millward, & Kyriakidou, 2006; Lipshitz, Klein, Carroll, 2006).

There are many significant contributions of NDM to the current study. The first is how decision makers cope with uncertainty (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997). Lipshitz and Strauss (1997) define uncertainty as "a sense of doubt that blocks or delays action" (150), this differs from Weick's (1979) notion of equivocality which is the multiplicity of meanings that can be imposed on a situation. Studying the military, Lipshitz and Strauss (1997) find three sources of uncertainty: incomplete information, inadequate understanding, and undifferentiated alternatives (i.e. equally attractive or unattractive

alternatives). Five broad coping strategies emerged: 1) reduction of uncertainty through collecting more information, 2) forestalling by preemptively generating specific responses, 3) assumption-based reasoning which is filling in gaps of knowledge by making assumptions, 4) weighing pros and cons, and 5) suppression of the uncertainty by ignoring it, acting on the basis of "intuition," or gambling (Lipshitz, 1997; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997).

Another contribution of NDM research is the expert-novice distinction. Experience-based expertise is a key reason NDM researchers study decision-making in the field as opposed to laboratories where experience is controlled for (Zsambok, 1997). NDM researchers argue that experience is an unavoidable factor of decision making and should be incorporated into models. One of the major theorists relied upon to understand expertise is Dreyfus (1997, Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Dreyfus (1997) argues that novice decision making relies on rule-following while experts have highly developed perceptual/attentional abilities. They have a sense of what is relevant and irrelevant and are able to simplify complex problems. Experts rely less on rule-following and more on intuitive understanding. By relying on intuition, experts generally are inarticulate about the processes used to make decisions. Their reactions to problems are more automatic (Shanteau, 1988).

In many ways, a new college president that is an organizational outsider is a non-expert about a specific organization. They do not have a sense of what is relevant or irrelevant in making decisions and they rely on rule-following—highly explicit prescriptions of what should be done. As expertise develops, newcomers "just know" what will work and not work in an organization and can more easily separate relevant

from irrelevant information. Likewise, over time newcomers build expertise in their occupational role. New presidents are novices to the position and slowly develop their ability to simplify their complex role requirements into fewer tasks (i.e. not showing up at every event or being involved in every decision).

The next significant contribution of NDM research is the articulation of a data-frame theory of sensemaking (Klein et al., 2007), which incorporates many of the properties of Weick's sensemaking (1995). In their theory, Klein et al. (2007) define sensemaking as "the deliberate effort to understand events" (114), which is typically triggered by unexpected changes or other surprises that make an individual doubt their prior understanding. They describe sensemaking as "a process of framing and reframing, of fitting data into a frame that helps us filter and interpret data while testing and improving the frame and cyclically moving forward to further adapt the frame" (119). In their theory, frames are explanatory structures that account for data and guide the search for more data. They reflect a person's compiled experiences. Klein et al. (2007) mention that sensemaking ceases when data and a frame are brought into congruence.

Klein et al.'s (2007) second contribution to the sensemaking literature is a discussion of the differences between experts and novices. In a summary of past studies, experts have been found to look at different cues than novices and have a richer repertoire of frames. They find experts' comments were "deeper, more plausible, showed a greater sensitivity to context, and were more insightful" (127). Experts have higher quality frames and "appear to have more routines—more ways of accomplishing things, which widens the range of frames they can draw on" (128). Novices, however, are less certain about the relevance of messages and "were more likely to interpret messages that

were noise in the scenario as important signals" (127). Experts were also been found to produce more action suggestions compared to novices.

The data-frame theory of sensemaking is a first attempt at combining naturalistic decision making with Weick's sensemaking (1995). In comparing the two approaches, most NDM researchers view cognition driving action rather than cognition and action being intertwined, as enactment theory suggests (Lipshitz, 2001). As mentioned previously, NDM has been concerned with micro-cognitive phenomenon rather than social and organizational processes in sensemaking, and has focused on micro-cognitive model-building as opposed to "sensitizing concepts" of how collectives think (Klein, 2008; Klein, Moon, & Hoffman, 2006a, 2006b; Lipshitz, 2001). Weick's sensemaking also has a greater focus on meaning and the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Despite these differences, both research streams have a fundamental interest in how people make sense of the world. They draw upon cognitive psychology to understand field settings where people face ill-defined situations.

While the NDM research program offers many valuable insights into decision making in real world situations, the contextual factors of research in this domain have moderate overlap with university administration. For example, Orasanu and Connolly (1993) outlined eight contextual factors for NDM research. Factors that readily apply to university administration include: 1) ill-structured problems, 2) ill-defined or competing goals, 3) multiple players as opposed to individual decision making, and 4) the presence of organizational norms. Other factors with less descriptive salience include: 5) an uncertain, dynamic environment, 6) action/feedback loops altering a decision course, 7) high stakes of life-and-death decisions or accidents, and 8) time stress. These factors

contribute to the marginal overlap between university administration and the NDM research program. Administration is marked by relatively stable environments such as constant enrollment patterns, ambiguity in connecting actions to future outcomes, decisions with relatively low stakes, and time for deliberation. Despite these differences, the conceptions of decision making under uncertainty (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997), the data-frame theory of sensemaking (Klein et al., 2007), and organizational and role expertise (Dreyfus, 1997) are powerful analytic concepts to understand the entry process of new college presidents.

<div style="text-align: center;">Sensegiving</div>

If sensemaking is about how people think, then sensegiving is *intentionally* trying to change how other people think. This behavior is more conspicuous among those in positional leadership roles, such as college presidents, making it relevant for this study. The term sensegiving was first used by Whetten (1984) in his practitioner article about effective administrators. In briefly mentioning the term, he states, "What distinguishes truly effective administrators is their ability to create the inspirational vision that can become the core of an insightful, commitment-generating strategic plan" (1984, 42). The term sensegiving was more prominently developed by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) in their ethnographic study of a new college president at a large, public research university. Sensegiving closely aligns with the perspective of sensemaking and the Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) article is highlighted as one of the seminal articles in the sensemaking literature (See Weick, 1995, Chap. 3).

Sensegiving, as originally conceptualized by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), is about framing (Gioia, 2008), and some authors have developed sensegiving as framing (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). The intent of sensegiving is seen as providing a viable interpretation of a new reality and to influence targets to adopt it as their own (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Gioia and Chittepeddi (1991) suggest that sensemaking and sensegiving are sequential processes that move through four phases (See Figure 2.3). The envisioning phase begins three months before the formal term of an executive and includes assessing potentials and possibilities through meetings with administrators to evolve an embryonic strategic vision for the university. The signaling phase begins after

a month in office and is defined by the public declaration of the strategic change effort.

This announcement "injects ambiguity" in a stable, even complacent university

community. This phase is similar to "stirring the setting" that Neumann (1995) describes

in her case study of a new college president. The third phase of re-visioning lasts about

six months and involves constituents trying to make sense of what the new changes will

mean; predictable opposition emerges. Finally, the energizing phase involves rolling out

activities that have become agreed upon by strategic planning committees.

Figure 2.3: Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) Processes Involved in Strategic Change

Envisioning	Signaling	Re-Visioning	Energizing
Sensemaking	Sensegiving	Sensemaking	Sensegiving
(Understanding)	(Influencing)	(Understanding)	(Influencing)
[Cognition]	[Action]	[Cognition]	[Action]
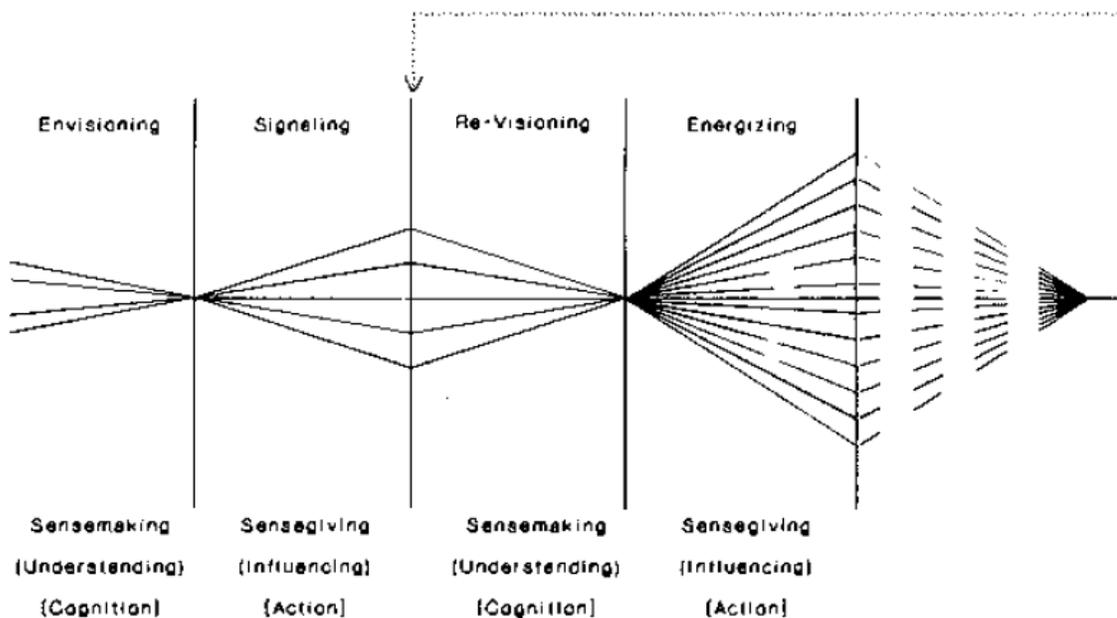
Since this original conceptualization, Weick et al. (2005) have defined

sensegiving as "a sensemaking variant undertaken to create meanings for a target

audience." The term is primarily used in the strategic management literature and usually

describes the persuasion of strategic change initiatives (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, &

Humphries, 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Rouleau, 2005), with the content of sensegiving being a present versus future image. In addition, sensegiving has anchored conceptually the use of metaphors by entrepreneurs (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995), the process of organizational identification (Ashforth, Harrison, Corley, 2008), and the diffusion and negotiation of meaning (Corvellic & Risberg, 2007).

Bartunek et al. (1999) equate sensegiving with persuasion and rely on theoretical language from this field (Johnston, 1994; Reardon, 1991; Smith, 1982). Drawing upon the work of Johnston (1994), they suggest four approaches of persuasive appeals. These include: (1) making messages appear logical and reasonable, (2) using sanctions and rewards, (3) appealing to the values and norms of the receiver, and (4) demonstrating the credibility of the sender in terms of good sense, good values, and goodwill (Bartunek et al., 1999). In their study of an organizational change in a government agency, they describe how a recipients' sensemaking will not be the same as the leaders' sensegiving. They suggest that "achieving acceptance of a vision is likely to be a complex process that involves multiple, perhaps conflicting, and evolving understandings" (Bartunek et al., 1999, 67).

This disjoint between a leader's desired interpretation of events and the multiple interpretations that are retained by constituents is highlighted in the longitudinal study of Neumann (1995), who describes the various interpretations that faculty members retain of a change initiative of a new president. The multiple interpretations that occur highlight a difficulty with the term sensegiving. In their case study, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) mention that sensegiving "instigated ambiguity." However, sensegiving is mostly considered an intentional effort to persuade others, suggesting the sender has an intended

meaning for a target audience. Corvellic and Risberg (2007) argue that having an

intended meaning risks the danger of reifying "sense." In other words, there is the

implication that someone "gives" something to someone else, and that senior

management owns an interpretation that is given to employees. Corvellic and Risberg

(2007) object to such a "sender-centric view of sense" and argue that "it is non-sensical

to speak of sense without referring to interpretation and, thus, to a living audience" (322).

Instead, they argue that sensegiving is the *activity* of influencing audiences in the

direction of a preferred definition of reality. By focusing on the activity itself, one

bypasses the complications of assessing whether a target audience adopts a particular

meaning. It is unlikely, in a strict sense, this would ever occur.

In her two-year study of a symphony orchestra, Maitlis (2005) describes four

distinct forms of sensemaking that result from leaders' and stakeholders' engagement in

sensegiving (see Figure 2.4). Maitlis' (2005) research adds to our understanding of

sensegiving as the reciprocal process of *both* leaders and stakeholders shaping the

definition of reality. In *guided* organizational sensemaking, leaders are very active in

constructing and promoting understandings and explanations of events, while at the same

time stakeholders try to shape beliefs about certain elements of issues. This form of

sensemaking produces a rich account that prescribes a unitary course of action. Within

the context of colleges and universities, this would occur in strategic planning sessions

where presidents promote a distinct perspective, while other stakeholders attempt to

shape beliefs about certain issues. In *fragmented* organizational sensemaking, leaders do

not attempt to control or organize discussions; instead stakeholders raise issues and shape

accounts of situations. In the current research context, a similar process is described as

garbage can decision making (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972), with the outcome being

multiple, individualist accounts. This form of sensemaking can be readily found in the

"listening sessions" that many new presidents conduct when they first arrive.

Figure 2.4: Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005, 32)

In *restricted* organizational sensemaking, leaders engage in controlled

sensegiving where they disseminate accounts of issues. Stakeholders tend to accept the

accounts and make few attempts to provide alternative understandings. Maitlis (2005)

finds this produces a unitary account that is narrower than *guided* sensemaking. Finally,

minimal organizational sensemaking occurs when leaders and stakeholders engage in low

levels of sensegiving. This produces only token understanding of issues with little

synthesis of perspectives. Maitlis' (2005) research contributes the idea that different

issues provoke different forms of sensemaking and that these different forms result in

different outcomes. Her framework and analysis is a large step forward in the

sensemaking literature.

More recently, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) examine the triggers and enablers of

sensegiving. They found that for leaders, sensegiving was triggered by "complex

sensemaking environments—those that were ambiguous and unpredictable and that

involved numerous stakeholders with divergent interests" (80). This description aptly

depicts a university context (Birnbaum, 1988; Peterson, 2007), that has been

conceptualized as an organized anarchy (Cohen & March, 1974), a multiversity (Kerr,

2001), and a loosely-coupled system (Weick, 1976). Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) also

found that sensegiving was enabled by "a discursive ability that allowed actors to

construct and articulate persuasive accounts of the world" (80).

Being in a position to shape meaning and label problems is a key component of

sensegiving. As Thayer (1988) describes:

> The special wisdom that leaders seem to possess lies not in their
> achievement of a superior verbal knowledge of things, but in their
> willingness to remain forever in pursuit of understandings that lie beyond
> language as such…The leader is not so much a problem-solver as a
> creative problem re-namer…The art of leadership lies in redefining the
> problem, of creating other possibilities for seeing, of creating possible
> "alternities," of creating different meanings of things. In a very critical
> way, which seems in retrospect always to have been inevitable, the leader
> is a sense-*giver* (254) [italics in original].

In this quote, Thayer (1988) describes both sensemaking and sensegiving. He

also gives us a clue as to why outsiders are often chosen as college presidents. First,

leaders are described as people willing to pursue understandings that lie beyond the

current reach of knowledge. They are in a position—as well as their senior management team—to be the "thinkers" for the organization, in which they are continually pursuing knowledge and understanding that lies just beyond current language. Second, the "art of leadership," as Thayer (1988) describes, is to alter how others think by redefining problems, creating new ways of seeing, and new alternatives. This is the essence of sensegiving and Thayer directly links this to sensemaking. In other words, as we are continually pursuing new understandings (sensemaking) we are continually conveying those new understandings to influence others (sensegiving). It is easy to see how organizational outsiders would be better at creating new possibilities for seeing. If people are searching for this ability in leaders, as Thayer suggests, then the prevalence of hiring outsiders as college presidents is understandable.

To conclude, sensegiving is an attempt to intentionally alter how people think, with no assurance that the intended meaning is adopted. The conceptual and empirical literature in this area is sparse and much of the work equates sensegiving with persuasion, influence, and action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). It is a term mostly used by those approaching inquiry from a sensemaking perspective and focuses our attention on the outward communicative agency of individuals. It is largely viewed symmetrically with sensemaking, and this is the manner in which I use the term. However, the conceptualization of sensemaking and sensegiving as separate processes disguises their interrelationship. For example, Gioia et al. (1994) found that 41 percent of the passages that were coded as sensemaking coincided with those coded as influence. This highlights the interdependence and reciprocal nature of these processes that was explored throughout this study.

Executive Succession Literature

The executive succession literature offers insight into the manner in which new CEOs or managers enter an organization. The main concern of the literature is on the financial outcomes of succession (Giambatista, Rowe, & Riaz, 2005; Karaevli, 2007; Kesner & Sebora, 1994), with few studies interested in the theoretical treatment of sensemaking and sensegiving or the stages of learning and action, with the notable exception of Gabarro (1987). This lack of theoretical treatment is mostly due to the quantitative methodology of succession studies. As Giambatista et al. (2005) summarize, "the current succession literature is sorely lacking in terms of qualitative studies" (972). In their review of over 40 years of succession research, Giambatista et al. (2005) conclude that

> We found relatively low reliance on survey and interview methods, which offer much potential for exploring the many holes and gaps in our understanding of processes from the early stages of succession (planning, searching, etc.) and exactly what it is successors do (984).

Nevertheless, one relevant issue that the literature addresses is the effect of a new manager's background and experience, such as being an organizational insider or outsider. In general, studies have found that organizations who select successors from outside the organization experience greater degrees of change (Brady & Helmich, 1982; Carlson, 1961; Fondas & Wiersema, 1997; Tushman, Virany & Romanelli, 1985). For example, Helmich and Brown (1972) found that organizational insiders replaced fewer subordinates than outsiders, with outsiders making more changes in their "executive role constellations." Birnbaum (1971), however, in a study of 76 college presidents, found that if outsiders where socialized and trained in similar organizations then successions had less conflict and more stability.

Regarding the balance of sensemaking and sensegiving, Gabarro's (1987) study of 17 new managers—four of which were longitudinal case studies and the remaining 13 historical case studies—is the most relevant study in the executive succession literature. His interest in process coincides with the sensemaking literature, as well as "how managers learn about their new assignments, act on that learning, and do the organizational and interpersonal work necessary to take charge of their organizations" (1987, 2). As the title suggests, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge,* Gabarro views actors as having substantial ability to change social systems—an assumption found to be more tenuous among college presidents (Cohen & March, 1974).

Gabarro found managers take charge in many different ways, depending on their style, skills, prior experience, and the context they entered. Nevertheless, several patterns stood out. In his study, Gabarro (1987) found five predictable stages of taking charge, which alternated between learning and action. These include: (1) Taking hold—a period of orientation, evaluative learning, and taking immediate corrective action, usually lasting from three to six months; (2) Immersion—a period of less change and more reflective and penetrating learning; (3) Reshaping—a period of major change in which the learning of the immersion stage is acted upon; (4) Consolidation—a period of follow-through and corrective action from the major change of the Reshaping process; and (5) Refinement— a period of fine-tuning and relatively little change. Gabarro (1987) found that it took two and a half to three years for managers to progress through these stages.

Gabarro finds a three wave phenomenon when he graphs the number of structural and personnel changes over time that occur through these five stages. The "three wave phenomenon" describes three periods with a high frequency of change. This pattern

holds for both industry insiders and outsiders and turnaround and non-turnaround

situations. The three waves across the five stages can be seen in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5: Gabarro's (1987, 16) Stages of Learning and Action

Figure 2-1
Average Number of Organizational Changes per Three-Month Period Following Succession*

*Averages based on change data from the successful cases in the longitudinal and historical studies.

Figure 2-2
Average Number of Organizational Changes per Six-Month Period Following Succession, Categorized*

*Averages based on change data from the successful cases in the longitudinal and historical studies.
**Insider successions are those in which the new manager had five or more years' experience in the new organization's industry.

Overlapping with the sensemaking perspective that posits identity as a prime

component of the process, Gabarro (1987) finds that "a manager's prior experience,

profoundly influences the manager's actions and what he tends to focus on, as well as the

kind of problems he is likely to face" (7). This finding is not surprising given identity

shapes the perceptual cues we notice, how we make sense of them, and what we decide to

do. Gabarro (1987) also finds differences in the stages based on the context the managers

entered, particularly whether it was a turnaround or non-turnaround situation. He finds

the two most prevalent causes of failure were having inadequate background experience

and having poor working relationships with key people.[2] Additionally, in highlighting

the social nature of cognition and sensemaking, Gabarro (1987) finds that managers who

had failed approached their task in a solitary, "Lone Ranger" fashion. As a result, these

managers tended to have a diagnosis of the problem that was much more narrow and

incomplete.

Critically examining Gabarro's study, there are a few shortcomings. First, he has

several notions of learning within each of the five stages. In the taking hold stage,

learning is orientational and evaluative. In the immersion stage it is characterized as

reflective. In the reshaping stage, learning is intervention-oriented. In the consolidation

stage it is again evaluative, and in the refinement stage it is routine (Gupta, 1988).

Second, Gabarro (1987) clearly delineates cognition and action—as do Gioia and

Chittipeddi (1991). He separates the dynamics of taking charge into learning stages and

action stages. The learning stages are described as deliberate periods of learning and

investigation which end in a clear decision to take action. A sensemaking perspective

takes an approach that cognition and action are simultaneous, and often action precedes

cognition. For Gabarro, a manager's emphasis alternates between learning and action in

a sequentially predictable fashion (See Figure 2.5). By learning, he means figuring out a

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[2] Gabarro (1987) defines failure as being fired in the first 36 months. Four of the 17 managers met this criterion.

new assignment and undergoing assessment and diagnoses. By action, he means the

organizational and personnel changes a new manager makes. Despite the sometimes

over-rationalized description of the entry process, Gabarro's longitudinal and in-depth

analysis make it the most relevant and comprehensive study in the executive succession

literature.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the research methods of this study. I begin by describing

research paradigms, which are useful articulations of one's stance toward the nature of

the social world and the limits of our ability to know what we know as social scientists. I

then discuss interviewing techniques, the study population, data analysis, and validity

concerns.

Research Paradigm

A paradigm derives from our personal orientations to ontology, epistemology, and

methodology, which Guba and Lincoln (1994) delineate into postpositive, interpretive, or

critical. These paradigms align with Burrell and Morgan's description of functionalist,

interpretive, radical humanist, and radical structuralist (1979). Burrell and Morgan

(1979) define paradigms as "very basic meta-theoretical assumptions which underwrite

the frame of reference, mode of theorizing and *modus operandi* of the social theorists

who operate within them. It is a term which is intended to emphasize the commonality of

perspective which binds the work of a group of theorists" (1979, 23). It is important to

note, that I do not see paradigms as mutually exclusive or that the assumptions of one

paradigm deny the assumptions of another (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Schultz & Hatch, 1996;

Weaver & Gioia, 1994). However, paradigms stress what is of primary concern to the researcher, or what one places as foreground and background in the research. Therefore, paradigms become useful "straw men" from which to compare the primary concerns of the researcher.

From a postpositive view, an objective reality can be apprehended with a desire for replicable findings to prove something to be "true;" objectivity is a regulatory ideal; and hypotheses are stated and subjected to empirical test to falsify them (not verify hypotheses as in positivism). The aim of inquiry is prediction and control, with knowledge steadily accumulating. The quality of the research is based on statistical benchmarks of internal and external validity and reliability, and an inquirer should be a "disinterested scientist" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

From an interpretive perspective, constructions are not more or less "true," in any absolute sense, but more or less informed and/or sophisticated; findings are created as the investigation proceeds; and the final aim is to "distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 111). The interpretive paradigm seeks an explanation within the frame of reference of the participant and views social reality as an ongoing, emergent process. The goal of inquiry is a construction that achieves relative consensus, and the quality of the research is based on criteria of *authenticity* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Questions that assess criteria of authenticity are: Do the findings enlarge personal constructions (ontological authenticity)? Do the findings improve the constructions of others (educational authenticity)? And do the findings stimulate action (catalytic authenticity)? Regarding the criteria of stimulating action, Weick states, "If the goal is to compose

useful vocabularies, then tests of usefulness lie in the outcomes of actions that take place in the presence of these vocabularies" (2006, 12).

Within a postpositive/functionalist paradigm, a natural science approach to studying organizations is possible and statistical validity is pursued (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This contrasts with the view that, "the pursuit in the social sciences of a degree of validity even roughly comparable to that achieved in the natural sciences is, for most propositions that might be pursued, foolish" (Lindblom, 1987, 513). The distinction between these two viewpoints is important, because one's methodological approach largely depends on one's ontological assumptions, which can be difficult to ascertain. Lindblom (1987), however, sets forth two ontological positions and describes their implications for methodology.

> Consider two social worlds. In one, mankind is at the edge of an intellectual mastery of it, approaching a capability to lay out a structured set of propositions describing it with scientific precision. In the other, it is far, far from such mastery; and man's incompetence is compounded by social change through social learning, which is itself accelerated by such accomplishments as can be credited to social science…In the first of these two worlds, the task of social science might be argued to be first and foremost that of achieving scientific validity. In the second, social science has to grasp (by every available method) at whatever limited understandings can be achieved (1987, 514; quoted in Weick 1989).

This description of "two social worlds" partly describes whether a scholar believes the contribution of social science is in validated scientific knowledge or rather in suggestions of relationships and connections that had previously not been suspected (Astley, 1985; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Weick, 1989). Therefore, theories are either judged based on their scientific validity or plausibility (Weick, 1989). A theory would be judged to be more plausible and of higher quality "if it is interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd, obvious in novel ways, a source of unexpected connections, high in narrative

rationality, aesthetically pleasing, or correspondent with presumed realities" (Weick, 1989, 517). If one believes that social theory not only reflects reality, but also produces that reality then "an awareness of the underlying values and biases upon which theory is constructed becomes essential" (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983, 270).

The goal of this research is to understand the subjective experience of participants and how they are interpreting the social world and communicating that interpretation to others. I primarily view the value of theory as the suggestion of relationships and connections that had not been previously suspected, thereby enlarging and expanding our personal constructions, and potentially stimulating more effective action.

Interviews and Data Collection

To capture the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of new college presidents, participants were interviewed with an open-ended, semi-structured interview (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993; Hopf, 2004; Kvale, 1996; see protocol in Appendix). While the structure of the interview protocol was followed, sometimes it was necessary to prod the subjects to further explore the sensemaking and sensegiving processes, therefore the research allowed for follow-up questions for deeper descriptions of experiences and events (Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg 1982; Weiss, 1994). Throughout the interviews, an attempt was made to understand the cognitive maps and schema that the presidents were operating from (Crandall, Klein, & Hoffman, 2006; Gabarro, 1987; Gioia, 1992; Kiesler, & Sproull, 1982), and how these cognitive maps and schema change over time in response to unexpected events.

The interviews were conducted in person, in the president's office. Before each interview I reviewed the interviewee's background and familiarized myself with events on campus that happened recently during the president's tenure. The interviews were digitally recorded, but as a back up and to aid memory in reflecting upon key issues, notes were also taken during the interview. Before beginning the interview, I asked the participants to sign an informed consent form (See Appendix). Using the structure of the interview protocol, I helped presidents "tell stories" (Crandall, Klein, & Hoffman, 2006; Orbuch, 1997). Through the stories I tried to find the cues and patterns that were perceived by the respondents and the schema or "rules of thumb" they have devised. I tried to elicit the knowledge and cognitions that are used to make sense of the organization and how they became a "springboard into action" (Weick, et al., 2005).

Upon completion of the interview, journaling was conducted to record impressions, thoughts, and insights from the interview. This was done immediately after the interview to capture as much of the nuance of the interview as possible (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993). The journaling consisted of an evaluation of the respondents, impressions of their statements, and a summary of their general disposition. In addition to the interview notes, each interview was transcribed shortly after its completion and preliminary analysis was conducted to understand dynamics and ideas to improve future interviews. The transcribing was conducted by the primary researcher in order to increase familiarity with the content of the interview. The transcripts were not shared with presidents, although they would have been shared if requested. Member checking the interviews may lead respondents to revise statements and alter their meaning to

manipulate their public persona. However, due to the busy schedules of respondents, no request to review transcripts occurred.

In addition to in-person interviews, I collected inaugural speeches, memoranda to the campus, and other remarks that were published on the president's website. Due to the public nature of the role, access to these documents was straightforward. In many cases, I could also watch videos of the presidents' speeches online in preparation for the interview. Lastly, I also collected newspaper articles related to the president. The articles were searched for in the college or university newspaper and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This complimentary data collection allowed me to form a more complete picture of the president's leadership and created a more productive in-person interview.

Study Population

A total of eighteen presidents were interviewed—a number at which sufficient "category saturation" was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To limit the influence of memory deficiencies, only presidents who had been in their position for less than five years were interviewed. Data collection was completed during the first six months of 2008. Thus, no president who began prior to the summer of 2003 was interviewed. To limit the influence of prior institutional knowledge, I only interviewed presidents who were appointed as external candidates. This criterion partly comes from Duderstadt (2007), who had been president of the University of Michigan from 1988-1996. He says:

> Since I had been in various faculty and leadership roles at the university
> for almost twenty years, I understood well the Michigan institutional
> saga…Hence, I was able to hit the ground running almost immediately as
> president-elect (and still provost); and long before I would formally

assume the presidency in September, I had begun to define and put into place the key themes that would characterize my administration: diversity, globalization, and our evolution into a knowledge-driven society. Hence, by the time of my formal inauguration in October of 1988, the university had emerged from its interregnum and was already accelerating rapidly (Duderstadt, 2007, 84-85).

Thus, insiders would have more institutional knowledge of the campus, so this was controlled for among the study population. Furthermore, to limit the influence of past experiences, only president who did not have a prior presidency were interviewed. A diverse sample by gender, race, and ethnicity was desirable, although length of service, being hired externally, and having no prior presidency were the primary determinants of respondent selection.

Presidents were chosen from three Carnegie classifications—research universities, master's colleges and universities, and baccalaureate colleges. No presidents of special focus institutions (e.g. schools of art, music and design, or technology-related schools, etc.), associates colleges, or for-profit organizations were interviewed as these institutional types are considered sufficiently different from the general population of higher education organizations. A balance was sought between public and private organizations and religious/non-religious-affiliations, but these criteria were of secondary concern with regard to achieving a reflective sample of the three Carnegie classifications. Presidents at college and universities in the Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, OH) were primarily chosen in order to maintain reasonable travel costs to conduct the interviews in person. The most important variables of concern for this study were personal variables. These included whether the president was an outsider, meaning their immediate prior position was at another institution, their time in office being less than five years, and

being first-time presidents. The variables that were considered less important were institutional, including type and private versus public.

Given the elite and public nature of respondents, all personal and institutional names have been kept confidential. Institutional pseudonyms have been used instead. I provided assurances of confidentiality to interviewees both before and after the interview and in the initial correspondence. In recruiting participants I first sent a formal letter asking for their participation in the study (see letter in Appendix). If no response was received, I then sent a follow-up email. If no response was received from the email, then I did not pursue the respondent further. Letters were sent to 40 presidents with a positive response from 18, for a response rate of 45 percent. Ten presidents declined to be interviewed due to time constraints (25 percent) and the remainder did not respond (30 percent). More letters were sent to presidents of large, research universities as this group was more likely to decline to be interviewed due to time constraints.

Table 3.1 outlines a list of respondents, including both personal characteristics and institutional characteristics:

Table 3.1: Summary Description of Presidents and Institutions (sorted by Enrollment)

Institution Pseudonym	Previous Position	Month/ Year Began	Gender	Approximate Enrollment	Public/ Private	Carnegie Classification
Coolidge State University	Provost of a Private University	July 2006	M	32,000	Public	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Madison State University	Interim Chancellor and Provost of Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2007	M	28,000	Public	Research Universities (high research activity)
Daft University	Chief Operating Officer of a Master's Univ.	July 1, 2004	M	24,000	Private	Doctoral/Research Universities
McKinley State University	Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences of a Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2006	M	17,000	Public	Research Universities (high research activity)
Tyler State University	Provost of a Master's Univ.	July 1, 2003	M	12,000	Public	Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)
Fillmore State University	Vice Provost of Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2007	M	12,000	Public	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Burr Research University	Provost of Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2007	F	9,000	Private	Research Universities (very high research activity)
Urban Tech Institute	Provost of Large, Private Univ.	Aug. 1, 2007	M	6,000	Private	Research Universities (high research activity)
Buchanan College	Dean of College of Arts and Architecture of Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2006	M	4,600	Private	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Loyola Jesuit University	Vice President in Planning and Budget and Associate Provost of Private Univ.	August 2005	M	4,000	Private	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Pierce College	General Counsel of Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2007	M	2,900	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
Hamlin College	VP for institutional planning and admin. at a Private, Baccalaureate Coll.	July 1, 2005	F	2,500	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
Adams College	Provost of Private Doctoral/Research Univ.	July 1, 2007	F	1,900	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
Wilson College	VP for Academic Affairs at a Private Baccalaureate Coll.	July 1, 2007	M	1,800	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
Lincoln College	President of a National Foundation	April 1, 2006	M	2,600	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences & Adult Education
Harrison College	Dean and Director of Regional Campus of a Large, Public Univ.	July 1, 2003	M	1,500	Private	Master's Colleges and Universities (smaller programs)
Hayes College	Partner at Law Firm; Had been on Board of Trustees of Hayes College	July 1, 2003	M	1,100	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
Arthur College	VP and Special Assistant to the President of a Private Baccalaureate College.	July 1, 2005	M	1,000	Private	Baccalaureate Colleges--Diverse Fields

Data Analysis

The methods of analysis are informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2001, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach does not mean I am using no prior theory and am a "blank slate," which is a common misconception of grounded theory (Locke, 1996; Suddaby, 2006). Locke (1996) describes this disagreement about the role of prior theory as an argument between Glaser and Strauss. Glaser (1992) states that a review of the literature is not necessary or preferable before the research, and Strauss and Corbin (1990) allow for prior theory, non-technical literature, and personal experience to help researchers gain insight into the data. My view is the latter, and thus in using grounded theory techniques I am looking to elaborate upon existing conceptual vocabulary (sensemaking and sensegiving) rather than develop new theory as a "blank slate." In this pursuit, I have sought "to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism" (Suddaby, 2006).

In elaborating existing conceptual vocabularies, new concepts and categories have emerged—separate from the models and language used previously by scholars such as Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Louis (1980), and Weick (1995). My analysis has also revealed the relative saliency and usefulness of prior conceptual vocabularies. In this sense, I have worked to "problematize" theoretical ideas. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) state:

> To problematize means to challenge the value of a theory and to explore its weaknesses and problems in relation to the phenomena it is supposed to explicate. It means to generally open up and to point out the need and possible directions for rethinking and developing theory (1265).

The first step in this process was coding the interview transcripts. Grounded theory, as articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1998), has a hierarchy of coding types: open, axial, and selective. Open coding is the analytic process through which concepts are identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These concepts become the basic units of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To identify sensemaking concepts, I relied upon the seven properties outlined by Weick (1995) as well as other articulations (Louis, 1980). Through this initial process I worked to become "aware of how much is packed into small bits of data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 65). I considered the range of plausible meanings and avoided making quick assumptions about the data. This process involved line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts to break apart the interviews into small units (Charmaz, 2006).

The next step was to categorize the concepts of open coding into *axial* categories. Axial categorization begins "the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 124). To do this, I assembled axial categories into a Microsoft Word document. Under each axial category I pasted quotations from the interviews along with insights from the literature. In labeling the axial categories, I sought to phrase them in gerunds, thus preserving the process-orientation of the research (Charmaz, 2006).

The process of choosing, discarding, and naming axial categories was largely one of "disciplined imagination," where interest, plausibility, and category saturation were the criteria for selection (Weick, 1989). In this manner the process of choosing axial categories unfolds much like artificial selection through trial-and-error thinking with the constant process of logical and affective judgment (Davis, 1971; Fendt & Sachs, 2008;

Locke, 2007). Logically, the categories were judged based on their plausibility in answering the research questions; whether they held up to increasing scrutiny, and their correspondence with theory and previous findings. Affectively, the categories were judged based on whether they were "interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd, obvious in novel ways, a source of unexpected connections, high in narrative rationality, aesthetically pleasing, or correspondent with presumed realities" (Weick, 1989, 517). In discarding axial categories, they were removed to an alternative document and occasionally reviewed in light of the continued analysis of transcripts and documents. Through the continuous selection and retention of axial categories, I began assembling them under higher levels of abstraction through *selective* coding. Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this research, I had the predefined selective codes of sensemaking and sensegiving to guide the coding process.

In analyzing the interviews, speeches and newspaper articles, I worked toward moving back-and-forth from the data to abstract concepts. I alternated between consulting the literature to analyzing the data. Through this process I worked to expand the abstract concepts by filling them with concrete examples. I also conceptualized from the concrete data about sensemaking and sensegiving. Thus, I grounded ideas in data, but also worked toward expanding the conceptual vocabulary through abstraction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and abduction (Reichertz, 2004, 2007; Strübing, 2007). Abduction begins when something unintelligible is discovered in the data, and is a process of constructing an explanation for this surprise. This process of data analysis is more of a cognitive process that allows for a "process of discovery rather than only a logic of validation"

(Van Maanen, Sørenson, & Mitchell, 2007). Overall, this process of data analysis is prescribed by the interpretative paradigm I was operating under that was discussed in a previous section.

Limitations and Validity of Interviews

There are several issues that may limit the validity of the interviews (Maxwell, 1992). The first limitation is due to *memory deficiencies*. Presidents' memories of the sensemaking during their first year in office may not be as detailed and specific as interviewing them at established intervals throughout the process. Furthermore, the process may be more subconscious than explicit, making it hard to conceptualize the process because it is difficult for respondents to articulate their past thought processes. As Weick and colleagues state, "methodologically, it is hard to find people in the act of coping with disconfirmations that catch them unawares" (2005, 415). Nevertheless, there are some conditions under which actors switch to active thinking.

Louis and Sutton (1991) outline the conditions that provoke people to switch from "habits of mind" to "active thinking." These include novelty, discrepancies, and deliberate initiative. They argue that generally individuals and organizations rely on "habits of mind" to guide interpretation and behavior. However, under conditions of novelty, discrepancies, and deliberate initiative, individuals and organizations move to a conscious mode of processing that is more explicit. Novelty most often occurs during role transitions for the individual or during organizational change initiatives at the organizational-level. Discrepancies can occur at the individual level during performance reviews when someone receives a "rude awakening." This recognized gap requires one

to move to "active thinking" and revise one's schemas to prevent similar discrepancies in the future. Finally, active thinking is also sparked by deliberate initiation such as strategic planning sessions. Individuals switch to consciously deliberate their personal or organizational trajectory and how it may need to change. I worked toward sparking active thinking through deliberate initiation in the interview.

In this study I stress the tight linking of individuals constantly making sense of the world and influencing others through this evolving interpretation. This approach gives little heed to cognition that is mindless and automatic (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Wilson, 2002). Recent work suggests that the majority of cognition falls outside of conscious awareness (Wilson, 2002), with estimates that we take in 11,000,000 pieces of information per second and process only 40 of them consciously (Nørretranders, 1998). A sensemaking perspective does not make a distinction between conscious and unconscious processing, but does incorporate both processes into analyses. The issue of conscious versus unconscious processes poses methodological concerns. Can people verbalize what is happening if so much is occurring "under the radar" (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977)? This poses a limitation to research as more evidence indicates the high degree of automaticity of human behavior and thought (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), and it is something to be mindful of as the field of sensemaking moves forward.

An additional limitation to retrospective interviews is that most people see past events as more rationally ordered than current or future events (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Thus, interviewing presidents too far hence from their entry process may uncover their rational narratives about the flow of experience rather than the flux and uncertainty of every day life. Furthermore, respondents may *reweave* their memory of past events

given the present cues and vocabulary used in the interview (Schacter, 1996). In other words, the respondent may only remember the gist of an event, but given too much prodding by the interviewer, they may include thoughts and insights that did not occur at the time of the event. I sought a balance of specifically prodding past events while trying not to put words in the respondent's mouth.

Counterbalancing these validity concerns caused by memory deficiencies is that retrospective verbal accounts of specific events can be more accurate than a recall of common, everyday events. Common events tend to blend together in people's memories, resulting in more problematic recall. The relative ease with which people recall unusual events is often ascribed to the availability heuristic (Schwartz, et al., 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

The second major threat to validity is the *social desirability bias* of respondents. This means that presidents may only share memories that convey competency. Being thrown off guard or confused by events may not be easily admitted, especially if sufficient trust has not been established with the interviewer. I ensured participants of confidentiality at the beginning of the interview and mentioned that their identity and institution would be disguised in the write-up. I also attempted to build as much rapport as possible during the interview.

Along with the desire to convey a competent image, there may be a disconnection between what presidents say they do and their actions (Argyris, 1976). This disconnect can be described as espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are how we say we act and behave and theories-in-use describe the actual assumptions that underlie our behavior. As Weick (1995) states, "Observations of action are crucial to offset the

possibility that what people tell us about their theories of sensemaking has limited

relevance to how they function" (123). This limitation could only have been overcome

by in-depth ethnographic research and by shadowing the presidents (Mintzberg, 1973).

However, to partly mitigate this concern, I attempted to triangulate analysis by reviewing

documents and observing as much behavior as possible during campus visits. This partly

helps to overcome this limitation.

Third, because I completed one interview in the organization, in a sense, I am

stuck with the president's interpretation, and I am trying to make an interpretation of an

interpretation (Geertz, 1973). This is a tradeoff in the research. I went for breadth of

interviews rather than depth with case studies. Case studies would have allowed me to

judge the plausibility of interpretations by the president, instead I have a larger

population from which to understand the phenomenon, but I tradeoff more in-depth

knowledge of a particular context.

CHAPTER 4

SIMULTANEITY AND SITUATIONAL DEMANDS

The main research question guiding this study has been: When new college presidents are hired as organizational outsiders, what sensemaking and sensegiving do they engage in over their first year? There are three sub-questions: 1) How do presidents cope with being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice? 2) How do situational demands influence this simultaneity? And 3) How can our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving be enlarged given the experiences of new presidents?

Simultaneity of Sensemaking and Sensegiving

This first section addresses the question of how presidents cope with being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice. In the manner that I am using the term, sensemaking is about the reduction of uncertainty and equivocality through the deliberate effort to understand the organization. Uncertainty is lacking information, having inadequate understanding, and having alternatives that are undifferentiated (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997); equivocality is having too many meanings from which to choose (Weick, 1979). The question I am seeking to answer is how organizational novices simultaneously cope with uncertainty and equivocality while having to persuade and influence (sensegiving).

To situate the findings within prior research, I briefly compare simultaneous cognition-action to stage models. I then discuss three coping strategies to deal with simultaneity: speaking in ambiguous, broad goals and "safe harbors," displaying an attitude of wisdom, and finding trusted individuals.

In past studies, sensemaking was equated with cognition, and sensegiving with taking action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Similarly, Gabarro (1987) described alternating phases of learning and action undertaken by new managers (Gabarro, 1987). These models of executive succession describe sequential processes. In other words, several months of cognition alternate with several months of action-taking or sensegiving. A competing perspective would intertwine cognition and action, and as enactment theory suggests, in many cases action precedes cognition (Weick, 1979). These competing perspectives of cognition and action are displayed in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Simultaneous versus Sequential Cognition/Action

Simultaneous cognition-action

Stage model of sequential cognition-action

(e.g. Gabarro, 1987; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991)
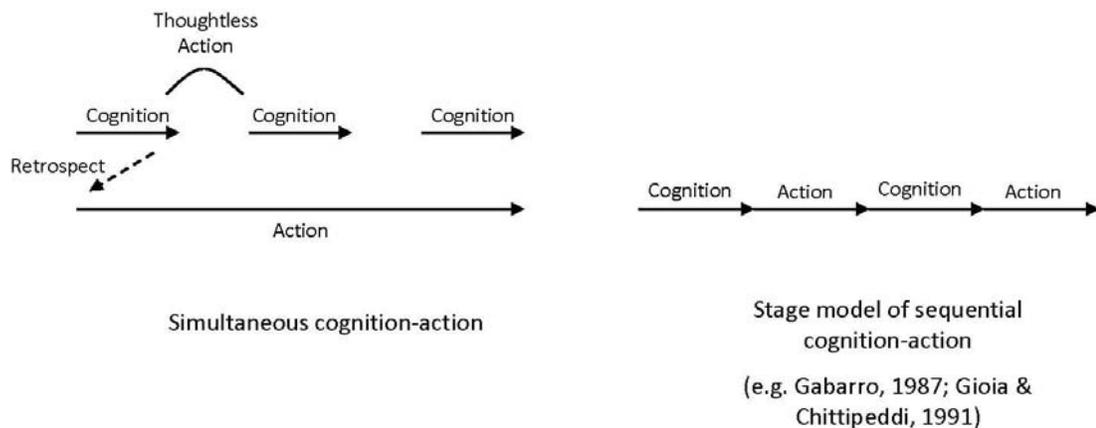
Stage models impose an order on reality which can imply a cleaner view of reality than most observations allow. In the interviews, presidents did not mention long periods of study that led to a clear decision point and shift to action-taking. Because past studies have described sequential processes through longitudinal case studies (Gabarro, 1987; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991; Hart, 1991; Isabella, 1990; Newmann, 1995; Stubbart & Smalley, 1999), I have focused on simultaneity, with less concern in finding distinct stages.

My question driving this section is how presidents cope with being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice. However, because presidents go through an extensive interview process and then have several months to transition before they officially start, they can read everything possible about the organization, speak with constituents, and make campus visits. Thus, they were afforded several months to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the organization before they began. Therefore, the idea that to focus on sensemaking is to "portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience" is not entirely applicable in this context (Weick, et al., 2005, 410). Nevertheless, many presidents still mentioned that their first few months in office were "like a blur." However, by having a period of time before they officially start, presidents have time to begin to understand the major challenges of the institution.

Once this transition period ends, there is a distinct shift when presidents officially begin. The period immediate following their start date was the primary emphasis of this research. This period is marked by high demands to "get up to speed" and to act the role of the president. For example, the president of Buchanan College says "you are thrust

into a situation where you have to be the president and learn about being the president

simultaneously." This is the essence of my first question: How do presidents cope with

being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice? My findings

suggest several ways that presidents cope with this simultaneity. The first is an external

process—speaking about ambiguous, broad goals, and "safe harbors." The second is a

personal attitude of holding knowledge cautiously and recognizing when you do not have

enough information. Finally, presidents mention the need to find trusted individuals who

can give contextual information.

Talking about Ambiguous, Broad Goals and "Safe Harbors"

In response to how they manage the normative pressures to set forth plans,

presidents mention "buying time" or speaking in "safe harbors" that will not commit

them to an initiative. For example, one president said:

> There are a lot of people who come to you and say, "So what is your
> vision for the University?" And, that is a very interesting question,
> because if you don't have something relatively interesting to say, people
> say, "Well why did we hire you?"…You have to find a way that you learn
> about the university, so that you can develop an informed opinion and you
> can't just say well you got to wait until I learn more to say stuff, you have
> got to be saying stuff all along the way. So, you think, where are the safe
> harbors that I can go that I can say something that six, eight, nine, ten
> months down the road I haven't started something that I have to undo?
> (President of Tyler State University)

To this end, the president of Tyler State University used the "safe harbor" of

improving student learning. This goal is uncontroversial and is one of the core functions

of any university—especially at Tyler State which is a regional comprehensive university

that does not have a large research component. The goal avoided premature commitment

because he says that in choosing initiatives, "If you are wrong, what are you going to

do?" This idea of speaking in "safe harbors" that are uncontroversial and avoid commitment, is similar to what Eisenberg (1984) describes as "strategic ambiguity" used by politicians. This is not surprising, given the role of college presidents and politicians are similar in many ways, particularly in being figureheads of many constituent groups with competing interests. Additionally, using "safe harbors" limits the need for commitment-driven sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as presidents would have to spend time in the future developing sensible explanations for irrevocable actions and statements they made when they began.

The president of Madison State University also used an ambiguous goal when speaking about the need for "growth," when delivering the state of the University address three months after he began. He said, "My vision for the University is evolving, and I refine it daily, but it revolves around our people and can be characterized in a single word—growth." Using an ambiguous word for his vision, he could offer a single term that could have different meanings by different constituents. He could simultaneously counter the normative expectations of having a vision while buying time to further come to an understanding of the organization. Campus constituents could impose their own meaning of growth, given the ambiguity of the term. In refining his meaning for growth, he says:

> Growth in the number of students we serve. Growth in our commitment to speak with pride about our University. Growth in our reputation as an institution that serves as a model of shared governance, civil discourse and inclusive behavior. Growth in our output and support for research and scholarship (President of Madison State University).

Madison State's president further diffused pressure for a vision by saying to people that it would be disrespectful for him to tell the campus community where it should be heading. In his state of the University address, he says:

> I've been asked since I arrived on campus what my vision for Madison State University is, and I've resisted going down that road. As someone just learning about the campus, its people and culture, its history, and its strengths and challenges, I did not think it appropriate to share a vision without having the complete picture. It would have been disrespectful to this campus community to do so.

Thus, presidents respond to the normative pressure to have a plan by using ambiguity to simultaneously be perceived as a competent leader while trying to understand the organizations they are leading. Talking about "student learning" or "growth" fosters agreement on abstractions that do not limit specific interpretations (Eisenberg, 1984). As Eisenberg (1984) argued, effective communication should not always be associated with clarity. With the existence of multiple viewpoints in colleges and universities, presidents use "umbrella constructs" to promote unified diversity and to facilitate collective action (Bess, 2006; Giroux, 2006; Hirsh & Levin, 1999). Goals such as "student learning" and "growth" sustain multiple interpretations and adjust to different contingencies. They also offer convergence on means rather than ends. Means such as, "we will be a student-centered," are a way of conducting operations rather than end goals in themselves. At universities there is only a commitment to pursue diverse ends through a common means of collectively structured behavior (Weick, 1976).

Maintaining an Attitude of Wisdom—Knowing You Don't Know

When asked how they simultaneously learned about the organization and set forth future directions, some presidents mentioned an attitude of holding knowledge

cautiously—not immediately coming to a judgment that is firmly held. For example, the president of Adams College says, "When I was hired I knew I needed to do strategic planning. The board told me that. There's just no question. They wanted to know when I was going to start, when the plan would be done, and I knew I didn't know enough about the institution to finish the plan, so I bought time." By knowing she didn't know, the president exhibited a self awareness of the certainty with which she held knowledge. The president of Burr Research University mentioned a similar sentiment:

> I was afraid that we might in our zest for cutting quickly, cut the very parts of us that were going to be our strengths going forward, and I didn't want to make that mistake, but I also knew that I didn't know enough to avoid that mistake if we did it too quickly, so that is why I asked for time so that we could know what we wanted to do (President of Burr Research University).

> And the president of Harrison College also mentions he didn't know a lot about the institution when he began. He says,

> And quite frankly [telling people where to go] is [a dangerous thing] for someone coming in from the outside, truly coming in from the outside, if they don't know a lot about the institution, if they were not recently affiliated with it. They don't know the culture. They don't know the history. None of which I knew. (President of Harrison College)

At the other extreme, some presidents said figuring things out was not "rocket science" and it took about "five minutes" to figure something out—demonstrating certitude in holding knowledge. Those who spoke of coming to a quick assessment of the campus also mentioned throughout the interview of having a lot of resistance to their initiatives. For example, the president of Arthur College said, "I'd like to tell you that [the College's] problems were rocket science because it would make me come out as a rocket scientist but they are not. Their biggest problem was enrollment. It took me about

5 minutes to figure that one out." Later in the interview he mentioned problems with

constituents of the campus. He says:

> Doing the right thing and being willing to put up with the consequences,
> it's not fun. It's really not. I mean I can tell you it's great some day if you
> are a college president, but it blows, it really does. You go to bed at night
> all these people are pissed off at you. You know, and you wake up and
> they are still pissed. It's not fun (President of Arthur College).

Likewise, the President of McKinley State University, who mentioned a great

deal of resistance with his leadership among the faculty, mentioned he embraced the

prospectus that was written for him about the institution. The prospectus was a 15-page

document written by the search committee about the current state of the university and

what it desired in a new president. He said because of the prospectus, "it was pretty darn

clear where we wanted to go." Therefore, he spent little time doubting he knew where to

take the campus. He says:

> Before I had accepted the job I had talked to a lot of people. I had
> already…it turns out that I had pretty accurately diagnosed most things
> before I had come; because I had…I just read everything. I talked to folks
> and I think one of my skills has been that I intuit things pretty well. I am
> able to connect the dots pretty quickly (President of McKinley State
> University).

He also said that because of his background as a dean of a large, public university

that he "was hugely prepared for this job," and because of this experience he "walked

right in and knew what to do." Later in the interview, he mentions resistance among

campus constituents around his goal of making the McKinley undergraduate experience

"the best in the country." He says:

> That hasn't played out too well on campus. They don't like the word best.
> Some don't like the restrictive part, so we may tweak it to be "one of the
> best" or "one of the finest" or "among the best" or something like that, but
> I'm not going to tweak it too far, but the resistance or the reaction to it sort

of exemplifies that unwillingness to actually be aggressive and bold about what we do (President of McKinley State University).

Additionally, he says that McKinley has a "huge number of people who have been here for a very long time and are resistant, very resistant to change, very resistant to change." He says:

> Then you start to actually push, and whether it's the bureaucracies or its our academic requirements or whatever else, whenever I tried to push something that was reasonable, I thought, boy I got some resistance, "That's just not the way we do it." It's a very headstrong, "it's all about us," the faculty kind of reaction (President of McKinley State University).

My findings suggest that presidents who were more certain, and did not doubt their knowledge, faced more resistance. Alternatively, those that "knew they didn't know" mentioned less resistance. The idea that certitude leads to resistance and conflict derives from a pragmatic view of thought (Menand, 2001). Pragmatism is a philosophy that elevates compromise over confrontation and the adaptive value of ideas (Menand, 2004). In this case, pragmatism suggests that presidents who doubted their knowledge coped better with their environment. Thus, this attitude has adaptive value.

Meacham (1990) describes holding knowledge cautiously as an attitude of wisdom. He argues "the essence of wisdom is to hold the attitude that knowledge is fallible and to strive for a balance of knowing and doubting" (181). A lack of wisdom is "illustrated by the error of believing that one can see all that can be seen, that one knows all that can be known" (Meacham, 1990, 183). The essence of wisdom, as Meacham (1990) describes is to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness. It is to balance knowing and doubting and to avoid both extremes. This attitude is held by maintaining a balance between what you know and what you know you don't know.

To visually depict this attitude of wisdom, I created Figure 4.2. The top half of the figure shows the extremes of knowing too cautiously compared to knowing with too much certainty. An attitude of wisdom is having a balanced ratio of known/unknown. The second half of the figure shows that as knowledge expands the balanced ratio remains. The more you know, the more you realize what you don't know.

Figure 4.2: Attitude of Wisdom as Balanced Ratio of Known/Unknown
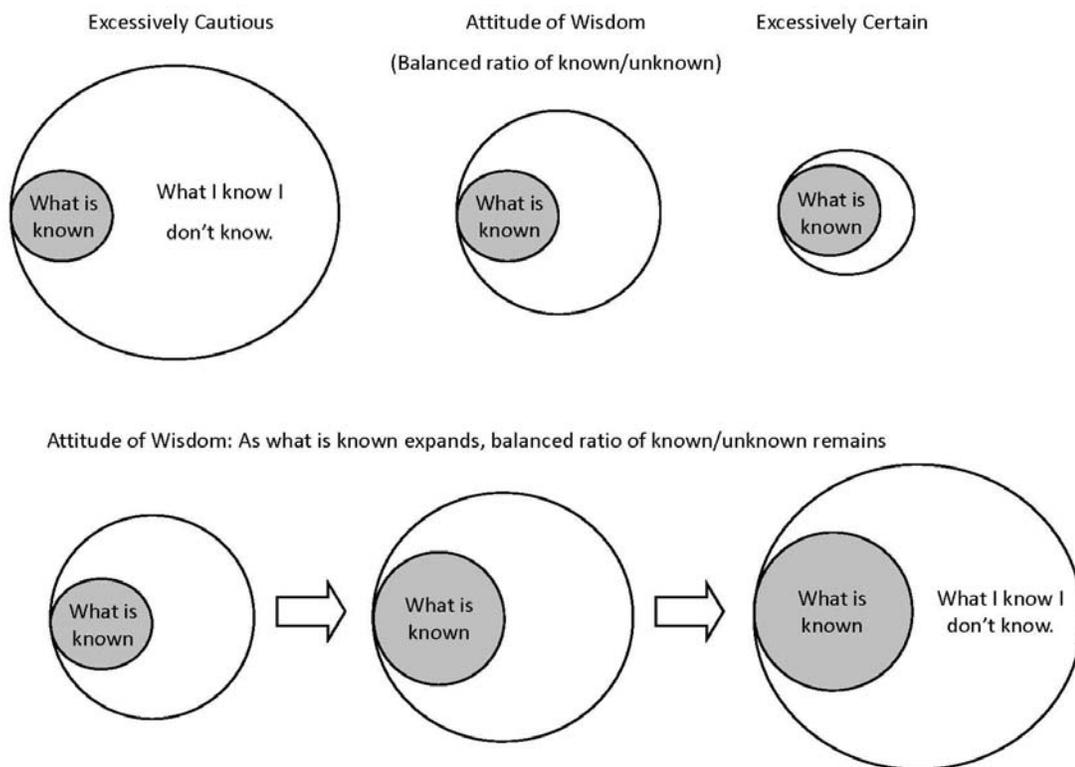
I further explored "knowing you don't know" by sharing a quote from a new president who had been an organizational outsider. Almost all the presidents agreed with

the ideas in the quote except for the president of Arthur College and McKinley State

University. The quote says:

> Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and
> understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived
> ideas about where you are going to take an institution to which you are
> new, because you simply cannot know. You can't know enough about a
> new environment to recognize where the strengths are and where you
> might need to push the institution to grow (Gruber, 2005, 341).

The president of Arthur College said he "rejected this 100 percent" because, he

said, "People are screaming for leadership far beyond what quotes like that seem to

assume." Likewise, the president of McKinley said that things were much clearer about

where to go, and that the president in the quote must have been at an institution where the

situation was much less clear.

Some presidents suggested that "knowing you don't know" improved their

effectiveness. For example, the president of Fillmore State University said he had "seen

[presidents] get into trouble when they come in, and they don't pay attention or heed to

this quote you gave me, in other words, they think they know the day they step on

campus, what needs to be done." In the student newspaper at Pierce College, a political

science professor said that the new president "had a sense of what he does not know.

This is refreshing." Thus, there is evidence that an attitude of wisdom enhances

perceptions of your effectiveness, and therefore has adaptive value. It is a wise stance to

knowledge that people respond favorably to, especially in organizations that are rich in

traditions and believe in the value of shared governance.

Finding Trusted Individuals

The third means that presidents described to handle simultaneously "being and learning" the presidency is to find trusted individuals who they can "go to the bank with." This suggests that as uncertainty increases the needed for thinking as a social process increases. Several presidents mentioned that you cannot buy time forever and that you need to take action. To improve their certainty in a course of action, presidents find trusted individuals to discuss ideas to make sure they are not missing something. In some cases, search consultants would tell the president who they thought were trustworthy and would give them good advice. In other cases, the president would discover these people themselves. In either case, the intent was to manage being in charge and trying to make sense of the organization by discussing ideas with trusted people. For example, the president of Fillmore State University says,

> You can't postpone actions that need to be taken just because you are still learning about the place…within a month or two you have been able to build some trust with some folks, you have found out from folks at other universities who is in your new university who are the folks that you can go to the bank with. So you think you know what you want to do in a situation you sit down and talk about "well, what would be the consequences of this and that…and well, this, that, the other thing." This would have this ripple effect, you can then gauge all that, and also test with people your analysis. You know, "here's how I am thinking about, here's how I came to the conclusion. Here is the data I had, and everything." Sometimes maybe they will point out you missed something…You can't buy time forever.

Uncertainty is reduced by modeling scenarios with a trusted individual who has contextual expertise. The trusted individual can gauge the future consequences of present actions and see ripple effects and missing data. The president is seeking out this expertise with an individual he or she can trust, who is not driven by a personal agenda.

Likewise, the president of Hayes College mentions needing to get someone to give a nuanced definition of the situation. He says:

> It was also very important early on for me to identify somebody who was sort of an insider with that senior management group who could be my guy, who I could really rely on and have confidence that I was getting the real dope from people who weren't going to talk to me. (President of Hayes College)

In many cases the trusted individuals were members of the search committee. For example, the president of Hamlin College says, "What was really, really helpful was to talk to the people who were on my search committee. They helped me put some major decisions in context, and I trusted their judgment." Similarly, at Adams College, they used a search firm to find the current president and the principal of the search firm said it was wise to have the transition team to "help me through these first months, identify those pressing issues on campus, and also would help you not stumble, unknowingly." Therefore, the search committee morphed into the transition team, and she had weekly telephone calls with the committee before she officially started. This group helped her identify all the pressing issues. She says, "the transition team was really the one who helped me make sense of, you know, what those issues were." She also used these trusted individuals to interpret the motives of people. She says, "A lot of people have an agenda. A lot of people want to come in and use the honeymoon period—the infancy period of a new president is often an opportunity for moving ahead on some personal agenda." Having trusted individuals in a transition team helped her make sense of the personal agendas and "issue-selling" of mid-level administrators (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill & Lawrence, 2001).

Likewise, the president of Buchanan College said the head of the search firm told him two of the vice presidents would be good advisors because "they have got a perspective on the institution, and it's a healthy perspective. It isn't necessarily a biased perspective." He continues:

> They were somebody that if I, in the studies that I was doing, I was able to go and say, "you know I really don't understand this. I don't understand why instead of a director of diversity, we have a director of student multicultural affairs. I, this makes no sense to me that we would focus on one tiny aspect of multiculturalism and kind of ignore the rest of it, so you know helping me understand the context of how those things happened. And I don't…I think that that is real important (President of Buchanan College).

Finding trusted individuals highlights the *social* property of sensemaking. This may seem banal. However, the point is that sensemaking is not a process of individual analysis; it is a social construction with others. In situations where individuals have little contextual information and high uncertainty, yet are called on to take action, the social nature of thinking is more prominent and adaptive.

In sum, to answer the question of how new presidents balance being in charge and learning about the organization, three components were commonly described: 1) speaking in broad, ambiguous goals, and "safe harbors," 2) holding knowledge cautiously—knowing you don't know, and 3) finding trusted individuals to help you make sense of the organization and to give you more certainty in your judgments. Each of these components is descriptive but also prescriptive: Don't commit yourself too early to courses of action that may cause problems down the road; don't be excessively certain; and ask others for their perspective, advice, and contextual knowledge. These findings suggest the pragmatic thinking of presidents. They described these beliefs and tactics because they improve their relationship with the organization. Thus, these findings are

not true because they mirror a mind-independent reality, but because they work (James, 1907). They make adaptive sense.

Situational Demands and Simultaneity

The second question of this study is how the context that presidents describe interacts with the simultaneity of sensemaking and sensegiving. The working hypothesis was that presidents who began in turbulent contexts would experience greater demands to "get up to speed" and set forth initiatives, while those in less turbulent contexts would be afforded the opportunity to richly understand the organization before they needed to take action. However, to answer this question the definition of "the context" and "turbulence" needs more precision.

I take the perspective that turbulence is both objectively-determined and subjectively-constructed. Objective turbulence includes a decline in the student-age population in the surrounding area or an economic downturn that decreases donations to the college. These are real changes that have real impacts on budgets, especially for colleges that depend on tuition as their primary source of revenue. Subjective turbulence includes a belief that "our reputation is not where it needs to be" or "we are slipping as an institution." This turbulence is socially constructed and imposed on a context. In this manner I take a light or moderate version of constructionism. This approach assumes "something is going on out there and there may be better or worse ways of addressing things, but also that the frameworks, preunderstandings, and vocabularies are central in producing particular versions of the world" (Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2007, 1265).

The second aspect of the question that needs further refinement is the idea of "turbulence." What is turbulence exactly and how does it influence sensemaking and sensegiving? In the sense that I am using the term, turbulence is the perceived decline of

an organization, which can either be objectively-determined or subjectively-constructed. Turbulence would exist if the organization is failing to attract sufficient numbers of students and operating in a deficit. If faculty and staff think the campus is "stalled" while their competitors are advancing, or if there are high levels of internal animosity between administrators and staff because of a no confidence vote or the firing of a previous president.

Given this middle ground between objectively-determined and subjectively-constructed environments, I will describe several factors that influenced the simultaneity of sensemaking and sensegiving that presidents described. My argument is that sensemaking and sensegiving do not unfold in the same manner for every president. There are many contingencies that impact descriptions of behaviors, and my interest in contextual factors incorporates the importance of situational complexity into the analysis.

It is important to note that since my study population is only outsider presidents, they may represent organizations that are facing more turbulence. A common finding in the executive succession literature is that when an organization is performing poorly, the likelihood of a succession event improves and outsiders are more likely to be chosen (Giambatista, et al., 2005). For example, Datta and Guthrie (1994) found that organizations with lower profitability and lower growth rates were more likely to select an outsider CEO. Therefore, because I only interviewed outsider college presidents, the study population may represent organizations with higher situational demands than in the overall population of colleges and universities.

Objective Environmental Issues not Recognized by Campus Constituents

As previously mentioned, when presidents were asked to describe the context in which they entered, they described turbulence that was either high or low in being objectively-determined or subjectively-constructed. For example, the president of Loyola Jesuit University immediately spoke about the surrounding county losing 50,000 people in the year he entered and that the demographics in the region were changing substantially. However, the desire for change in the organization did not match this turbulence. The president describes this disconnect:

> The most puzzling piece for me was what I would have referred to myself, for myself, as the disconnect between reality and faculty and staff attitudes. I didn't realize really at one level how successful Loyola Jesuit had been for so long that kind of lulled people into this passive, hopeful behavior, and a lack of concern relative to doing anything really to change (President of Loyola Jesuit University)

When asked to describe "the reality" he came to know, he described how he had to persuade and convince the campus of the objective factors it was facing. This suggests that when there is objective turbulence and the campus does not realize it, the balance shifts toward more sensegiving. In the president's words:

> [The reality we were facing was] declining economics and demographics in the region and how that had impacted us. For example, very compelling to me…I would say to folks, "OK, let's say that 10% of that 50,000 folks who left the county in 2005 were college age, and let's say we could have had 5% of that. That's 250 students. A typical class we were short about 100 students. (President of Loyola Jesuit University)

Likewise, the president of Hayes College entered a college that was facing large budget shortfalls due to declining enrollments. This objectively-determined context was not understood by most of the campus. This heightened the need for sensegiving, or giving people new meanings to interpret the situation the college was in. After he visited

several high schools in the region, the President of Hayes College says he had to "change

the mindset" of the admissions office.

> We were going to do things differently, and we were going to focus on a
> different group of people. The answer I got when I came back from the
> first few of these visits and asked them, "well why haven't you been to St.
> Ignatius high school?" The answer was, "Well, those kids all go to
> Harvard and Yale and Michigan." They are not going to come here.
> Well, that of course was patently untrue. The top 20 kids go to Notre
> Dame, and Duke and Stanford, but there are 220 other young men who we
> would love to have, who were going to John Carroll and Dayton, and
> Miami, and Xavier, and they could come here. So, we…I had to change
> mindset (President of Hayes College).

Thus, a greater need for sensegiving occurred when objective environmental

issues caused operational difficulties which were not recognized by campus constituents.

In this context, presidents had to spend more time explaining the situation to the campus

to "change the mindset."

Campus Constituents Perceiving the College as "Stalled"

Alternatively, a college can be relatively stable and financially secure, yet the

campus constituents construct the context in a way that it is perceived as turbulent. For

example, the president of Wilson College, despite its relative financial stability and high

academic standing, said:

> Everybody was pretty frustrated with feeling stagnant, and so, when I got
> here, I began…you know my first posture was listen campus, I am
> prepared to just listen for a year, we can form our agenda together, you
> know we can take our time to figure out where we need to go and the
> answer I got was "No. We don't have time for that. We have been
> standing still. We hired you for direction and vision and leadership. Let's
> go." And that has kind of been what it has been like. (President of Wilson
> College)

In this case, the context was more socially constructed as turbulent. The president said the college "certainly wasn't coming into a crisis situation" but it was "stalled." He said that, "It has been standing still for the last 10 years, and so while other colleges that were our comparison group were kind of moving forward, standing still meant moving backwards." He said an example of moving backwards was the decrease in diversity on campus, and that he was "entering a place that was very hungry for change." This desire for change had little relation to Wilson College's financial position or enrollment difficulties, with the president saying he felt blessed because the college is "solid financially."

Given this context, the president said that "unless we developed a focused agenda, we wouldn't get anything done." So he set out on a process of agenda formation that resulted in six priorities to pursue and "organize the campus around." These six priorities included: 1) building community through dinners and meetings with faculty, students, and staff; 2) making changes to organizational structures, such as redundant reporting relationships; 3) increasing student and faculty diversity; 4) improving enrollment processing such as how financial aid is awarded and how applicants are rated; 5) improving and updating the buildings on campus; and 6) developing "a dynamic process of continuous strategic planning."

Therefore, while the president of Wilson College was not facing an objective crisis in comparison to the enrollment and financial difficulties of other colleges the context was constructed with a high desire for change. This led to higher sensegiving activities, which are seen in the agenda formation and priority setting. Thus, while presidents who faced real enrollment and financial crises needed to engage in more

sensegiving behaviors to "change mindset" even if a president entered an organization that was relatively stable and financially secure, this did not mean they would automatically have fewer demands to prioritize and sell new changes to the campus.

Lack of Positive Organizational Identity

The next context that impacts how presidents describe sensemaking and sensegiving was if they perceived the organization lacked a positive identity. This was most pronounced at Hamlin College and Madison State University. In these cases there was more of an effort to increase "pride" or get the faculty to "boast" about the institution. For example, the president of Hamlin College said, "One of the things that I started doing immediately was telling people they had to boast more about this institution, that we were too modest." After being in office for three years, she says that now:

> I will overhear a conversation in a meeting where people will say, "Remember we have got to boast." And that was a new thing. We were really, really modest and I saw that in too many ways where we just didn't take opportunities to boast about what we were accomplishing and the mission of the school and what it has done for students over the years (President of Hamlin College).

The modesty of the campus became apparent in talking with faculty when she began. When she arrived in July she set out to meet with every member of the faculty in the first several months and through these meetings "everyone was quiet about these amazing strengths that really were distinguishing characteristics of our school." In addition, just before she arrived they completed a survey of alumni, faculty, aspiring students, parents and trustees; it was "very, very clear that Hamlin didn't have an identity that people could agree on." From these discussions with faculty and the survey, she

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attributed this modesty to inadequate marketing. She says, "We had been pretty quiet about ourselves. We didn't have an identity and nobody knew really what Hamlin is today or its major accomplishments." In sum, she says, "what I did was to help us make sense of our strengths, our history in a way…and now keep pushing that and it's helping to, in a sense, build a brand." Thus, the context she entered was a college without a positive, coherent identity. She came to understand this context and this altered her sensegiving to get people to "boast" about the strengths of Hamlin College and work towards articulating a common, distinct "brand."

A similar context was described at Madison State University, where the president said "pride was not evident." This understanding led him to describe more sensegiving activities. This included a marketing initiative titled "The Madison Edge." The marketing initiative was meant to increase pride in the institution and raise enrollment. He said increasing enrollment by one person for the next academic year would be "a symbol—a marker that we are making progress." To increase enrollment he went to hotels in the area to "seal the deal" with prospective students, calling these sessions "Mustang Pride." In public remarks he discussed "points of pride" about the University being one of 97 members of Phi Beta Kappa and one of 199 research universities in the country. This compares to the president of Daft University who says, "Every president has their brag list" and who went on to list numerous distinctions of the University. Increasing an organization's sense of pride and esteem is a core function of any presidency, and this role is often more salient when presidents begin.

In giving the "State of the University" address four months after he began, the content of the speech was mainly a means of addressing the lack of pride in the

institution. He mentions the state of the University is "strong and vibrant" and he lists

accomplishment after accomplishment of the faculty, students, and alumni. He also says

his vision for the university is one of "growth in our commitment to speak with pride

about our University." He says:

> Our goal is not braggadocio, but well deserved recognition for this
> University's place in the academic arena. We have a strong, well-
> deserved reputation now. Our focus must be on findings ways to enhance
> that reputation. Each of you will play an important role in doing so. This
> is a goal that depends on our every interaction with people outside the
> University—be it those we meet while standing in line at the grocery store
> or sitting next to us at a national conference. You are our ambassadors.
> You make the difference with the story that you tell and the internal pride
> that you demonstrate (President of Madison State University).

When a president enters a context with an institution lacking a positive identity,

they have a more pronounced sensegiving role—a role of being a spokesperson for the

campus, in giving new meaning and pride to members of the campus community. In

these situations, there is a greater demand for positive leadership that impacts the

meaningfulness of work (Cameron, 2008; Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2005). The

campus needs to be affirmed of its ability to become positively deviant—an organization

that is highly-respected nationally. The president acts as a catalyst to increase this

collective self-esteem, a topic which has recently been explored by leadership scholars

(van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The ability of a president to influence collective self-

esteem is important in institutions of higher education which are mostly driven by status

and prestige concerns as opposed to profit.

Immediate Role Requirements

Another hypothesis about the context was that if there was no enrollment or financial crisis, presidents could listen and learn for several months without being expected to take action. However, regardless of whether there was a financial or enrollment crisis, presidents faced immediate role requirements when they began. They had to approve budgets, fill open positions, and give speeches. For example, the president of Buchanan College says:

> Even if there is no crisis, you are thrust into a situation where you have to be the president and learn about being the president simultaneously…You have no, there is no break in period. I mean the day you walk in people start handing you documents and say, you know, "here's the financial forecast for next year, we need your approval on this budget." You know, so the first two months were, are, absolutely a blur. (President of Buchanan College)

Likewise, the president of Adams College had to make immediate hiring decisions before she officially started. She says, "my original thought was well…let me wait, get on campus, I'll figure out what needs to take place and it became very clear that waiting was not an option." The most surprising thing about starting was the constant invitation to make decisions on "significant topics" in which she did not have enough information.

> You are being asked for your decision when you are not even, you are not even on the job, you don't have the authority, and you don't have enough knowledge, and yet people are treating you now as the president, and expecting you to make decisions, kind of hit the ground running when you don't have the information and not even really authorized to make the decisions (President of Adams College).

She said to handle the immediate role requirements of decision making, she would respond by saying, "stay the course," and asking "how have you made those decisions in the past? Who was involved? What was the outcome?" She drew on the

retained institutional knowledge to enhance consistency. Therefore, despite my initial working hypothesis that situational demands would be alleviated when institutions were financially stable and secure, presidents are still called upon to fulfill the role requirements from the first day in office.

Role of Interim Presidents

Another contextual factor that was common in the study population was the use of interim presidents. Within my study population, five presidents succeeded an interim president who had taken over because the predecessor had been fired or left abruptly. These include Madison State University, Fillmore State University, Burr Research University, Hamlin College, and Harrison College. The use of an interim presidency lessens the situational demands on new presidents. They face less of a crisis situation because many of the major issues have been dealt with. For example, at Madison State University, the previous president had been fired after a contentious vote of no confidence among the faculty. After an interim president served for a year, the current president said the interim had done some "heavy lifting" so that "there was not a crisis." Likewise, a member of the board of trustees served as an interim president at Burr Research University after a vote of no confidence.

Because of interim presidents—which are usually a member of the board of trustees—the crisis situation that most presidents face is usually diminished. It also allows the hiring process to be lengthier and more deliberate. This means that most presidents who enter the position have gone through a long interview process and had several months of being the president-elect. This period reduces the demands to "get up

to speed" and be in charge. Therefore, the use of interim presidents and the lengthy search process are a functional response to lighten the demands of the succession process (Birnbaum, 1971). Presidents face less demand to "get up to speed" because much turbulence has been attenuated during an interim presidency.

Chapter Summary

In sum, this research sought to appreciate the complexity and contingency of each succession process. My initial hypotheses of the balance of sensemaking and sensegiving proved to be overly simplistic. With institutions having concrete environmental shifts and socially constructed environments, high and low status concerns, immediate role requirements, and interim presidencies there are a wealth of complexities and contingencies that shape the process.   It is not simply that presidents who face a crisis have higher demands to "get up to speed" and set forth new directions; it is more complex than a simple hypothesis can state.

However, in a macro sense, one can theorize that when a system is working poorly, it will look outside itself for new direction and insight. Because my study population was only outsider presidents, it may represent organizations that were experiencing more tumult. In these situations, presidents are relied upon for new meaning and direction. However, conscious thought and sensemaking are in high demand regardless. Therefore, to answer the question of how situational demands interact with the simultaneity of sensemaking and sensegiving, it seems to directly impact

the level of sensegiving. Situations often demand new meanings, new directions, and a new way of seeing, and outsiders are often chosen to provide this.

Figure 4.3 provides a depiction of the chapter, showing the three categories that emerged in coping with simultaneity. Concurrently, the figure shows that situational demands mainly affect the level of sensegiving.

Figure 4.3: Chapter Summary of Simultaneity and Situational Demands

Strategies to cope with simultaneity:

Speaking in ambiguous, broad goals and "safe harbors"

Attitude of wisdom—knowing you don't know

Finding trusted individuals

Situational demands that heighten need for sensegiving:

Objective environmental issues not recognized by campus

Campus constituents perceiving the college as stalled

Lack of positive organizational identity

Immediate role requirements

Cognition   Cognition   Cognition

Action

Simultaneous cognition-action

Sensegiving

Decrease need for sensegiving:

Interim presidencies

CHAPTER 5

ELABORATION OF SENSEMAKING PROCESSES

The following chapter describes several ways in which presidents make sense of the organization. I am seeking to answer how our understanding of sensemaking can be enlarged given the accounts of new presidents. In the first section of this chapter, I describe how presidents unknowingly utilize ethnographic methods to understand organizational culture, and how the organization's size and complexity led to qualitatively different descriptions of efforts to make sense of the organization. Both of these categories explain president seeking to understand, "what's the story here?" Second, presidents expressed the need for the collective thinking of their administrative teams; the reliance on peers and mentors to reduce uncertainty about how to deal with complex and novel problems; and how strategic planning sessions offered a means of discovering the group's priorities to reduce equivocality. All of these categories correspond to presidents addressing the question, "what do we do next?" Finally, through their actions, presidents are justifying their choice to take the position. They are in a committed condition and their actions can be interpreted as a way of answering, "why am I here?"

In the second section of this chapter, I describe several barriers to sensemaking such as isolation and power distance, complications of thinking out loud, and a lack of

time for thinking and reflection. They correspond to barriers in answering the three fundamental questions mentioned above.

Sensemaking Processes

Understanding Localized Meanings as Lay Ethnographers

In the interviews, there was a universal espousal of the virtue of listening, with every president mentioning some kind of listening tour. In some cases, they actually called it a "listening tour." In others, it was a description of meetings with faculty, deans, vice presidents, alumni, staff, trustees, and community members. In small colleges, it was most common to say that you met with every faculty member. In larger universities, it was meetings with the deans and directors of programs. In some cases, the president had very elaborate structures to meet with constituents.

For example, the president of Tyler State University had 75 "listening sessions" where he met with people based on their longevity of service. The president of Fillmore State University met with over a 1,000 individuals in 40 sessions, and the president of Daft University did a "listening tour" that took his entire first year. He went to every college and department that wanted him. In his words, he said, "I took an empty pad and asked them, 'Tell me Daft as you know it? And what do you need from the organization to succeed?'" He also went to the major heads of the corporations in the city and said "Tell me what people say about Daft, when Daft is not in the room."

Concurrently with these formal listening sessions, presidents sought to understand the tacit, localized meanings of the organization. Therefore, they intuitively made an effort to meet people "on their turf" by meeting faculty in their offices or going to

department meetings. The knowledge presidents were seeking to obtain was contextually-embedded and therefore the learning they sought needed to be in context. For example, the president of Adams College described what it was like to "get her feet on the ground." She says it was:

> Total immersion. So, and it would be immersion in the sense of walking around campus, I wanted to physically see the different buildings. I wanted to see where faculty were working so I would go into buildings and if a door was open I would talk to faculty members or staff members. Tried to attend, there was actually a surprising number of events in the summer that take place and so trying to attend any event that was taking place, faculty presentations, student events, and just trying to soak up what the culture was like (President of Adams College).

In many ways, presidents acted as lay ethnographers (Louis, 1990).

Unknowingly, they adopted the learning methods of ethnography because the knowledge they were seeking was tacit and contextual. Campus members could not articulate it succinctly in a pre-defined list. The presidents needed "total immersion," much like an ethnographer needs total immersion in a research setting. Through this process, they sought to understand the reality of campus members. For example, the president of Arthur College met with faculty in a place of their choosing and led off the meeting by saying, "I want to understand your life as a faculty member here, what you like, what you don't like, your struggles, your glories. Spend time talking to me about your reality, help me to get into your reality."

The president of Madison State University also described several ways he went outside formal channels to come to understand the contextualized and tacit nature of the culture. These include sitting with students at football games and completing a polar bear swim. He said going to these events helped him frame issues because he gained informal, first-hand knowledge of the university, in his words, "a whole different

perspective on the university." He said after these experiences he could refute

statements, such as administrators belaboring the drunkenness of students at football

games. He could now say, "How do you know that?" This immersion gave him

contextualized knowledge to question peoples' claims.

Presidents were searching to become conversant in the set of shared meanings of

group members. In order to become effective in their role they needed to understand

these localized, shared meanings to better interpret what was going on and better manage

the uncertainties of their position. This lay ethnography was not only functional but it

was also recognized as symbolic. For example the president of Coolidge State University

says:

> People read a lot into what you do in the first, you know, couple of
> months. You know, if you don't meet with the faculty early on, then the
> faculty say, "Oh he doesn't care about us." You know if you don't meet
> with the staff, so just a lot of meetings with a lot of different groups, just
> to try and get out there and be visible and let people know that you are
> here and that things are changing and that the University is moving
> forward (President of Coolidge State University).

He continues by saying, "the timeliness with which you do that is important. I

mean people are watching and they are looking to see what…who you are meeting with

when, and because that says something I think about the values and where an individual

places importance." Thus, while there was a functional need to conduct listening

sessions and experience total immersion in the campus culture, presidents understood the

symbolic significance of their approach to learning about the organization.

These functional (i.e. presidents described them as an explicit way to learn) and

symbolic listening tours also included alumni. When asked how they came to understand

the organization, many of the presidents immediately mentioned that alumni gave them a

rich conception of the institution. For example, the first thing the president of Harrison College mentioned when asked how he learned about the organization was speaking with the alumni on the board of trustees. He had alumni on the board that had been students at Harrison going back to the 60s. He says, "Having 60, 65 years of history, affiliated with this place as student, as board member, really was a very rich set of data for me."

Likewise, the president of McKinley State University described making sense of the organization through the eyes of alumni, gaining the most new knowledge and understanding from them. He says, "Looking back at what was important to them was a key to understanding this thing called the 'McKinley Experience,'" which he says, "has a capital M and capital E." When he spoke with alumni he began to see the university differently. He said he was trying to "figure out what was enduring, what was foundational, and what was the moment, you know, kind of how do I see past the clutter of the moment and really understand what has made McKinley special."

While presidents act as lay ethnographers in many ways there are substantial differences. Presidents are not detached observers. In their privileged position they play a major role in the endless negotiation of the localized meanings of the organization. They are not passively accepting "the way things are done" but are part of a reciprocal process. They are trying to make sense of the organization, but they were often hired because they would reject common understandings. This was especially true at organizations facing substantial enrollment or budget crises, such as Arthur College and Hayes College. In these circumstances, the president was more likely to understand the culture but immediately recognize the shift in thinking that needed to take place. They

viewed the organization as poorly functioning and this caused them to challenge the assumptions and worldview of members more directly.

The role discretion of presidents in coming to understand the culture was described in nearly every interview. For example, the president of Madison State University mentioned how he viewed everything differently as president because he suddenly could do things to create change. He explained several examples, including seeing that the campus catering staff should change the color of its uniforms from white to black and campus signs he disliked and wanted changed. Presidents can come to see the way things are done in an organization, but they have more authority to change things they see as dysfunctional. The president of Wilson College described how the college has a "bizarre academic affairs structure." The vice president for academic affairs is always hired from the outside and the dean of faculty is always hired from the inside, and they are always supposed to be in the same place at the same time. He said this was a complete redundancy, and "we are going to change it but slowly." Examples abound of presidents seeing the way things are done but saying they need to be changed. The point remains that organizational outsiders have an inherent ability to see the organization differently than insiders, who often take things for granted. Thus, presidents act as lay ethnographers, but with the role discretion to reciprocally change the meanings and structures of the institution.

Impact of Organizational Size and Complexity

Throughout the interviews I found a difference in how presidents of different size institutions made sense of the organization, with presidents in smaller institutions looking

to understand the core identity, unifying vision, and common purpose of everyone on campus; none of the presidents of the larger organizations mentioned a similar desire to find a core identity or a desire to "get everyone on the same page." With smaller organizations, a president faces less equivocality or variation in meanings (Weick, 1979). This led to qualitatively different description of efforts to understand the organization.

For example, the president of Adams College, with an enrollment of 1,900 says she found an "eerie consistency." In her words:

> I am finding…this eerie…consistency. We are getting similar views, similar perspectives, and I think its easy for me, I think I have a much, much easier job, in this, as president. Because of an institution that's been pretty steady going in one direction for 173 years. We're a four year liberal arts, undergraduate, residential institution, and we're not that complex, and so the views of the future are not that disparate. So, it's pretty easy and it'd be real tough if one were at an institution—I read about some of these undergraduate, master's, doctoral—they don't know if they should be more graduate than undergraduate, is research the primary reason faculty are here, or is it teaching? You know, and all those things, and they're debating the size and everything. Should we grow by 5,000/10,000? We don't have to wrestle with that, so I think that's why it is probably unique here because it's so…the path is so clear, there is so much consistency about where we are going.

She continues to say that one of the reasons she came to Adams College was that "it had such a clear, clean focus," and that she did not have to worry about the added complexity of tensions between teaching and research at larger institutions. This consistency was salient for her because of the change from her previous organization (Louis, 1980). She had been a provost of a large, public university with an enrollment four times the size of her current presidency. With the objective difference between her new and old setting, the experience was constructed differently based on the noticed cues of the new setting.

Likewise, in an institution of similar size, Hamlin College, with around 2,500 students, the president said she started right away by announcing that she wanted to meet with all faculty. She met with over half of them during the first summer she began. The faculty told her their aspirations for the college and areas for improvement. She said this "really helped me see the essence of this school, and the way in which, almost the commonality of people's feelings about the culture and what was important." She said this process was one of the most important things she did to get to know the college, and it allowed her to state what the college was about. In her words:

> So by the time fall came around I felt as though I really knew this place, and so I could put together a speech for the incoming class that captured the 'what we were about' and then start disseminating it back out to various constituencies and that helped set the stage for my presidency. (President of Hamlin College)

This indicates that presidents in smaller organizations can more easily come to a unified interpretation of what the organization is doing while in larger organizations it involves coming to terms with complexity and ambiguity (Cohen & March, 1974). As the president of Tyler State University, with an enrollment of 12,000, says, "you have to embrace and love complexity and ambiguity to do this job." Therefore, sensemaking in smaller organizations can more easily come to a clear interpretation of "the core essence" or commonality and for larger organizations it is embracing or coming to terms with complexity.

Presidents of smaller colleges were also more explicit about "getting everyone on the same page." For example, the president of Harrison College with an enrollment of approximately 1,500 continually spoke about "reducing the list in the ship" and that "people need to be pointed in the same direction rather than one person rowing this way

and another person rowing that way." None of the presidents in the larger research universities mentioned something similar to this and nor could I imagine them saying it. It would be fairly difficult to try with multiple professional schools and undergraduate departments.

As mentioned with the president of Adams College, the complexity and size of the institution was more salient when presidents had come from an institution of a different size. Their perception was largely reference dependent, in other words, the perceived attributes of a new environment reflect the contrast between the prior context and current stimuli (Kahneman, 2003). In many ways, the level of discrepant cues was influenced by the size of the institution of their prior position. For example, the president of Daft University, with an enrollment of 24,000 had come from a much smaller institution with 3,600. He says:

> I had worked at large institutions, but I hadn't been a senior manager
> there. I was an executive VP at a very small institution. You know, there
> were about 3,600 students when I left. I knew everybody on that campus
> by name. I could solve any problem by just going down…walking to their
> office and saying, "Ok, how are we going to fix this one?" When you
> come here to Daft where there are 6 campuses in the city and 7 campuses
> overseas, nine colleges, you know, suddenly you can't do that and if you
> do that you freak your vice presidents and deans out because you are
> stepping on their authority, and so you can't go to people deep in the
> organization (President of Daft University).

Not only was solving problems in larger organizations noticeable for a president who came from a smaller organization, but being able to communicate in such a large organization was also a challenge. The president of Daft University mentions that,

> I had to learn how do you speak in a way where your vision of what you
> want to happen can survive the retelling five layers down? And how do
> you get information from the front lines up to you? And so, I try to show
> up at a lot of stuff, just to listen about what people are talking…I am still

learning…how do you manage and lead in a very large organization is a really interesting thing.

In response to this challenge, he made lots of short videos about what is central to the University that can get "blasted across the whole organization." He also spent much of his time giving speeches and writing in ways that can gets passed through the whole organization, in a way that can "survive the retelling as it gets directly out there." He says, "I have to spend a lot of time just talking with people who are in charge to come to some kind of sense, ok, we all have the same understanding when we use these words, you know, it has been a real challenge for me to try to learn how to lead in a big place." His experience articulates the equivocality in large organizations and his attempts to overcome the variation in meanings, but also the difficulty of this task in coming from a much smaller organization.

In contrast, the president of Buchanan College, with an enrollment of around 4,600, had spent his entire career at three major public universities. He described this as a "tremendous advantage" and was fairly confident in his task of understanding the organization. He says,

> I had a tremendous amount, probably because of the size of the institutions, a tremendous amount of autonomy at the leadership level whether you are a dean or a vice-president or anything else…there weren't a lot of people looking over your shoulder. You were responsible for a budget. You were responsible for curriculum. You were responsible for promotion and tenure and what I said to the people here was, you know, the college I was running at [a Large, Public University] was larger than Buchanan College…And for all practical purposes I was running a college like Buchanan College. So, I felt pretty confident coming in to that. (President of Buchanan College)

Thus, size and complexity made a difference in the qualitative descriptions of sensemaking and were particularly salient for presidents who had come from larger or

smaller institutions. Both of these categories—presidents as lay ethnographers and the impact of organizational size—are about the fundamental question of "what's the story here?" They are about how presidents form plausible, working definitions of the situation and create the foundation for what to do next.

Social Cognition and Administrative Teams

The degree to which presidents stress the importance of administrative teams cannot be overstated. In large measure, nearly every president mentioned building an administrative team or "getting the right people on the bus" (Collins, 2001). This highlights the relational or social context in which sensemaking occurs and has been explored with college presidents by Bensimon (1991) and Neumann (1991), among others. The importance of administrative teams is a formalized version of how presidents mention finding trusted individuals when they begin. When uncertainty is high and contextual knowledge is low, the presidents rely on the thinking and feedback from their administrative teams.

For example, the president of Coolidge State University said there is no substitute for the open and honest discussions he has with his leadership team. He says,

> I can't tell you how many times that people that I have confidence in, you
> know the senior leadership team, the vice chancellors, how many times
> they have helped me identify a particular course of action that has turned
> out to be the best one. If left to my own devices, I would have jumped off
> a cliff (President of Coolidge State University).

Similarly, the president of Wilson College says,

> I think the dynamics and the chemistry of the senior staff of the cabinet
> and your relationship with them can't be overestimated. The importance
> of it can't be overestimated. It is just…it is just critical (President of
> Wilson College).

Not only are administrative teams critically important, but harmony and collaborative unity is needed. The president of Wilson College says that he has five direct reports and that "unless you are on the same page with them, doing what they're doing, things are really out of whack." Likewise, the president of Buchanan College mentioned the importance of not having a "divisive cohort" on your senior team.

> One of the interesting things to me is perhaps to use the "Good to Great" analogy now, and that is getting the right team on the bus and so much of being a president I think is looking at the group you have working with you and making sure there isn't a kind of divisive cohort within that, whether it's one individual or group of individuals. (President of Buchanan College)

Likewise, the first thing the President of Harrison College mentioned in an open-ended question was that a good administrative team was "critically, critically important." In the beginning of his presidency he dealt with a member of his team that others wanted fired, and he was not able to focus his attention on important initiatives when he couldn't rely on key individuals in the provost's office or advancement office. He says, "At the end of the day, getting those chess pieces aligned properly is…well it goes to Peter's idea of getting people on the bus—getting the right people on the bus first."

What was stressed across all the interviews was the social property of sensemaking—that a collective group is needed to properly run the organization and that these individuals need cohesion. In this sense, it is not the president who runs the college but the presidential team. While I spoke with one individual, the president would express how much he or she relied on the collective expertise of multiple individuals. Operating as a senior team, the president relies upon the cognitive complexity of an administrative unit, making him or her more able to respond as necessary. By their answers in the

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interviews, the presidents were suggesting that a process of collective meaning

construction and response generation is far superior to an isolated process.

Reducing Uncertainty with Peers and Mentors

Presidents seek to reduce uncertainty by looking to peers at other institution to see

what they should be doing. This highlights the social nature of sensemaking and the need

to overcome the isolation and singularity of the position. For example, the president of

Hayes College says, "I actually went and talked to a few other presidents in the area, on

the guise of introducing myself, but really trying to pick their brain about what the hell is

going on. What am I supposed to be doing here?" Presidents are also on email lists

formed while attending new president seminars. These lists serve as a means to

"compare notes" with others. For example, the president of Adams College mentioned

she was reviewing an email conversation about strategic planning. She says, "What we

do on our distribution list from our new presidents' seminar—everybody's doing the

same thing, we're all doing strategic planning—so we compare notes about the process."

The role of peers is important for newcomers when tasks are unclear and complex

(Louis, 1990; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This is especially true of the college

presidency where the issues faced are not ones in which standardized, professional

knowledge can be applied (Schön, 1983). The president of Burr Research University

says when she became president she really took advantage of opportunities to talk to

more experienced presidents, to "bounce things off of them from time to time, and

just…try to get as much wisdom as I can from them, knowing that I am new, and wanting

to learn as much as possible from the experience of other people."

In addition to speaking with peers, the use of mentors was also frequently discussed. For example, the president of Lincoln College said having a mentor was "extremely helpful, very, very helpful." Having a mentor is a valuable experience because the problems or questions new presidents face are novel and complex. They are looking for the pattern recognition and perspective that comes from experience (Klein, 1989). For example, the board was trying to decide how the president of Lincoln College would be evaluated. The board chair offered Intel Corporation's evaluation process as a model. The president of Lincoln College described this process as "basically you have every person who has ever met you evaluate you once a year." He knew this was not the process he wanted, but he did not know how to proceed. He says,

> So I called Steve [his mentor] and talked to him about it, he not only agreed that that wasn't what I wanted but he also had a very good suggestion about how to do it instead and this really related to what he had done at [his College], and now I basically have a kind of confidential verbal evaluation after ever trustee meeting (President of Lincoln College).

He said this evaluation process has worked very well, and that this is one among several examples of his mentor gaving him great advice and options.

Mentors also help new presidents understand how an "experienced president" would interpret and respond to a situation. For example, the president of Tyler State University said,

> I think it is very important for presidents, especially young presidents to have mentors. I think that having someone that you can talk with who has been an experienced president, probably is not a president now, who you can talk with honestly, directly, and to get unvarnished advice, I think is incredibly useful (President of Tyler State University).

He and his mentor "visit on the phone probably once a week for an hour and a half and that is just…that is just incredibly useful to have that kind of perspective and I seek out

other presidents and ask them for their advice. I really do." Mentors provide social

support and insight into the complexities and lack of clarity around the presidential role.

These mentors are particularly helpful because presidents are unlikely to display their

ignorance, confusion, and need for help among people that are their direct reports. They

also do not want to display uncertainty with their "bosses," the board of trustees. All of

this suggests that just as presidents rely upon their senior administrative teams to help

them deal with the complexities of their position, they readily turn to peers and mentors

as a social means of thinking and coping.

Reducing Equivocality with Strategic Planning Sessions

When presidents began, they often mentioned leading a group process of

collectively discovering the organization's strategy or priorities. In some cases this was

mandated by the board of trustees who wanted a strategic plan. In others, the president

mentioned the need to hold these sessions to "get everyone on the same page." In the

later case, the question becomes why did they want to get everyone on the same page?

What problem were they trying to overcome? When seen as equivocality-reduction

(Weick, 1979), there were too many meanings of what the organization could be doing.

The president was trying to reduce this equivocality by focusing the efforts of the

organization. Equivocality is especially present in colleges and universities which have

complex and diffuse goals to educate students and create knowledge. Higher education

organizations have complex environments they interact with, including the disciplinary

inquiry of society and the natural world. This creates a multitude of purposes that

counteract attempts at equivocality-reduction. With our desire to have a clear purpose, managing a university is not for those seeking clarity. Nevertheless, people try.

This process of reducing equivocality was most clearly demonstrated in strategic planning meetings. Presidents are especially prone to want these meetings because uncertainty collects at the top of the organization. They face many directions the organization could go and are in need of reducing this is some way. Two presidents specifically described the same process for discovering the collective priorities of the college. For example, the president of Buchanan College led a process to develop the school's strategic plan with a committee of 40 people. Each person wrote action steps on post-it notes. The committee members wrote these individually but they also passed forth ideas from the campus community. During the primary strategic planning meeting, committee members arranged the post-it notes into categories on a wall. He says,

> We put them all up on this huge wall and then we began to assemble them into similar categories. Once you have done that. Once you have got them, and it's a time consuming process where everybody…I mean you can say, "No, this goes over here." And someone else says, "No, it doesn't." And you finally reach a consensus, and then once you have done that everybody—you get little dots and we gave every…all 40 people each got 10 dots. So you got 10 votes and you could put all of your votes on one item, if you said this is the most important thing that I think we have to deal with you could put all 10 votes there.

From a sensemaking perspective this is a prototypical case of "How do we know what we think until we see what we say?" How can the committee know what they think until they see the categories on the wall? Committee members come to know what they value by seeing their votes. They act in order to think. Their knowledge of priorities is largely tacit and becomes explicit by placing dots next to action steps. This not only reveals the tacit priorities of an individual but also the collective's priorities.

This process is also natural selection in microcosm. Participants bracket some portion of the stream of experience by writing action steps on post-it notes. There is then an intuitive selection of action steps by placing dots next to the ideas. The strongest, most plausible ideas survive. Finally, ideas are retained in a formalized, written strategic plan.

The president of Loyola Jesuit described a similar process. He says:

> The university-wide planning meeting was like a…process…the process was like determining together, the priorities of the institution, and so there was lots of talk about how to group those various priorities, so we did some early brainstorming and then the facilitators and I tried to group these. We created nine…nine areas, and then we took under those nine topical areas, now what would be the operational priorities here and let people use dots to locate their support, and so, of those nine, we probably developed 60 or 70 operational pieces (President of Loyola Jesuit University).

These strategic planning sessions demonstrate how the activities of organizing are directed toward the establishment of a workable level of certainty (Weick, 1979). The president is a facilitator of this process, ostensibly because their role in the eyes of the board of trustees is to set the strategic direction of the college. They face too many meanings and need clarity about preferences. Strategic planning sessions offer a means to reduce equivocality and direct action.

Identity Saliency and Predecessor's Weaknesses

The final two categories of this chapter emerged from the fundamental question of "Why am I here?" To some degree, president's identified with being the antithesis of their predecessor. In many cases, the president was hired for their ability to overcome a predecessor's weaknesses, a finding consistent with the conclusions of many other

scholars (Kaufman, 1980; Walker, 1977). Therefore, if we are a "parliament of selves," as Mead says (1934), then the self that become most apparent for presidents is often the antithesis of their predecessor.

For example, the president of Buchanan College repeatedly mentioned that the most challenging thing he faced when he began was a conflict with faculty over the meaning of shared governance. The previous two presidents had been members of the faculty at Buchanan and they had sided with the faculty on many disputes with the trustees. Most shocking to the current Buchanan president was that if a faculty member came to his predecessor with a problem, he would describe the issue to the provost as having a "colleague in pain." It became clear throughout the interview that one of the reasons the current president had been hired by the trustees is that he would bluntly "say no" to the faculty and side with the trustees on contentious issues.

For example, Buchanan College had been told by the Higher Learning Commission that they needed some form of faculty performance appraisal. The trustees agreed, yet there was faculty resistance to performance appraisals and Buchanan's president at the time sided with the faculty. The current president was given a mandate by the trustees to devise a performance appraisal process—a mandate he believed in. However, in trying to implement changes he was told this was a "faculty right" to make this type of decision. In describing the continual conflicts he had with faculty, he repeatedly described himself as someone who would "say no" and that he was willing to say "this is what we are going to do." For example, he says:

> Depending upon the constituency within the college, there is a very
> interesting view of what their responsibility is and what your
> responsibility is and I have found in more than one instance where I have
> said, "Well…you know, I appreciate your perspective, but no that isn't a

faculty right and responsibility. You do not dictate when we pay overload pay. You do not dictate when we decide because of budgetary considerations to eliminate under enrolled classes. That is not a faculty responsibility." And since this is my first presidency, I have no idea if this is emblematic of an issue that others have faced or not, but it appears to me, sometimes I just think it is the culture of Buchanan College because there has been a long history here of faculty saying, "this is a right of the faculty" and no one willing to say, "no, probably not" (President of Buchanan College).

In many ways the president symbolized the battle between the board and the professional autonomy of the faculty. The board was seeking more control in its authority to operate the organization while faculty were asserting their professional autonomy. The president sat in the middle—siding with the board's desire for authority—and his willingness to "say no" became a prominent factor of who he was as president.

At Burr Research University, which recently had gone through a vote of no confidence, the new president's openness and trust were vary salient components of her identity. She continually mentioned how she believed in transparency and that she only knows how to operate in a really transparent way. Her "predisposition to openness" came from her background of being a provost at a public institution. In addition, she continually mentioned that she is very good at "earning trust." Her ability to earn trust made her the "right fit at the right time," she said. In recognizing why she was the right person at the right time, she said that, "So much of [the board of trustees'] perception of what is right at this time is driven by the failures of the prior person."

In addition to her predecessor not being transparent and trustworthy, he had not been considered good at execution. Therefore, the current president mentioned how she was good at priority-setting and execution. Explicitly, she says, "In this search, it was all

about execution, because they viewed my predecessor as having a big vision, but he couldn't actually make anything happen and it all fell apart." Therefore, in our discussion, she quickly mentioned having a track record of execution. In her previous position as provost of a large, public university she would set 3-4 priorities every year and would press her subordinates to work on these priorities. She was frequently accused of starting every meeting by saying, "OK, where are we on this initiative?" This was her way of driving things to completion. Given her predecessor's perceived inability to execute, this became a salient feature of her identity as a leader.

The identity that presidents enact through their presidency is heavily shaped by how they describe themselves during the hiring process. This is not surprising given they are selected for this description which validates the appropriateness of the beliefs they describe. The subsequent fulfillment of this identity comes through an interaction and negotiation with the campus throughout their tenure. They seek to prove the veracity of their beliefs and remain consistent in the eyes of their bosses, the trustees. This process was most clearly seen with the presidents from Buchanan College and Burr Research University. The president of Buchanan College continually described incidents where he said "no" to faculty and curtailed what he perceived to be excessive demands by faculty to have a final say in decision making. It also explains why the president of Burr Research University continually mentioned her drive to execute on a clear set of priorities, as well as her trustworthiness and transparency.

This process of successors having an identity that is a means to overcome the weaknesses of their predecessor may be more prevalent in higher education. In business organizations, it is common for executives to have input in grooming or choosing their

replacement. In higher education, the search committee rarely, if ever, would include the current president. The hiring process is mainly completed by the board of trustees and the search committee, making it less likely that an incumbent president can choose a successor with a similar personality (Birnbaum, 1971).

Making Sense of a Public, Volitional Choice to become President

The presidents were also in the process of making sense of their choice to take the position. They are in a "committed condition," and being committed changes the way events are understood. As one president says,

> I realize that my commitment to this place, there's a sense that I don't have any choice but to be here because I have to go through the bicentennial and the end of the campaign or I will have damaged McKinley instead of moving McKinley forward, and so even if I wear out, and say, it's time to just go retire, I can't, and that is emotionally difficult.

In most cases, presidents in the study population traveled far distances and agreed, publicly, to be in charge. Obviously, people who make such a choice are inclined to believe that they can change an organization. In the interviews, I did not directly ask presidents why they choose to take the job. Neither then, did I have a chance to ask them what they thought about this choice. However, I did explore the actions they took after arriving and in large measure these actions can be understood as a means of justifying their choice. If they traveled halfway across the country and gave up a great deal of personal time and energy, they are going to believe they can make a difference. Seen from this perspective, the presidency is a "committed condition" and the goals, attitudes, and actions that presidents articulate are justifications for their past choice of accepting the job (Weick, 1993b).

For example, the president of Fillmore State University had come from a large,

respectable institution in the southern United States to his current position—a school with

low status in a state system of higher education in the Midwest. When he was asked what

his greatest surprise was, he said, "I didn't know coming in that I would conclude that we

could be the best in the country." As a researcher, I found this odd because it means he

thought the institution was sub par when he came. He then proceeded to discuss his plan

for making Fillmore the "best in the country" in integrating students' academic and

personal development. The university was currently in a low status position even relative

to its peers in the state system of higher education, yet his plan was to make the

university one of the best in the country. As a researcher this struck me as overreaching,

but if we view his actions as a person trying to impose a reason on a committed

condition, becoming the "best in class" institution is a way of justifying why he made

such a choice. In his own words, he says:

> I found that people here really value excellence, personal attention,
> accessibility to a Fillmore education, and service, service to each other, to
> the students, to the community, to the state and so forth. Those ran much
> deeper than I thought, and what I found was that we could actually take
> things to a significant level of achievement that given our values, given
> our size, so forth and so on, that we really could be, with a lot of work,
> and it is going to take time, the best in the country, I think, at this
> integration of the academic and personal development of the students
> (President of Fillmore State University).

Likewise, the president of Lincoln College described several "pleasant surprises"

when he began. Being pleasantly surprised suggests that expectations were low to begin

with and there was insufficient justification for taking the position. He says,

> I was a little surprised by the, well maybe even rather surprised by the
> quality of the faculty here…I wondered, I knew that we would have good
> teachers, or I believed that based on everything that I had heard, but I
> wondered about the kind of time and for that matter even dedication that

are required for scholarship, but the quality of scholarship here is much better than I anticipated so that has been a very pleasant surprise (President of Lincoln College).

The presidents in my study population already made the decision to become president, and their accounts of what was surprising often are ways to build attitudes to buttress support behind this decision. It is unlikely that a president would want to come to the conclusion that they are the head of a sub par group of faculty and an institution with little ability to improve itself. Driven by post-decision rationalization, the presidents want to believe the institution exceeds their expectations.

Alternatively, if you conclude that the institution does not meet your standards, you will try to raise the quality of the institution. For example, the president of Arthur College was quite candid about his difficulties in reconciling the quality of the institution with his self perception. He did not talk about the college being "better than expected" as many other presidents did, but saw things rather critically. In his words,

> I was surprised at the culture of students and the culture of faculty and staff…this school did not reach out to what I would call the leaders from high schools, the leaders from academic programs, the leaders from athletics. It sort of dropped down a notch. And I said, well really sharp people, really smart people. People that are…you know, who are really able to express themselves and have a lot of self esteem, those people go to other schools. The people that go here are the people that are kind of insecure, not real sure of themselves, maybe people that don't expect to ever really reach high heights. So, I was surrounded by a sea of mediocrity is the better way to put it. From the custodians all the way up to the senior administrative staff. That's not how I view myself, maybe I fall deeply within that sea of mediocrity, but that's not how I see myself, and so there was whole lot of disconnect between how I viewed me and how I viewed the people I was surrounded by (President of Arthur College).

In light of this perception, the president of Arthur College was quite forceful in raising the status of the organization. He often quoted Jim Collins (2001) in critiquing

the school as mediocre and spoke about excellence and that "good is the enemy of great."

In conjunction, he used strategic planning as a process to raise the status of the organization, to bridge the disconnect of how he viewed himself and how he viewed the organization. In many ways, the accounts of new presidents are a means of justifying their public, volitional choice to become president. They either adjusted attitudes or ambitiously worked to raise the status of the organization to justify their decision.

Barriers to Sensemaking

Throughout the interviews several aspects of the president's role emerged as a potential barrier to sensemaking. The first barrier is when individuals are at the top of the organization, subordinates are less likely to share information that reflects poorly on them. In conjunction, there is a tendency for subordinates to be reticent to verbally engage or disagree with presidents who are, ostensibly, their superior. The second barrier is one familiar to those in public life—the inability to think out loud. A president's words are often interpreted with greater weight and ideas are taken as a *fait accompli*—an accomplished fact. This says less about presidents than it does about people in followership positions. We tend to see those in leadership positions as having rationally and strategically planned every idea. Finally, presidents face a constant flow of meetings, banquets, and interactions, the pace of which hinders their ability to retrospectively construct meaning. In the following section, I will examine each of these barriers and provide examples from the interviews.

Isolation and Power Distance

Sensemaking stresses the social component of cognition as opposed to individuals as information processors. The mind is a complex amalgamation of knowledge structures from society, professions, organizations, and personal histories. Much of this knowledge is tacit. We don't know what we know until we collectively discuss it—the sensemaking recipe (Weick, 1979, 1995). Thus, isolation in the presidential role is a significant barrier to making sense of what is going on, particularly when presidents are newcomers and have little knowledge of the organization itself. This isolation is a general, ongoing phenomenon—"I have few people to talk to"—and an event based phenomenon—"I am the last to know about a problem." As mentioned previously, with the general, ongoing isolation presidents reach out to peers at other institutions and find mentors. For example, the president of Tyler State University says he is involved in the national association of state colleges because:

> That interaction with that kind of cohort of people that you develop into, and I think there are a number of national organizations that I go to for the contact that I have with my presidential colleagues because the conversations that we have with each other, I can't have with anybody else on this campus (President of Tyler State University).

Presidents face isolation because people are unlikely to share gossip, bad news, or contradict presidents with their honest opinions. This involves how people relate to those in authority positions, which Hofstede (2001) labels "power distance," which is the tendency for people to accept or distance themselves from people in authority positions. For example, the president of Harrison College says, "It truly is the case; the president is often the last to know about some things that are going on." A core issue they face is the common tendency for subordinates to not share information that may reflect negatively

upon them. Other presidents mentioned that when you take the position "people stop telling you the truth." The president of McKinley State University said that "There aren't many people that you can really talk to," and the president of Fillmore State University said that when he began he was "trying to figure out who the people are who are going to tell you what you need to hear not what you want to hear."

The president of Coolidge State University compared the information he used to receive as a dean and faculty member to his current role. He says,

> When I was a faculty member in mechanical engineering I knew everything about everybody. I mean the secretaries were talking to me about who was seeing who, and they weren't necessarily talking to me, but I knew which secretary was dating who, and all this stuff that I didn't care about and didn't want to know and…because everybody would talk about all kinds of stuff, and I didn't care about that stuff, and now, nobody will tell me anything (President of Coolidge State University).

Presidents are hierarchically and socially removed from the informal channels of communication and much of what they describe in learning about the organization was a means of escaping deferential treatment or being given the "company line." In the extensive listening sessions at Tyler State University, the president took people out of their departments because he said, "I think you kind of get the company line," and instead he found a crummy room so he could have more "human relations" with people. In the listening sessions he did not stand up because of a "status thing if I was standing and they were down." These listening sessions became such a valuable means of escaping the isolation of the position that the president of Tyler State said, "When I stopped doing it [the listening sessions], it was like going through withdrawal. I missed it. In fact, to where my third year, I did it again with listening about values, it became a part of kind of a piece of who I am." All of this suggests a difficulty of getting good, unvarnished

information to make sense of. Presidents had to overcome the way people speak and act

differently because of the power distance or status of their position.

Much of what the presidents described about this isolation and lack of candid

information were means of how they overcame this problem. For example, the president

of Harrison College said:

> It's awfully important that you have some of the real…I don't know if
> they're curmudgeons or…the institutional eyes and ears out there all the
> time that you really feel comfortable talking to that do two things. One,
> they're giving you honest feedback on what they are hearing, what they
> are sensing, but and at the same time and maybe this is where the
> curmudgeon piece comes in, you want some people that are willing to
> come in and not be afraid of the office or afraid of the person and tell you
> like it is from their perspective, so that you truly are getting a good sense
> of what is the pulse out there. You can't do that without having eyes and
> ears out and I say this all the time (President of Harrison College).

Many presidents mentioned similar ideas about how to overcome the

informational isolation of the position. Means of overcoming this barrier are apparent in

categories previously discussed such as finding trusted individuals and speaking with

peers and mentors.

Complications of Thinking Out Loud

As with most jobs in leadership positions, presidents have to be careful about

what they say publicly. If one takes seriously the sensemaking maxim—"How do I know

what I think until I see what I say?"—being excessively cautious in speaking puts limits

on a president's ability to know what they think. In nearly every interview, presidents

mentioned being surprised at how their preliminary ideas were taken as *fait accompli*. As

with the isolation and power distance of the presidency, this says as much about

followership than it does about anything else. It says that most people expect leaders to

rationally plan every statement. Most people do not see a president's words as provisional and emergent but as finalized facts. For example, the president of Hayes Colleges says:

> I am really surprised that people take so seriously what I say. I don't agree with myself 99% of the time, and I throw lots of stuff on the wall to get it out there and to see what people's reaction is, but in this context, you put something out there, you say something, and that's it. That's the way, that's what we are going to do. And people don't like that, you know, and so it's a…I am surprised at that…people in other contexts recognize that as OK…you are testing, you are probing, you are running up the flag here. Boy, say it and it's a *fait accompli*, and that surprised me (President of Hayes College).

The president of Tyler State University said he would not even nod his head because "one of the things you learn as a president when you nod your head people think you are going to do something about it." The realization that their words are taken seriously leads to altering their personal style. The president of Daft University said he had to learn to censure his speech because he was an external thinker. He says:

> I literally put ideas out in the air to see if they are dumb or if they are useful. I think out loud, and I learned, boy that can throw an organization into havoc. You know, "the president said this. And the president said that." And all I was doing was brainstorming. So I had to learn not to brainstorm so much in public (President of Daft University).

Getting into trouble for thinking out loud or not realizing how people will interpret offhand remarks was a surprise for nearly everyone. The president of Madison State University said the key realization over his first six months was that "you can't just think out loud because people will take it very seriously." He recalled several examples where offhand remarks he made led to changes on campus, and he would say, "I was just thinking out loud, I wasn't saying we should do that." The president of McKinley University says, "I can't say anything without people trying to parse every part of every

sentence," and the president of Urban Tech University mentioned the presidency is different from his role as dean and provost because of the higher percentage of political science in the presidency. He says he has become more reserved and subtle in the way he expresses his opinions. Nearly every president had examples of speaking without an awareness of the potential meanings of their statements.

If most people are external thinkers and know what they think by seeing what they say, then this is a significant barrier to the process of making sense. Presidents have to censure their speech which limits the richness of conversations and the construction of ideas. Because of the inhibited conversation there is less variation to choose from in selecting interpretations. This barrier to sensemaking also heightens the need for finding trusted individuals, having a leadership team that is cohesive and has rich discussions, and the need to speak with mentors. Instead of in a public setting, the articulation of what presidents think happens with a smaller subset of individuals, and public dialogue is filled with non-specific generalities and pre-formed ideas.

The Rapid Stream of Experience

A key tenet in sensemaking is retrospect, which is stepping outside the stream of experience to direct attention on it (Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1995). As Kierkegaard states, "It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards" (1843/1967, 450). Presidents are "living forward" at a rapid pace with little time to "understand backwards." Most presidents mentioned one of their biggest surprises was this rapid stream of experience. For example, they often gave estimates of the number of ceremonial dinners

they had. The President of Wilson College says, "I haven't had a dinner where I didn't have an occasion…I think we are coming on 8 nights now." The president of Tyler State mentioned how the job is all consuming, and that one of the surprises when he began was how many evenings and weekends were occupied.   He said he and his wife only ate meals at home 20 times during their first year.

The speed and pace of the presidency was a consistent surprise and was mentioned by nearly everyone. The president of Coolidge State University mentioned not having a half hour to think.

> So there is just not a lot of time to do things and to think, it's just one meeting after another. You know, today there is not a half hour, you know, in fact, a half hour, I have got two half hour periods because I have got to drive someplace and so that is the downtime but I'll probably be on the phone, I have got a phone conversation scheduled for one of those time periods while I am driving (President of Coolidge State University).

The point can be belabored, but the barrier to sensemaking is apparent in the descriptions of their first years in office. They said it was "like a blur;" they could not get "on top" of their schedule, and they never felt "caught up." All of this suggests that the rapid pace of experience hinders their ability to bracket and bound experience. They are constantly in the flow of events and have little time to get "on top" of their experience to reflect upon it. Likewise, the experience is "like a blur" which suggests an inability to parse out and remember discrete events.

To overcome this barrier, presidents mentioned having time blocked off to avoid getting "swallowed up by the speed of events" (President of Lincoln College). For example, the president of Daft University does not schedule appointments before nine in the morning for "reflection time." The president of Fillmore State says you have to

"guard certain segments of your time." His secretary blocks out time each day under his name. He remarks:

> I never thought about this before taking the job, but the idea that you have to kind of be on all the time means that now I value down time a lot more than I used to, there is less of it, but when I get it, and you have to plan it or you are never going to get it, I really cherish it. So, that's been a real challenge, (President of Fillmore State University).

In sum, presidents face three significant barriers to sensemaking: isolation and candid communication from subordinates, complications of thinking out loud, and the rapid stream of experience with little time for reflection. In most case, they briefly mentioned these and spent the majority of time describing the means to overcome these barriers, such as speaking to mentors and trusted individuals on the leadership team, parsing their words, and blocking off time in their calendar.

Chapter Summary

Figure 5.1 summarizes the previous findings as a process of answering three fundamental questions: What's the story here? What do we do next? And why am I here? To construct the story of the college, presidents act as lay ethnographers, meeting people "on their turf," walking around the campus to get "total immersion," attending as many events as possible. Through this process, they gain an understanding of the culture that is largely tacit. Second, in their construction of the story, size and complexity of the organization make a qualitative difference. Presidents at smaller institutions more easily come to a "core essence" or find "an eerie consistency."

To answer the next question—what do we next?—presidents rely on the cognitive complexity and collective understanding of their administrative team. The importance of

a cohesive group can not be overstated. It was mentioned by nearly everyone as critically important, especially with presidents being newcomers with little contextual knowledge and high uncertainty in taking action. In addition, presidents look to reduce uncertainty through speaking with peers and mentors. They rely on them for social proof about what to do next, and, in the case of mentors, they need the perspective of a person with role experience to help them interpret novel situations and provide guidance. Finally, presidents reduce equivocality—or the number of avenues the university could pursue or is pursuing—by conducting strategic planning sessions.

Answering the questions of "what's the story here?" and "what do we do next?" is hindered by the isolation of the position and the likelihood of subordinates to not be candid or mention issues that reflect poorly on them. Additionally, presidents cannot discover what they think by seeing what they say. Their words are often taken as *fait accompli*, rather than provisional ideas to be tested and discussed. This reduces the variation from which to choose ideas from and hinders the articulation of tacit knowledge.

Finally, on a personal level, new presidents seek to rationalize their committed condition. They do this by continually reinforcing their identity as the antithesis of their predecessor, and working to confirm the rationale for being hired. Many of the surprises they mention are a means to validate their prior choice to become president. They construct a meaningful future for the organization to give meaning to the sacrifice and effort they are giving in the present. Another barrier to constructing this meaning is the rapid stream of experience. With a never-ending spate of banquets, meetings, and events,

there is little time for personal reflection. Figure 5.1 summarizes these ideas into a single diagram.

Figure 5.1: Fundamental Questions Underlying Sensemaking Processes

Fundamental questions:	Process:	Barriers
What's the story here? →	Lay ethnography Impact of organizational size and complexity	Isolation and power distance
What do we do next? →	Social cognition of administrative teams Reducing uncertainty with peers and mentors Reducing equivocality with strategic planning sessions	Complications of thinking out loud
Why am I here? →	Identity saliency and a predecessor's weaknesses Making sense of a public, volitional choice to become president	Rapid stream of experience

CHAPTER 6

ELABORATION OF SENSEGIVING PROCESSES

This chapter elaborates on sensegiving which is defined as the intentional process

of influencing a target audience's perception of meaning. The following sections will

elaborate on several facets of this process that emerged throughout the interviews,

including priority-setting, setting forth a desired future image, and motivating through

crisis creation. I am seeking to answer how sensegiving can be refined and

conceptualized given the accounts of college and university presidents.

Sensegiving Processes

Figure 6.1 conceptualizes the processes of persuasion from a sender to receiver.

It highlights the process by which a sender, in this case a college president, attempts to

alter the meaning construction of campus constituents. Five categories emerged through

the interviews—priority setting, framing, setting forth a desired future image,

constructing crisis, and re-labeling and re-organizing. The diagram also highlights two

important factors, including whether the president's intention is clarity or ambiguity. The

orthodox of organizational communication is clarity, but as was found in this study (and

many writers have previously noted), the ambiguity of a message in a university can be

functional because of the diversity of purposes of the organization (Bess, 2006,

Eisenberg, 1984). Next, whether the intended meaning of a message is adopted is never

guaranteed as they are a "living," interpreting audience. This has been found in

numerous studies, from university faculty (Neumann, 1995) to symphony orchestras

(Maitlis, 2005).

Finally, the influence on the sender of sensegiving has yet to be explored (Weick

et al., 2005). For instance, if we only "know what we think until we see what we say,"

then only through sensegiving do presidents know what they think. However, as was

found in this study, presidents espouse more forethought in their public statements, and in

many cases they repeat the same message over and over, which suggests a mindlessness

to sensegiving. As the president of Hayes College says, "You have to just keep saying

the same things over, and over, and over again, and it gets boring, you get tired listening

to yourself." With these caveats in mind, the remainder of this section explores the five

categories of sensegiving that emerged across the interviews.

Figure 6.1: Conceptual Diagram of Sensegiving Processes

Sensegiving Processes (Persuasion)
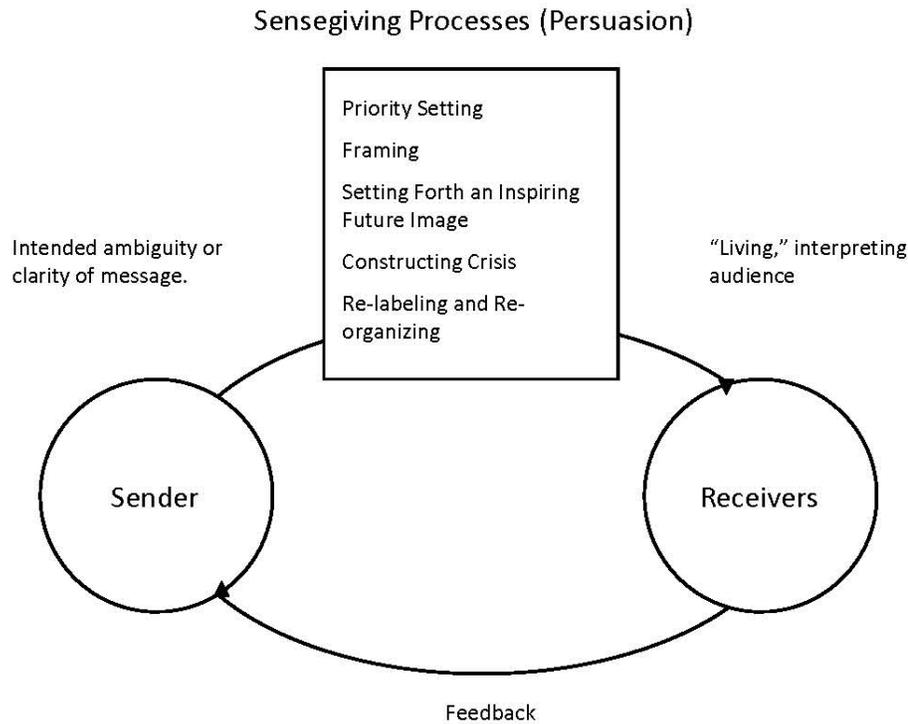
Priority Setting

The first category of sensegiving, or influencing how other's think, is priority

setting. Barring any tangible crisis, the problem a president faces is reducing the number

of options of what the college or university could be doing. There are too many

directions the college could go, and the problem is reducing this directional uncertainty

and feeling of stagnation. Similar to Schön's (1983) description of problem-setting,

priority-setting is the process of setting a boundary of attention, naming the things to

which people will attend, and setting the context in which people will focus their efforts.

As the president of Daft University describes, "People look to the president for a bit of

removed vision of saying, 'OK, this is important. This is less important.'" And the

president of Loyola Jesuit says, "I would say that I am a strategic leader because I force

myself and therefore everyone else to prioritize, to focus on the big picture, and leave the

rest of it." These statements of priority-setting were repeated in most interviews and are a core function of a university presidency.

As mentioned previously about reducing equivocality through strategic planning sessions, most presidents do not set priorities alone and they are quick to mention they are collectively-determined. However, they are often the person who writes a "priority memo" that is sent out to the campus which is their filtered interpretation of campus meetings. Thus, while the priorities do not spring from their minds alone, they do play a critical role in their selection and articulation.

The president of Burr Research University was very explicit about priority setting. She described it as the key lesson she learned in her previous position as provost in another university. Each year, her administrative team would identify three or four priorities—a practice she carried over as a new president. In directing the attention of the organization around these priorities, she said:

> I…we put them on the web. I talked about them constantly. These are the three things or if it was four, most years it was just three. These are the things we are doing this year. This is what we are working on. I asked everyone who worked for me to adjust their time based on those, that doesn't mean you don't do other things, but I wanted their time to be focused on what we said were our priorities, and each year we then reported on what we got done.

Her priority-setting approach developed as provost while working on an initiative to reduce the number of credit hours needed for undergraduates. The advice she received from other provosts at the time was, "If you want to do that, you need to restructure people's time around getting that done, otherwise it just won't happen because everybody is so busy." With future initiatives, priority setting became an integral part of how she influenced the thinking of people in the organization. She said she made sure that time

was structured around these initiatives and that she was frequently "accused of saying, 'OK, where are we on this initiative?'" Her description of priority setting was primarily about how she drove the execution of the priorities. Execution was seen as a weakness of her predecessor who was perceived to have lofty goals but little ability to execute.

It is interesting that the term priority was used in most of the interviews rather than goals or vision. A priority is ordering the current activities of the organization in order of importance. A goal is articulating an aspiration which entails re-ordering the current attention of people and prioritizing their time, but the word "priority" has a stronger hint of realism. Using the word "priority" recognizes the demands on individuals and attention as a scare resource. It also hints at the world in which most presidents live, where there are hundreds of directions and initiatives and a need to focus attention, rather than articulating inspiring new goals, the university already has too many. Instead, priority setting is needed to focus attention.

Framing

Similar to priority-setting, framing is the activity of setting the bounds for discussion (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Goffman, 1974; Kaplan, 2008). Framing selects and highlights certain aspects of an organization's activities. Priorities, however, deal more with the ordering of attention to a set of possible activities. "Framing," as Gardner and Avolio (1998) say, "involves communications that shape the general perspective upon which information is presented and interpreted" (41). Framing is about organizing experience and setting the bounds through which activity is interpreted. It is a

sense*giving* process and not sense*making* because sense has already been made by the sender and an interpretive framework directs the interpretations of a target audience.

For example, the president of Harrison College focused his remarks to the campus on four E's: community engagement, resource enhancement, student experience, and academic excellence. He said these "were the broader frames that were used to kind of move some deliberate activities along." They served "as the framework for conversations I would have with alumni, talks I would give here, so that people were all on the same page." In organizing the strategic planning material, he asked that these four E's provided a "frame" around which some of the old strategic planning materials would be organized, and he used them to organize his inaugural speech to the campus. The four E's provided a language structure and order to what would otherwise be chaotic behavior. They also made action seem more guided and intentional. He mentioned several times about being "deliberate" and "planned," and these four E's provided him a ready description of the campuses activities and improvement efforts.

The four E's were also a useful heuristic for the president and helped him in the impression management of his position. He says,

> I can almost walk out the door today and give a speech to anybody just knowing what my four E's are, not to talk about the four E's, as you know, this is the technical definition of what this means, but I can go out and say "these are the four things we're really focusing on." And by the way, here are some good things that are happening in this area. When I talk about whatever it is, student experience, here are some good things that have happened in the last month that really is firming up, this is an important thing we are focused on, and so it becomes a very easy way to simply frame any conversation I have with donors, alumni, and community groups, whatever it is. And I can remember four E's.

In describing his use of the four E's, he acknowledges that his intention is not the clarity and accuracy of their meaning. Just as presidents speak using ambiguous, broad

goals and "safe harbors," the four E's are effective in their vagueness and ambiguity. They provide a minimal structure of language that allows a diversity of interpretations. Likewise, the president of Daft University framed the work of the strategic planning committee. He said, "I will not tell you where to take this new strategy for Daft, but I said if you bring me a plan back and it does not focus on academic quality, I will send it back to you." He set the bounds of attention to be about academic quality to frame the discussion and direction of the University. This second component of sensegiving is similar to the first, priority setting, except that it less about agreeing on the relative importance of activities and more about setting the bounds of interpretation.

Setting Forth an Inspiring Future Image

The content of sensegiving, as articulated by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), is a desired future image, and in their case study of a new president, the strategic initiative was to become a "top ten public research university." Many presidents mentioned a similar initiative. For example, the president of Fillmore State wrote a memo to the campus after being in office for seven months. The memo was a report of his conclusions from a series of 40 meetings with around 1,000 participants. He began these meetings by mentioning his desire for "Fillmore State to be best of class and first choice, and to discover what that would mean for us." These conversations helped him "assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to Fillmore's advancement." He mentions that the "best thing to do was to find out what people think is really important, and then reflect that back."

As a result of these meetings, he wrote to the campus that, "Fillmore State University can be the best in the nation in the integrated academic and personal development of students. This overall goal will guide and frame our actions going forward." He said he was surprised at how committed people on the campus were and that he did not realize this future would be attainable before going through these meetings. After having sent the memo to the campus, he said, he worked through the academic departments just "double checking, with the letter. I am not getting any pushback." The letter instigated some ambiguity as one faculty member in the student newspaper says, "It will be interesting to see what the letter means of where we're going to go from here." One student in the newspaper responded that the letter "reads like a politician's speech, with no clear or concise plan." However, the conceptualization of sensegiving is the *activity* of altering the meaning construction of others, with the understanding that recipients are a "living," interpreting audience.

Likewise, the president of Daft University described setting forth an inspiring future image as similar to giving an "elevator speech." He says,

> The main question is you have to be able to give the elevator speech, you know, where is…how is the organization going to be different six years from now than it is today, and it has got to be ambitious enough to get people's imaginations flowing and to saying, "I can be part of that," and they can feel good about waking up in the morning and to really engage their energy and yet it has to be realistic enough to engage their energy, and so you have got to hit that sweet spot. And you have got to be general enough that people can fit their activities into it, but specific enough so that you can actually measure it and say we got there or we didn't. We are actually hitting our marks or we are not (President of Daft University).

The president of Daft University offers a nuanced description of the role of a president who gives the "elevator speech" that activates imagination and identification (Ashforth, Harrison, Corley, 2008; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). This future image also must be

seen as plausible or "realistic," but general enough that all of the campus activities can fit into it. This highlights the difficulty of balancing clarity and ambiguity with a future image.

As mentioned in chapter four, many of the presidents noticed people were not proud of the organization when they began, and a large percentage of their actions were aimed at instilling pride and getting people to "boast." As a component of sensegiving, presidents set forth a desired future image as a means to alter this reality. In many ways, this future image was a means to construct a positive organizational identity in the present. By stating how the institution will become the "best in the country" or "nationally recognized," presidents are seeking to influence the positive saliency of belongingness to the institution. This mirrors the research of Gioia and Thomas (1996), who say, "One of the most pronounced findings was the intense focus on the projection of a desired future image as a means of changing the currently held identity" (394).

Identity, as a construct, is particularly useful in the study colleges and universities. In fact, the seminal articles on organizational identity came from a study of college alumni (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and the competing identities of a religiously-affiliated university (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In this dissertation, I noticed president using notions of identity more than culture. Especially at smaller organizations, presidents spoke of finding a "core essence" or wanting to figure out "who we were." While culture is certainly important, identity seems to be something deeper, more lasting, and in this study at least, presidents seemed more concerned with notions of identity. Culture and identity are heavily intertwined but colleges and universities seek to build an enduring, life-long belongingness to their organizations.

They rely on alumni to fund much of the operations through donations and the achievements of alumni help raise the status and prestige of the organizations. Thus, identity is a more central construct in the organizational behavior of higher education organizations.

The desired future image that presidents set forth was a means of forming a positive organizational identity. The projection of a compelling future was a means to pull the organization into alignment with a more positive image of itself. The campus is prompted to become positively deviant—an organization that is highly-respected nationally (Cameron, 2008). The president acts as a catalyst to increase this collective self-esteem (Hogg, 2001). As other scholars have mentioned (Ashforth, Harrison, Corley, 2008), there is a great deal of overlap between sensegiving and positive organizational identification process. I found this to be a core function of the university presidency—to help people see themselves as part of a common and distinct group with a positive identity.

Constructing Crises

Another means of intentionally altering the thinking of the campus community was the construction of a crisis. This communication process relies on the idea that people will do more to avoid a loss than to make a potential gain (Moore & Flynn, 2008; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991). Thus, in order to persuade, some presidents rely on a description of reality where the organization is "sliding into mediocrity" or "losing its position." Rather than talk about potential gains and a bright future, presidents talk about

an impending crisis. The president of McKinley College relied on this sensegiving tactic

very explicitly. He said,

> I would say that this is a classic "good to great" problem, where we were
> good enough to be complacent, and our complacency was killing us and
> people weren't recognizing it. If the metaphor about a frog staying in the
> water until it boils to death were true, which apparently it's not, this is
> kind of where I saw McKinley, is that we had become comfortable being
> good (President of McKinley State University).

His construction of the crisis revolved around people not knowing how bad things

were, including people overestimating the resources of the University. He would say to

members of the administration, "Look, you kind of maxed out on your in-state tuition.

You have maxed out on your out of state students, and you have maxed out on your state

support. So, how do you feel that you have got a lot of resources to go ahead and do great

things?" In addition to questioning the assumption of adequate resources, he compared

the institution to one of its major rivals. He says this competitor university,

> Has done a terrific job over the last 20 years of improving themselves as a
> university…so we were thinking that anybody who's good in [the state] is
> going to want to come to McKinley and guess what, we woke up one day
> and the average ACT score of [our rival university] is now higher than
> ours. When I tell an alum that they just go into…they hyperventilate.
> They just go into shock (President of McKinley State University).

The president was trying to persuade the campus that they needed to become

"great," although the meaning of greatness was open to interpretation. The method of

persuasion was constructing a crisis where the campus was "sliding into mediocrity."

He said, "The biggest problem was people being comfortable being mediocre, or not

mediocre, being good and we were on our way to being mediocre because we weren't

doing the things that needed to be done." He continues,

> The good departments are sitting there saying, "We're good, what…leave
> us alone. Don't worry about it." And, of course, that is the death knell, as

soon as you believe that you don't have to continue to reinvent yourself and figure out where you are going to go. You are closing in to mediocrity, and that is the thing that terrifies me the most, is to be responsible for a unit that's sitting there sliding into mediocrity and not even knowing it (President of McKinley State University).

In addition to citing the lack of resources and declining standards compared to a rival university, he described McKinley as having "lost its vision" by decreasing the number of credit hours taught by tenure-track faculty over the past ten years, from 73 percent to 48 percent. He said, "Here is a university that prides itself on its undergraduate experience, and we, how can you let this…How can you let this happen?" This illustrates that when a university does not have a recognizable crisis, presidents construct an environment to which the organization must respond. Presidents foster an environment of change by constructing a crisis to persuade campus constituents.

Re-labeling and Re-organizing

The final category of sensegiving that emerged was the process of re-labeling and re-organizing. Comparatively, this component is sensegiving through symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981) and language (Kelly, 2008; Pondy, 1978). For example, the president of Hayes College faced declining enrollment. He wanted to make a big change in the whole "enrollment make-up" and reorganize how they function. He said, "After being here for a couple weeks it was clear that we have a bunch of external functions which you can sort of think of as marketing." In the case of Hayes College, this included enrollment, development, college relations, and community relations. He combined them and found somebody to lead this group as a combined entity. By this, he re-labeled and re-organized the functions of the college under the term "marketing." This new word gives

meaning to employees to think of themselves as marketers in which they sell the product of the college to prospective students and the external community.

Likewise, the most surprising thing for the president of Harrison College was the "disconnect between who people say we are and what it is that we actually do." He said that everyone characterized Harrison as a classic liberal arts college. However, when he examined the programs that Harrison offers he found they were actually a blend of liberal arts and professional studies. Additionally, the college was founded as a "preacher and teacher" college which is not considered "classic liberal arts these days," he said. This was a "revelation if you will, or admission that we are much more than a traditional liberal arts college which has established our vision for where we want to go in the future."

Given the disconnect between his conception of liberal arts colleges and Harrison's actual programs, he began referring to Harrison as a "New American College." The concept of a New American College was developed in the mid-1990s by Ernest Boyer to help colleges which had competing identities in a liberal arts curriculum, research, and professional studies (Coye, 1997). The New American College model reconciled the competing interests of faculty, parents, students, and employers, who all have competing demands for educational quality and professional skills. This new label for the College's identity offered a way for the president to bridge the competing interest of parents and students who wanted a practical, professional degree and faculty who were more interested in maintaining a liberal arts identity.

In a final example of sensegiving as re-organizing, the president of Wilson College describes a process of instigating ambiguity among faculty through a symbolic

change to their governance structure. He said when he began he tried to make specific

changes early to signal to the campus that "we are capable of change." To accomplish

this, he began to raise questions about why he, as president, should set the agenda, chair,

and edit the minutes of faculty meetings. In his words,

> I said in the first faculty meeting that I chaired, I said "I don't think it's
> appropriate for me to be in front of this faculty. I think faculty meetings
> should be run by faculty." And this was just like a huge like, "What do
> you mean? It has always been this way. How can you do this? Who is
> going to do this?" And, you know, then they started talking amongst
> themselves and they came to realize, you know, this is a great idea, this is
> exactly right, of course we should do this, and now they have elected a
> faculty moderator of faculty meetings and now I am not running it. So,
> that was just a very small thing, but a very symbolic thing, about how I
> was going to comport myself in a presidency. (President of Wilson
> College)

These three examples demonstrate sensegiving as re-organizing and re-labeling.

Presidents were supplying a target audience with a new representation of organizational

action. In the first case, departments that interacted with the environment were now

labeled marketing and were organized together. In the second, the president re-labeled

the College as a "New American College" rather than a classic liberal arts college. This

deployed a new cognitive representation of the College's identity. Finally, the president

of Wilson College re-organized the governance structure of the faculty senate to re-define

his role and how he would comport himself as president. Each of these examples

represents an intentional effort to reconstruct a new definition of reality.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I first summarize findings and then explore theoretical and practical implications and future areas of inquiry that were sparked by the interviews. I then conclude with a reflective discussion of puzzles and surprises that occurred through the course of this research.

Research Summary

The main question guiding this study has been: When new college presidents are hired as organizational outsiders, what sensemaking and sensegiving do they engage in over their first year? There are three sub-questions: 1) How do presidents cope with being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice? 2) How do situational demands influence this simultaneity? And 3) How can our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving be enlarged given the experiences of new presidents?

The first section of this dissertation sought to better understand the experience of being a new president while being in charge. I did not find stages that were clearly defined periods. Rather, their maturation in the position was gradual. Imposing a universal order on this process seemed arbitrary given the contextual and idiosyncratic nature of each president's experience. However, I did find three salient categories about

being a newcomer while simultaneously being in charge. The first was a communication process where presidents spoke using ambiguous, broad goals, and "safe harbors." The second was a personal attitude of cautiously holding knowledge and "knowing you don't know." Finally, presidents mentioned the need to find trusted individuals who can give contextual information and help interpret what things mean.

Second, I explored how situational demands influenced the simultaneity of sensemaking and sensegiving. My initial hypothesis of the balance of sensemaking and sensegiving proved to be overly simplistic. In institutions with concrete environmental shifts and socially constructed environments, high and low status concerns, predecessors with various weaknesses, interim presidencies, and immediate role requirements, there are a wealth of complexities and contingencies that shape the process. It was not simply that organizations were or were not in a crisis and presidents had to act differently in either situation. Despite the multitude of complexities and contingencies that shaped the entry process, when organizations perceive they were functioning at moderate or poor levels, they look outside themselves for new direction and insight. Since all the presidents were outsiders, they were relied upon to offer new meaning and direction despite the specific context.

This new meaning and direction came in several forms, such as priority-setting, framing, setting forth an inspiring future image, constructing crises as a means to initiate change, and re-labeling and re-organizing. As newcomers, I also found presidents simultaneously acting as "lay ethnographers," unknowingly using many of the methods of ethnography to understand the tacit, contextualized knowledge of the organization. There were also qualitatively different descriptions of their efforts to make sense of the

organization among presidents at small baccalaureate colleges and those at large research universities, with presidents at the smaller institutions more likely to describe coming to a consistent, core identity, while presidents of larger institutions learning to manage a complex organization.

In the interviews presidents also mentioned a reliance on peers and mentors to reduce uncertainty, and presidents considered the cohesion of their senior administrative team as critical. These findings highlight the social nature of sensemaking and that viewing it as only a micro-cognitive process will impoverish analysis. Several barriers to sensemaking also emerged, including: 1) the isolation of being in a formal position of authority where people are unlikely to tell you the truth; 2) constituents expecting presidents to be highly deliberate which created complications for presidents in thinking out loud to discover their tacit perspective, and 3) the rapid stream of experience which offered little time for thinking and reflection.

It is important to note that in my interpretations of the findings, I sought to appreciate the complexity of leadership processes and not to overestimate the significance of individual leaders, for "any interpretation of leadership proceeds from basic ideas about the centrality, or lack of it, of human beings in the order of things" (March & Weil, 2005, 8). Taking heed of this, I worked to maintain an appropriate balance in describing the agency and foresight with which presidents operate. Never denying their ability to shape events but not thinking events can be shaped at will.

This perspective was a middle ground between two contending theories of how things happen in organizations. The first perspective assigns a major role, sometimes heroic, to great figures in their ability to shape the course of events. The second

downplays the significance of administrators in a world of loose coupling, organized

anarchy, and "garbage can" decision processes (March, 1984; Pfeffer, 1977). Such a

belief may lead to "self-confirming withdrawal from efforts to be effective" (March,

1984, 28), and, as a researcher, places one at odds with the managerial bias toward belief

in managerial importance. In an attempt to reconcile these competing perspectives, I

sought to balance and appreciate the truth of both of them, and to take an appropriate,

contextualized middle-ground.

It is also important to note that in my analysis, I did not have the outcomes of the

presidents' sensemaking or sensegiving and thus did not know if it was ultimately

successful or unsuccessful. These outcomes would have helped develop a definition of

the situation as to whether presidents made good and bad judgments and actions. While

this is the manner in which most best-selling business books are written, I did not have

the benefit of hindsight to label actions by the presidents as effective or ineffective. I did

not have an outcome in hand from which to construct a plausible story that produced it. I

have my hunches, but they could be proven wrong. All I had was the data of the

moment, from which I described how a collection of individuals make sense and give

sense.

Implications for Theory, Practice, & Future Research

This next section covers implications for theory, practice, and future research that were sparked by the interviews. I first explore how future-oriented thought may play a larger role in the sensemaking literature and how sensemaking might be linked with the macro logic of institutional theory. I then explore future research implications, including managing the unexpected in university administration and disciplinary influences on administrative leadership. Finally, I discuss implications for practice that emerged from the interviews.

Implications for Theory and Sensemaking

Besides the findings mentioned in previous sections, there are at least three ways this study contributes to a sensemaking perspective. First, the idea of barriers to sensemaking emerged throughout the interviews. This was an unexpected finding and may be limited to the role of top executives, however it is a finding not mentioned by previous researchers. In particular, I found the sensemaking maxim—"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"—to have less applicability in my study population. While studies have found that we often pursue strategies before we can conceptualize and verbalize them (Bechera, et al., 1997), once we verbalized them, the automatic restatement of what we think becomes predominant. As the president of Hayes College says, "You have to just keep saying the same things over, and over, and over again, and it gets boring." Thus, while presidents might initially discover what they think through

verbalization, they then automatically restate things at banquets, dinners, and gatherings. In these occasions, they already know what they think before they see what they say.

In addition, nearly every president mentioned getting into trouble for thinking out loud or not realizing how people will interpret offhand remarks. The president of Madison State University said the key realization over his first six months was that "you can't just think out loud because people will take it very seriously." If most people are external thinkers and know what they think by seeing what they say, then this is a significant barrier to the process of making sense. Presidents have to censure their speech which limits the richness of conversations and the construction of ideas. This barrier to sensemaking also heightens the need for finding trusted individuals, having a leadership team that is cohesive and has rich discussions, and the need to speak with mentors.

Second, sensemaking emphasizes enactment and retrospect. In other words, "Action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition" (Weick, et al., 2005, 419). However, this study found a great desire of participants to think about and plan for the future—to think strategically and be deliberate—to place cognition before action. This is likely because planning and imagining a future in which an organization is prestigious and nationally-recognized is enjoyable (Gilbert, 2006). The practice gives meaning to present conditions, and prods campus constituents toward the future; however incremental the improvements may be. The practice of planning for the future also creates positive expectations which can be motivating (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Thus, one implication for sensemaking is to give more credence to cognition occurring before action. In many ways, my findings suggest there should be a de-

emphasis of enactment, at least among my study population. In this manner, more emphasis should be given to future-oriented thought and how it influences present constructions of reality—how people think before acting. The role of future-oriented thought in sensemaking has been commented upon, but never developed (Gioa, 2006; Gioia & Mehra, 1996), and this study gives more weight to cognition occurring before action. Table 2 presents some illustrative quotes of the future orientation of presidents.

Table 7.1: Illustrative Quotes of Future Orientation of Presidents

Institution	Illustrative quote
Harrison College	As I read things like the Greater Expectations document, as I understood who it is we are, what it is that we need to do, as I talked about getting the list out of the ship, as I saw some of the things that we needed to do, to make sure we in fact did have a brighter future. The pieces came together to start to create that kind of a vision of who it is that we should be, what it is that we should start to do, to become in a more deliberate fashion, a certain kind of institution.
Buchanan College	As part of my fall faculty address, both the first and second year, I laid out some things that I thought were very important for the future of Buchanan College.
Daft University	That whole first year was about…kind of…getting an organization past that kind of crisis moment so that we could start talking about the future, so it really wasn't until my second year that we could start putting together the strategy for where we were going next.
McKinley State University	I feel this enormous responsibility for the future of the university.
Loyola Jesuit University	And looking at what I think the future is, drawing any kind of regression line you want, and it's not going to be pretty so that concerned me even more, and so that for me racketed up our need to take that seriously and do something.
Lincoln College	I particularly use speeches to try to effect opinion and people…they become quickly accustomed to the fact that if I am making a speech at a convocation or even a faculty meeting…they certainly know that they are going to hear something that is on my mind and that might have something to do with the future of the institution.
Coolidge State University	You know, we still had a lot of work to do, but that allowed us to kind of put those under the radar and focus on the future instead of dwelling on the past.

The proposition that people act first and interpret later may be true under certain boundary conditions, particularly in emergency situations where there is little time to think. This is the context in which most sensemaking research has been completed (e.g. Weick, 1993a). In most cases, presidents are not thrown into situations that have a clear time constraint and a specific outcome they need to reach. They are in a high-discretion

role and can take time to plan. Thus, the future orientation I encountered among participants is likely a result of my study population. Executives are supposed to be the future-oriented thinkers of the organization. While it is acceptable for line workers to say they have not given much thought about the future of the organization, it would be unacceptable (and unthinkable) for a president or CEO to say likewise. Thus, while some of organizational behavior can be explained by people acting and then interpreting those actions, the thoughts of the executive are markedly different. If organizations are metaphorically viewed as a collective mind (Morgan, 2006; Weick & Roberts, 1993), then the executive office can be viewed as responsible for the collective foresight of the organization.

While much work as been done in conceptualizing and researching components of memory (e.g. semantic, procedural, and episodic), there has been a corresponding dearth of work in understanding future-oriented thought until recently (Atance & O'Neill, 2001; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). There has been an explosion of research in cognitive psychology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, comparative psychology, and evolutionary psychology that is designated to understanding future-oriented thought (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). While I cannot pretend my research informs these disciplines, from a sensemaking perspective of organizational behavior, I have found future-oriented thought to be under-emphasized partly because of the property of retrospect.

Preliminary evidence suggests that memory and future-oriented thought are functions of the same core brain network (Buckner & Carroll, 2007; Schacter & Addis, 2007; Schacter, Addis & Buckner, 2007), and that the vocabulary of episodic memory

(e.g. memory of specific events) is drawn upon to construct possible future episodes (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). This suggests that enriching our vocabulary of past events will expand our capacity to imagine future possibilities. It also suggests within my study population, presidents who have an impoverished understanding of the organization's past, have little capacity to construct a future image, unless they draw from their past experiences at other colleges. The recent evidence that suggests episodic memory and future-oriented thought draw from the same core brain network would explain the finding that when people place future events into the past their accounts have more detail (see Weick, 1979, pp. 194-201). In these cases, people can readily access their episodic memory to "pre-experience" the future.

In conceptualizing future-oriented thought, a sensemaking perspective normatively asserts that future events should be placed as if they have already happened (Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, Rura-Polley, 2003; Rollier & Turner, 1994; Weick, 1979). This leads to richer detailed description of the future event. In addition, recent evidence suggests that an image of success that is visualized from the third-person rather than first-person elicits higher levels of motivation (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). Thus, a future image of an organization should be visualized as "They will have achieved…" as opposed to "We will have achieved…" The cognitive mechanism underlying the effects of visual perspective from a third-person seems to come in construing an event in a manner that "accentuates its broader meaning and significance" (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007, 1401). In the current study of outsider college presidents, they may initially be more adept at viewing the organization in the third-person and thus initially visualize the future of the organization that accentuates the broader meaning of its mission and the

organization's significance. In fact, in their initial description of the college, many of the presidents did use the third-person, for example by speaking about the campus as "*they did not understand…*"

It seems clear that people can mentally simulate the future (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). In some cases, they can treat the future as if "it's over and done with." This preserves the notion of retrospect in our understanding of sensemaking (Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1995). But what is happening when a future-perfect orientation is not occurring? These accounts may lack phenomenological richness, but people are still puzzling over what the future may bring. Figure 7.1 displays three times and aspects of verb tense (Salzmann, n.d.). The vertical column presents three times that can be indicated by verb tense in English (present, past, and future) while the three "aspects" that can be expressed are simple, perfect (completion before the time of focus), and progressive (in-progress activity at the time of focus). Each box pictorially displays these orientations.

Figure 7.1: Time and Aspect of English Verb Tenses

	simple	perfect	progressive
PRESENT	HE EATS	HE HAS EATEN	HE IS EATING
PAST	HE ATE	HE HAD EATEN	HE WAS EATING
FUTURE	HE WILL EAT	HE WILL HAVE EATEN	HE WILL BE EATING
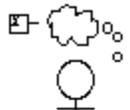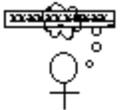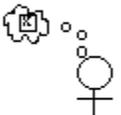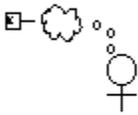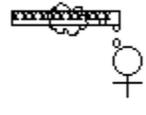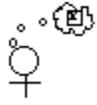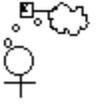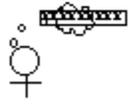
Source: Salzmann (n.d.)

Sensemaking stresses the future-perfect tense as leading to greater phenomenological richness. But administrators also speak in the future-simple and the future-progressive. For example, "we will implement a new academic program by 2012" or "we will be implementing a new academic program in 2012." Thus, through retrospect, sensemaking stresses thinking in the "perfect" column, in many cases thought is occurring in the simple and progressive dimensions as well. For example, the president of Fillmore State University says in a memo to the campus:

> Our students will upon graduation begin a lifelong learning journey, participate in a knowledge economy, serve in a volunteer society, and compete in a global arena. To prepare them we must provide the best in

academic and personal development (President of Fillmore State University).

In this case, the president is using the future-simple construction to motivate people in the present. Overall, most presidents were not explicitly mentioning the future as "over and done with," (i.e. using the future-perfect tense), but they seemed very interested about the future for several reasons: It is a way to motivate people. It can help people make adaptive changes in the present. And it gives clarity for actions in the present (i.e. there are too many directions that could be taken). In all of these cases, people are trying to make sense out of what the future might bring. How the future is framed and constructed (despite the multitude of errors that occur in prediction) played a prominent role in the organizational life of informants. It seems this future orientation was largely a means to increase the behavioral flexibility in the present to improve the status of the organization for the future.

The third implication for sensemaking is that I found that the construction of meaning was heavily influenced by normative concerns. How presidents described their entry process—the surprises, puzzles, and actions—was heavily influenced by how they thought they should behave. In this manner, there is a larger role for institutional theory in a sensemaking perspective. In many ways the institutional logic of the college presidency is being constructed by new presidents' seminars, management bestsellers, and dictates of corporate executives who sit on the board of trustees of colleges and universities. All of this content—from seminars, books, and bosses—informs what a college president should be. This suggests that there is a stronger linkage between the micro logic of sensemaking and the macro logic of institutional theory (Scott, 2001; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

The dominant view is that institutions serve as cognitive constraints on sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006), even though a sensemaking perspective largely espouses that we create the environment to which we must respond (Weick, 1979, 1995). If the latter perspective is more descriptive, I might have seen more variance in how presidents responded to the questions. However, after 18 interviews a common mentality of the college presidency seemed to emerge, suggesting a unified macro logic, with less freedom to create the role at will. Thus, one implication of this study is the larger role of the macro logic of institutional theory on the meaning construction of sensemaking.

With an institutional theory perspective, I could have completed a similar dissertation about the college presidency. How has this institution shifted and changed over the past 30 years? What are the consequences of these changes? From reading brief historical accounts (Gray, 1998) and the writings of former presidents, the college presidency today seems to have shifted toward the model of a business chief executive. This is not surprising given boards of trustees are mostly business executives, but with a booming industry of management bestsellers over the past 30-40 years, there may be a more cohesive model of what a corporate executive should be. With my interviews, I was discovering the macro logic of this institution. Corporate executives are strategic and have strategic plans. Corporate executives have a smaller role in academic operations (which many of them expressed) and are concerned with the strategic resource-allocation in the organization. Presidents should be concerned with marketing initiatives and the branding of the college. The list goes on, but the point remains that the macro logic of institutional theory was inextricably linked to sensemaking.

Managing the Unexpected in University Administration

Despite the extensive rhetoric of planning, on many accounts the college

presidency is a reactive job. Demands of the moment often consume planned action. As

the president of Daft University says, "I always live in the midst of triage." He wasn't

alone. The president of Madison State spoke of random events throwing him off track

every day. He says, "These are huge complex organizations. You can walk in during the

morning and think that life is good, but then something can consume and engulf you.

You have to be constantly adaptable and maintain your composure…with so many

possibilities of things going wrong. It is like being a mayor." This was a common

sentiment among presidents, especially viewing their role as similar to a city mayor, with

all the attendant constituencies.

In managing the unexpected in everyday administration, the president of

Buchanan College, who had a background in stage design, says:

> In theater, you know, you have this human condition that things do
> happen, that are unexpected on the stage, that…and I think that kind of
> training…it's…maybe it's improvisation, I don't know what it is, but to
> deal with the unexpected, and I think that, that's not a bad thing for
> presidents because I think most of them will tell you the same thing. I
> honestly believe I have had a real productive day if 20% of what I deal
> with in the day is stuff that I thought I was going to deal with during the
> day. You know, that there is always the unexpected that comes up
> (President of Buchanan College).

In addition to improvising, two means of managing the unexpected emerged. The

first is learning to delegate and the second is having a person designated be alert for

possible danger. The first property of delegating compares to "deference to expertise"

found among High Reliability Organizations such as aircraft carriers and nuclear power

plants (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). For example, the president of Daft University

mentioned he has learned to let others manage the minute-to-minute details of crises and

only attend to them periodically. He says, "You try to hire people who can do much of

the work, so I am not doing much of the work, but I am just attending to it throughout the

day, go…where is it now? Who is doing what? What have we learned? Then you go

back to things and you attend to it later." When he began, he wanted to manage the

situation continuously and be involved in every meeting and decision.

Likewise, in speaking about crisis management, the president of Tyler State

University describes overcoming the temptation of doing too much. He says, "It's better

to get a person who is a little further down the food chain, who is closer to the issue who

understands a lot of the…a lot of the idiosyncrasies and has a knowledge of the subject

matter rather than yourself." Both of these presidents suggest delegating to others is a

better means of managing the unexpected.

The second means of coping with the unexpected is to have a lookout that is

politically sensitive. This comes from the memoir of the former president of the

University of Michigan, who says:

> Even the seemingly most inconsequential decision can explode in one's
> face. A decision not to accept a speaking request from a key constituency,
> denial of a personal request by a board member to admit a relative to a
> selective academic program, or a slip of the tongue with a politically
> incorrect phrase at a public appearance—all can bring disaster. Hence, the
> challenge to the president is how to keep the focus at the strategic level
> when the routine flow of activities through the Office of the President
> contains occasionally explosive elements. Part of the answer is to make
> certain that the office has at least one politically sensitive staff member
> who can act as the canary in the mind shaft, always on the alert for
> possible danger (Duderstadt, 2007, 115).

Having someone act mindfully while everyone else is distracted and overloaded is a rational mechanism to head off crises. These two means of managing the unexpected were preliminary categories that emerged throughout this study.

To view how administers manage the unexpected is to see success in university administration as the absence of things gone wrong. If there are no scandals or mishaps the administration could be doing outstanding work, but the quality of their work is a *non-event*. This compares universities to High Reliability Organizations. As Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) say, "safety is elusive because it is a dynamic non-event" (30). University administrators could be doing outstanding work, but this is only demonstrated by *nothing happening*. Student records aren't lost. Athletic scandals don't occur. Students don't protest. Faculty don't speak out against the administration, and a campus shooting does not occur. These are non-events and may be the result of outstanding work on a day-to-day basis.

Seeing universities through a reliability lens gives new meaning to the often mundane work of meetings, oversight committees, and hiring decisions. Instead, these become a means to keep the university from undergoing a costly and reputation-damaging mishap. Researching this area further would examine the head administrative teams of large, research universities. Within this dissertation, presidents at the large, complex universities were more likely to mention the possibility of a crisis on any given day. Among these administrative teams, questions to consider include: What scandals and errors is the administration most concerned about? How does the administration attempt to prevent such scandals or errors? And what activities of the administration, if performed inadequately, pose the greatest risk to the well-being of the organization?

Interviews and observations of various administrative teams at large research universities would help us better understand effective administration as the reliable functioning of the university.

Disciplinary Background and Administrative Leadership

The second area of inquiry sparked by this research is the influence of disciplinary background on administrative leadership. Institutions of higher learning are unique in being run by individuals with a vast array of intellectual backgrounds—people who are less likely to have functional expertise such as business executives (e.g. marketing, finance, etc.), but disciplinary expertise. This would seem to be self-evident in its importance, but it has not been studied in past research on leadership in academia (Bensimon, et al., 1989; Birnbaum, 1992).

In this dissertation, statements exposing one's disciplinary background were plentiful. Presidents who had experience in political science spoke about building political coalitions and interest groups. Presidents from law spoke of uncovering assumptions and testing them in debate. A president with a background in finance mentioned reading the bond ratings of the university. The president of Urban Tech Institute, an engineer, responded using engineering language. He says,

> If I ask the Vice President for facilities how is the dining hall? Oh it's great, we are doing well and then I ask the students I get a different answer. Maybe, sometimes I get the same answer. So it is parallel channels of communication. I have been in academics now, almost 40 years, as a faculty member, and of course I was a student myself, so I know that there is a lot of noise on the signal. I mean the signal is here, the noise is like this, you have to average over a lot of input to get the correct assessment, the correct perception (President of Urban Tech Institute).

As expected, his approach was informed by his discipline. He viewed the world as a hard

scientist with a "correct perception" that can be measured. He continued in other parts of

the interview to talk about "sampling problems in the engineering sciences," and how to

get good information as president, you have to take many samples. He says, "You really

need to sample over different parts of the campus over different constituencies, over

different kinds of people, and you start to get a picture."

The president of Harrison College had a doctorate in natural resource

management and spoke about "tinkering" with athletics, much as a natural scientist

tinkers with a natural system. He said in a speech to the campus about program review,

> I ask you to look at this through the lens of my discipline, natural resource
> management. When I was with the National Park Service, I was involved
> in recovery efforts for the Florida panther, bald eagle, and other
> endangered species. One of the principles of ecosystem management is
> that we manage a total system. Likewise, we shouldn't look at our
> programs at Harrison College in isolation because one program cannot
> survive without others to support it. Many parts of the college contribute
> to the total student experience. The father of wildlife management,
> conservationist Aldo Leopold, said that, quote, "the first rule of intelligent
> tinkering is to know that all things are connected." Decisions we make
> about any program affect all programs, in this case, all parts of the college.
> Therefore, we must ensure that our decisions strengthen the connections
> and maintain a balance (President of Harrison College).

In this case, the president sees the college as a natural system, making him aware of how

changes in one area affect others.

The President Hamlin College had a background in social psychology and said

this made her "very, very aware of the limitations on people's information-seeking. I am

very aware of peoples' biases and limitations of information-processing. It's affected me

my entire administrative life and it sure effects me as president." She says her

disciplinary background has made her more humble about decisions and how biases and

situations shape peoples' behavior—making her more forgiving. In her inaugural address she spoke about overcoming "cognitive miserliness" to come to a more complicated truth. Through practice and motivation, she says, we can rise above our human nature of categorizing people into opposing groups. Instead we should work to "defamiliarize" ourselves and not settle on our categories. Through this we should listen fully and respectfully, and "put oneself in the position of the other, search for commonality across lines of difference, learn which differences matter and which do not, and find threads of agreement that sew connection." As with other presidents, her disciplinary background undoubtedly shaped her administrative leadership.

A different study could be designed to specifically examine the consequences of disciplinary backgrounds. In examining senior administrators the main question would be: What influence does disciplinary background have on administrative leadership? The study would draw upon the research on disciplinary subcultures as a conceptual anchor (Becher, 1989), and would examine the differences and consequences of disciplinary backgrounds on university administration. To simplify the variation, it may be necessary to compare and contrast humanists versus scientists (Snow, 1959). How do scientists and humanists think differently about administration, and what are the consequences of their approaches to the management of a university?

Implications for Practice

Having interviewed eighteen, first-time, college presidents about their experiences in a new organization, there are implications for practice for administrators of all ranks, especially those new to an organization. In this research, one of the main questions was

how new presidents coped with simultaneously being in charge while being an organizational novice—an experience most people in a managerial role have faced or will face. Several action strategies emerged that seem to have adaptive value when confronted with this situation. First, presidents mentioned speaking in broad, ambiguous goals and "safe harbors." A safe harbor is a goal or phrase that will not bind you several months down the road but still offers a general direction.

To this end, the president of one university used the "safe harbor" of "improving student learning." This goal is uncontroversial and is one of the core functions of any university. This "safe harbor" helps avoid premature commitment that may prove unwise as you learn more about the organization. Furthermore, talking about "improving student learning" fosters agreement on an abstraction that does not limit specific interpretations. With the existence of multiple viewpoints in colleges and universities, using a "safe harbor" can promote unified diversity and facilitate collective action because it sustains multiple interpretations and adjusts to different contingencies.

Second, the presidents who mentioned less resistance held their knowledge cautiously. They were not excessively certain or excessively cautious. They were willing to admit to themselves and others that they knew they didn't know. One president in particular said, "Telling people where to go is a dangerous thing for someone coming in from the outside, truly coming in from the outside, if they don't know a lot about the institution, if they were not recently affiliated with it. They don't know the culture. They don't know the history. None of which I knew." Other presidents mentioned buying time because they knew they didn't know enough about the organizations to make hiring decisions and cutbacks when they first arrived.

At the other extreme, some presidents said figuring things out was not "rocket science" and it took about "five minutes" to figure something out—demonstrating certitude in holding knowledge. Those who spoke of coming to a quick assessment of the campus often mentioned throughout the interview of having a lot of resistance to their initiatives. Alternatively, those that "knew they didn't know" mentioned less resistance. Meacham (1990) describes holding knowledge cautiously as an attitude of wisdom. He argues "the essence of wisdom is to hold the attitude that knowledge is fallible and to strive for a balance of knowing and doubting" (181). A lack of wisdom is "illustrated by the error of believing that one can see all that can be seen, that one knows all that can be known" (Meacham, 1990, 183). The essence of wisdom, as Meacham (1990) describes is to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness. It is to balance knowing and doubting and to avoid both extremes.

In the student newspaper of one college, a political science professor said that the new president "had a sense of what he does not know. This is refreshing." An attitude of wisdom can enhance perceptions of effectiveness and has adaptive value. It is a wise stance to knowledge that people respond favorably to, especially in organizations that are rich in tradition and believe in the value of shared governance.

Third, when presidents began they found trusted individuals to help make sense of the organization and to give them more certainty in their judgments. In many cases, trusted individuals came from the search committee. This makes sense given they are heavily involved in choosing a president; they know the organization well, and they want the president to succeed. One president in the study population said it was wise to have the search committee to "help me through these first months, identify those pressing

issues on campus, and also help me not stumble, unknowingly." She had weekly telephone calls with the committee before she officially started. This group helped her identify all the pressing issues. She says, "The committee was really the one who helped me make sense of what those issues were." She also used these trusted individuals to interpret the motives of people. She says, "A lot of people have an agenda. A lot of people want to come in and use the honeymoon period—the infancy period of a new president is often an opportunity for moving ahead on some personal agenda." Having trusted individuals in a transition team helped her make sense of the personal agendas and motives of others.

Finding trusted individuals highlights the *social* property of the transition process. Learning about the organization is not a process of individual analysis; it is a social construction with others. In situations where you have little contextual information and high uncertainty—yet are called on to take action—the social nature of thinking is more prominent and adaptive.

Finally, even if the campus is in a stable position, you cannot listen and learn about the organization for a year. One president said that despite the college's relative financial stability and high academic standing that "everybody was pretty frustrated with feeling stagnant, and so, when I got here my first posture was listen campus, I am prepared to just listen for a year, we can form our agenda together, you know we can take our time to figure out where we need to go and the answer I got was 'No. We don't have time for that. We have been standing still. We hired you for direction and vision and leadership. Let's go.'" Thus, despite their best attempts to take things slowly and listen, colleges often hire outsiders for new direction and insight. If they wanted continuity they

would have hired an insider. So despite a natural desire to not impose a vision on a campus, outsiders are often chosen to do exactly that. In sum, seek to use "safe harbors" when you begin, avoid being overly certain or overly cautious of your knowledge, and find trusted individuals who can help you interpret issues and the motives of campus members. Finally, despite a natural desire to listen, begin to offer new direction and insight in face of this natural hesitancy.

Research Surprises

In this section I address many of the puzzles and surprises that were encountered during the research, including a belief in strategic planning and the use of Jim Collins' book *Good to Great.* I then explore presidents using the language of transformational leadership while they preside over organizations that have been conceptualized as "organized anarchies" and "loosely coupled systems" (Cohen & March, 1974; Weick, 1976). I then examine the ambivalence of symbolic leadership that was mentioned in the interviews.

Belief in Strategic Planning

Throughout the interviews, the presidents constructed a world with very clear goals, a unified perception of mission throughout the organization, and an overriding belief in strategy. They did not describe a world that is muddled and indeterminate or that a college or university is like an organized anarchy with unclear goals, unclear technology, and fleeting participation of organizational members (Cohen & March, 1974). Instead, the picture is much clearer. There are clear goals, a clear identity, and a strategic plan. They emphasized the importance of goal clarity and tying decisions and budgeting to strategic priorities. Perhaps as a leader you have to believe this is the case, or perhaps it *is* the case, or if you believe it, it *becomes* the case. Either way, there was a noticeable belief that events are controllable, that the future is controllable, and that the college or university should be guided by a clear strategic plan. March and Weil (2005) describe this as "the ideology of leadership."

The ideology of leadership emphasizes reason more than foolishness, strategy and vision more than serendipity and improvisation…Action is seen as intentional, driven by the evaluation of its expected consequences. Within such an ideology…[leaders] need to believe they can make a difference (4).

Examples of this abound such as the president of Arthur College, who says,

I was really surprised that an institution like this can exist for 148 years without a plan. There was really no plan on how to grow enrollment, no plan academically, no plan in terms of the physical plant. It just sort of put one foot in front of the other each day and where the journey ended up, it ended up, and that's not me. My thing is I want to go from A to B. The question is what's B? There was no B. It was just start from A and start walking (President of Arthur College).

This president was remarkably certain in his ability to chart a clear, predictable path from A to B, as were most presidents. At Burr Research University, the president says that while interviewing for the position she marveled that there was no plan. She says,

The other thing we didn't have was a strategic plan. We haven't had one here…nobody can even remember when, and I knew we didn't have one because when I was looking at the job I scoured the web looking for one, and then ultimately when I interviewed I said, where's your strategic plan? And there wasn't one (President of Burr Research University).

She went on to say:

I don't even know how they have been budgeting. I mean I marvel. How do you budget when you don't know what your priorities are? How do you decide? There are all these things competing for resources. How do you decide which ones you are going to spend money on and which ones you are not if you don't know what your priorities are and you don't know what your strategic direction is? I marvel at that. I don't know how to budget any other way.

She marveled at a budget not driven by clear, intentional priorities and considered the current procedure as collective incompetence. In large measure, presidents demonstrate their competence by espousing deliberate, planned action. It becomes a major reason for their hiring. For example, the president of Buchanan College mentioned that his

competence in strategic planning was a contributing factor to being hired. When he

began one of his primary responsibilities was to teach people about the process of

strategic planning. He says, "I am good at strategic planning. I think one of the

reasons…probably a contributing factor to me getting this job is that I have a good

amount of experience, positive experience, in strategic planning."

The assumption behind strategic planning is that deliberate, planned action

produces more satisfactory outcomes for the organization (Mulhare, 1999). Strategic

planning becomes a symbolic demonstration of managerial competence, and boards of

trustees and some members of the university equate a strategic plan with competent,

professional management. In addition, presidents receive the message that strategic

planning is what they are supposed to be doing. Managing by intuition, happenstance,

and experiential learning is unacceptable. One's current actions should predict and

control future conditions. Therefore, in many ways the presidents are responding to what

is socially acceptable, and the message they receive from new presidents' seminars is that

strategic planning is a best practice. For example, the president of Adams College says,

> I just don't think it is for Adams College, but for any presidency, wanting
> to raise the stature and visibility of the college, and that was understood
> that I would need to do that and the path would be strategic planning, and
> so clearly I have launched that because I just understood and I think every
> president, so what we do on our distribution list from our new presidents'
> seminar, everybody's doing the same thing, we're all doing strategic
> planning, so we compare notes about process, but I think it's every new
> president understands that's what he or she needs to do (President of
> Adams College).

New presidents' seminars and boards of trustees espouse strategic planning as a proven,

professional technique to manage a university or college, when much of the assumptions

have been discredited among academics (Birnbaum, 2000; Bornstein, 2003; Hardy,

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Langley, Mintzberg, & Rose, 1983; Mintzberg, 1994). Nevertheless, presidents are responding to what they understand should be done.

Within the ideology of planning, there is scant admission of the substantial errors in anticipating the future. This may be an artifact of the interview and the desire to portray competence by presidents, but it was surprising that there was no admission of the difficulties of planning for the future, and a strong belief that all behavior should be deliberate and goal-directed. In addition, each president seemingly thinks their strategic plan is really strategic, and at other institutions, they just have a plan on the shelf, or other presidents are just checking off a box. There is a belief in uniqueness— that we know what we are doing and others do not—which is part of a common construction of being special, despite the failures of rational reform by predecessors and peers (Brunsson, 2006).

The amount of planning may have also been overstated in the interviews, as presidents were trying to manage the impression of what they think their peers are doing. As March states (1984), "If you experience planning as something you rarely do yet all the people you admire report that it is important, you might plausibly come to echo their comments without a clear understanding of why you talk about planning so much yet do it so little" (33). In this case, the interviews might largely have been an echo chamber of everyone saying it is important and initiating the process, but actually utilizing it very little.

However, strategic planning has many benefits in serving as a template for action. This is especially needed with the level of role ambiguity that presidents face when they begin. Strategic planning offers a structure for organizational reflection and priority

construction that can instill confidence and motivate self-validating action. It causes

presidents to wade into the flow of events with a sense of confidence. As March and

Weil (2005) state:

> In our rush to sophisticated doubt about the possibilities for intentional
> action, we should not ignore the extent to which an innocent belief in
> heroic consequences can sustain commitment to fulfill the demands of
> leadership (120).

This confidence is aided by the perceived legitimacy of the strategic plan, with the

process of planning in many ways more important than the plan itself. It serves as a

means of getting input on the future direction of the organization. In professional

bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1979), with limited authority, priorities and strategies need to

be seen as legitimately constructed through large-scale committees. With the input of a

strategic planning committee, the plan is perceived as collectively-determined and

therefore legitimate.

In addition, strategic planning promotes the possibility that a leader can help the

organization escape from a chaotic, uncontrollable world (Thayer, 1988). In this manner,

"A leader symbolizes for us the possibility that *everything* depends upon us, that we are,

after all, in control" (Thayer, 1988, 254-255). Thayer (1988) mentions this is a reason we

are fascinated with the idea of leadership, because: "[Leadership] is our understanding

that present conditions are a result of past happenings; that future conditions will be a

result of present happenings; and that, without visible leadership, we are adrift in the seas

of time" (233). Strategic planning symbolizes to the organization that someone is in

control, perhaps giving an "illusion of control" (Langer, 1975).

Despite the confidence and advocacy of strategic planning during almost every

interview, there was some skepticism. The president of Tyler State University said, "At

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institutions people believe that they have to have a strategic plan. They don't think anything gets accomplished much from having them, but the absence of one is viewed as a lack of leadership." He goes on to describe a modest appraisal of his influence. He says,

> The presidency, I think, is overrated. It is the faculty and the staff who do the work. I think anybody who confuses that is just dead wrong, now I can hurt the University a lot, witness Eastern, OK. If people are talking about the president instead of about the university, I don't think you are doing to a very good job (President of Tyler State University).

The president of Urban Tech University also mentioned that he carries around a quote from Cohen and March (1974) about the limited powers of a university presidency. He then reflectively mused whether presidents can make a difference yet pretend otherwise. He says, "My approach is I am going to make a difference one way or the other. I didn't come here not to make a difference. Can I? I don't know, but I am sure trying." And finally, the president of Hamlin College was reflective and surprised about how difficult it was to create change. She says:

> I think that what most surprised me—but I should have known it beforehand by talking to other presidents—is how hard it really is to change institutions as a whole, and that having the top job does not mean that it's easy to move institutions. That it involves dealing with the thousand details that come up and keeping your eye on the ball and continuing to move forward, and I think as I look back, I probably thought that it would be easier than it actually is. Things are…I don't want to give you the impression that things aren't changing. They are changing…moving. You know, we have had great success, but I think I am surprised…I am surprised at how difficult it actually is (President of Hamlin College).

Other than these comments, the presidents displayed a strong belief in strategic planning, little reflective doubt, and a belief in their ability to control the future of the university through present actions.

Belief and Reliance on Jim Collins' "Good to Great"

Another surprise of this research was throughout the interviews and in the presidents' speeches there was substantial use of the language of Jim Collins' book *Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap...and others don't.* In the book, Collins describes the characteristics of 11 companies that went from good to great stock market performance. Many of the presidents used *Good to Great* as a means of criticizing the institution for being mediocre and inspiring hope that greatness is achievable. The president of Arthur College referred to it during the initial strategic planning meeting of the College. He says:

> Now this is August 22nd of 2005. I arrived on July 1st of 2005. OK, so this is like right out of the gate, and what I said to them was "mediocrity is not OK. Good is the enemy of great," as Jim Collins says. Excellence matters. We are going to grow this school. We are going to do it with good kids. I've got a plan. If you have got a better plan, let's hear it. If you don't then you have got to get on board with my plan or get out of the way. The worst thing we can do is do nothing (President of Arthur College).

As with the president of Arthur College, the book was a canon for many of the presidents. For example, within the first question of the interview, the president of McKinley State University said the organization was a classic "good to great problem, where we are good enough to be complacent, and our complacency was killing us and people weren't recognizing it." *Good to Great* was so influential in his interpretation of the University that he referred to the University as a company. He says, "The combination of size, history, campus, traditions, all that stuff, you know we are a pretty rare company in terms of what we can do, but it is a niche, you know, it's not something else."

The book also firmly rooted his identity. He said, "I am a *Good to Great* deputy.

I am an absolute *Good to Great* deputy." When asked about whether his views of

leadership have changed at all, he said, "No, I think more just a maturation of what I am,

as I said, before I came here, I believed in the kinds of leadership that are described in

Good to Great." His ultimate goal was to make the McKinley undergraduate experience

the "best in the country," but he was getting resistance to this from faculty. He says this

"exemplifies that unwillingness to actually be aggressive and bold about what we do."

The *Good to Great* book made him more bold and aggressive, and instilled a sense of

confidence that the University's present actions could create an inspiring future.

The most often cited concept of *Good to Great* was "getting the right people on

the bus." The phrase was used more than any other during the interviews and it served as

a metaphor for the critically important task of constructing a leadership team. It helped in

the difficult task of personnel changes by subordinating these painful decisions to the

larger goal of becoming great. As the president of Buchanan College says,

> I think conceptually what he says in *Good to Great* is— and as I said,
> there are some great snippets in there—that this whole concept of getting
> the right people on the bus, and don't be afraid to say, "yeah, you know, I
> have got to make a change. You are just not…you don't fit what this
> organization needs or wants or is looking forward to." And I think that
> that kind of empowering is important (President of Buchanan College).

The influence of the book was widespread and surprising, but it was by no means

universally accepted. Several presidents mentioned not having much need for business

books and that they rely on philosophy or religion for models of leadership. For those

who did rely upon it, its influence is understandable. It is a prescriptive book that has a

tone of confidence and rhetoric of rigorous research. Collins communicates convincingly

his findings, and as new presidents, many of the individuals were trying to manage an impression of being an inspiring, transformational leader.

Transformational Leadership in an Organized Anarchy

In addition to the belief in strategic planning and a use of the language of *Good to Great,* a major puzzle that I encountered was a disconnect between presidents using the language of transformational leadership and the literature about leadership in higher education (Cohen & March, 1974; Pfeffer, 1977). There are several reasons why I may have encountered this puzzle. First, in the interview itself, presidents wanted to present a positive self. They wanted to give me the impression of charismatic leadership and impart lessons about how to do this effectively. In effect, for some of the interview responses, I might not have gotten "backstage" and was largely in the realm of impression management (Goffman, 1957). This partly explains the puzzle, but I got the sense that many of them truly believed what they were saying.

Another obvious reason for this puzzle is that most presidents have never read the organizational theory literature of higher education. They do know about loose coupling (Weick, 1976) or universities as organized anarchies (Cohen & March, 1974) and have never questioned their assumptions of organizations as rational machines. Therefore, what they see becomes a never-ending spate of irrationalities and misalignments that need to be fixed. If they have read a management book, it is likely to be an inspirational story of a business turnaround, which is then applied to the present circumstances of their college or university.

In addition, because presidents in my study population were all outsiders to the organization, rather than being appointed through an internal transition, the presidents are likely to be more strategic and visionary, as opposed to managerial (Giambatista, et al., 2005). My sample did not include leaders that were hired to just keep the organization running. They were chosen through a selection process that hired them through a national, year-long search. Thus, they are more likely to be visionary, strategic leaders who believe in change because the organization hired them for this reason.

Being an outsider also signals that the organization desires transformational leadership or the system is faltering (Giambatista, et al., 2005). When systems are in crises, leadership can play a more important role. As March (1984) argues, "When an organizational system is working well, variations in outcomes will be due largely to variables unrelated to variations in attributes to top leaders. Where top leadership affects variation in outcomes, the system is probably not functioning well" (33). Thus, while I interviewed outsiders because of the higher demands of getting up to speed and being in charge, I may have unintentionally skewed my study population toward presidents that were hired to bring renewed energy and transformational leadership.

All of these issues played a role, but they may have not been the largest explanatory factor. Everyone I interviewed was a new president in their first years, and in many ways they were playing a role they convinced themselves is how leaders should behave. They were acting out (enacting) a role of an inspiring leader. In many cases they were brought in to change things around and therefore they truly believed in their self-efficacy to do so. In many interviews, the presidents were truly convincing that they believed in the heroic task of clearly articulating a strategy and having everyone unified

around a clear goal. In this case, the presidents were acting themselves into a belief.

They were not trying to manage an impression or disregard ambiguity and complexity,

but they truly believed in their perspective. In the moment of the interview the language

of transformational leadership was predominant and believable. This belief in a tightly-

coupled, rational organization may slowly deteriorate with the hard knocks of experience,

and the literature of higher education leadership (at least from a scholarly perspective)

may better capture reality as it is lived, but in the moment the belief was genuine.

Ambivalence of Symbolic Leadership

The final puzzle of this research was the ambivalent, yet intuitive, approach to

symbolic leadership. While presidents stressed the rational, instrumental effects of their

leadership, the perspective of this research has been that presidential leadership is

primarily symbolic rather than instrumental (Pfeffer, 1981), that actions of presidents are

more about interpreting organizational life for others than it is about instrumental acts.

Pfeffer (1981) notes that symbolic leadership is possible when organizations are

characterized by four properties: (1) preferences are undefined and only emerge as a

consequence of retrospective rationalization of action (Weick, 1979); (2) The

organization avoids assessment and focuses on inputs that are easier to manage; (3) There

is uncertainty about results due to the multiple activities being conducted; and (4)

symbolic actions may be sufficient given the limited interest of many social actors in the

organization. These properties appropriately describe organizational life in colleges and

universities. Knowing that actions have made an instrumental difference is difficult with

little assessment or the goals of assessment cannot be agreed upon. Likewise, in colleges

and universities, there is a collection of professionals involved in their own pursuits. In this world, symbolic management may be all that is needed.

The presidents seem to implicitly understand the symbolic aspects of leadership because much of what they discussed was in this realm. For example, the president of Buchanan College made a point of being the first person into the office. He says, "Our sports information director is notorious for being the first one in the office and I beat him here every morning." The president of Arthur College mentioned reprimanding a secretary for not turning on a fireplace when he had just invested a substantial amount of money in it. He says, "It is just a constant, you know, again, encouraging of people to do better." The perspective of this dissertation has been that presidential influence is largely derived from language and symbolic action and this perspective was found to be suitable and productive throughout the data collection and analysis.

However, as mentioned previously, most presidents have little exposure to organization theory, and if they have, it may be Bolman and Deal's (1992) four frames at a new presidents' seminar.[3] This often introduces them to the idea of symbolic management, and heightens their understanding of why they need an inaugural, even though many of them are uncomfortable and uninterested in having one. They seem to act symbolically at an intuitive level, but viewed symbolic management as somewhat illegitimate or as an imposition on more important things.

This was the case with the president of Adams College, who mentioned she didn't want to have an inaugural, and then remembered the symbolic aspect of leadership she was taught through Bolman and Deal's (1992) four frames at the Harvard presidents'

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[3] The four frames of Bolman and Deal (1992) refers to political, symbolic, structural, and human resource concerns of leadership.

seminar. In changing her mind about having an inaugural she says, "I realized, it's not

for me…you know…this is symbolic. This is for the community." Likewise, the

president of Madison State University mentioned he just wanted to get through with the

inaugural. Overall, presidents described many symbolic acts, but described ambivalence

about symbolic leadership. As March (1984) states, "The ambivalence is itself socially

dictated. In a society that emphasizes instrumentality as much as Western society does,

leaders would be less acceptable if they were to acknowledge the ritual activities of their

jobs as central" (31). Thus, there was an interesting puzzle in the research. Many of the

presidents described symbolic leadership, but spoke about it ambivalently and were

unlikely to mention it as a major part of their role.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Summary of Data & Findings

To more comprehensively view the dataset, the below table summarizes the categories that emerged for each informant across

the major sections of the findings chapters.

Table A.1: Summary of Data and Findings (sorted by Enrollment of Institution)

Institution Pseudonym of President	Simultaneity	Situational Demands	Sensemaking	Barriers to Sensemaking	Sensegiving
Coolidge State University	Demonstrated more certainty when he began. He said before he started he "had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do." He had a 90 day plan that was "pretty well-defined" in what he wanted to accomplish in each 30 day period. He also said, "It was very clear what I was supposed to do and what I needed to do. There was never really any doubt in my mind."	"It was a mess," he said, with athletic scandals, financial audits, and "a lot of turmoil." There had been an interim president, but he still "walked into the middle of it."	Said he heavily relies on his administrative team to help him think through issues and to "keep him from jumping off a cliff."	Mentioned that compared to being a faculty member and dean, "now, nobody will tell me anything," and that "there is just not a lot of time to do things and to think, it's just one meeting after another."	People were anxious to move forward and he initiated a "Flagship 2020" to "reaffirm their status" and to undertake a process where a shared vision is developed that is "clearly articulated to everyone."
Madison State University	Used the ambiguous goal of a need for "growth," and said it would be disrespectful to tell people where to go immediately.	Low morale in the organization, a lot of uncertainty, and dropping enrollment. An interim served for one year because the previous president had been fired by the board after a three-year term.	Described several informal ways to get tacit, contextual information about the organization, such as sitting with students at football games and participating in a polar bear swim. He says this informal, first-hand knowledge helps him frame issues. These informal interactions also "give him a whole different perspective on the University."	He says that you cannot just think out loud because people will take it very seriously.	He said he couldn't wait to start the marketing initiative because enrollment had been falling for several years. They called it "The Madison Edge." Said he "couldn't wait" to show a "marker that we are making progress." He wanted to be up by at least one student in enrollment.

Daft University	Said he had a great advantage because nobody expected a new strategic direction because the campus was finishing the implementation of a previous plan and really just needed to get over the "crisis moment" of a financial scandal with the prior president. He therefore needed to be more transparent so it was "getting all the information out to the organization so that they could learn with me as I was learning about the organization, they could learn about their own organization. So, the whole institution could learn together."	"That whole first year was kind of getting an organization past that kind of crisis moment so that we could start talking about the future, so it really wasn't until my second year that we could start putting together the strategy for where we were going next."	Did a "listening tour" that took his entire first year. He went to every college and department that wanted him. In his words, he said, "I took an empty pad and asked them, 'Tell me Daft as you know it? And what do you need from the organization to succeed?'" He also went to the major heads of the corporations in the city and said "Tell me what people say about Daft, when Daft is not in the room." He came from a much smaller organization and commented frequently on the differences.	Said he had to learn to censure his speech because he was an external thinker. He says, "I literally put ideas out in the air to see if they are dumb or if they are useful. I think out loud, and I learned, boy that can throw an organization into havoc. You know, 'the president said this. And the president said that.' And all I was doing was brainstorming. So I had to learn not to brainstorm so much in public."	He made lots of short videos about what is central to the University to "blast across the whole organization." He also spent much of his time giving speeches and writing in a way that can "survive the retelling as it gets directly out there."
McKinley State University	Read everything before he came and said he "intuits things very quickly." Mindset was described as not demonstrating an "attitude of wisdom."	He had a fairly clear "scoping document" that the search committee had written. No apparent budget, enrollment, or prior leadership crisis.	Describes making sense of the organization through the eyes of alumni. He says, "Looking back at what was important to them was a key to understanding this thing called the 'McKinley Experience,'" He said he was trying to "figure out what was enduring, what was foundational."	Said that "There aren't many people that you can really talk to," and that everyone parses every sentence he says.	He spent time constructing a crisis where the organization is "sliding into mediocrity" or "losing its position." Rather than talk about potential gains and a bright future, he spoke about an impending crisis.
Tyler State University	Used "safe harbors" that would avoid commitment and yet demonstrate he had a plan. He therefore spoke about "improving student learning."	He faced budget cuts from the state, and said he was fortunate that he followed a president who had been "reasonably successful."	He went on an extensive "listening tour" of around 70 meetings. He eventually repeated this listening tour in his third year because he missed it. He also stressed the need for a mentor to understand how an "experienced president" would interpret and respond to a situation.	Joined a number of national organizations to have conversations that he couldn't have with anybody else on the campus. He said he and his wife only ate meals at home 20 times during their first year.	Spoke about being "student-centered" and how to improve student learning as a "safe harbor" that would give him leeway.
Fillmore State University	Found people he could "go to the bank with" to test his analysis to make sure he wasn't missing something—stressing the need to find "trusted individuals" when you first begin.	Things were fairly stable, and he spent time preparing a letter to the campus about future directions that he sent out in January (7 months after he began).	Met with over a 1,000 individuals in 40 sessions with the intent of "finding out what people think is really important." He said it "makes sense to find out the strengths of the institution and what people are committed to; what they are willing to work for."	Values downtime a lot more and is intentional in planning for personal time. Also said he was "trying to figure out who the people are who are going to tell you what you need to hear not what you want to hear."	Discussed his plan for making Fillmore University the "best in the country" in integrating students' academic and personal development. He also set priorities to set boundaries around the discussions of planning committees.
Burr Research University	Asked for time before making budgets cutes because she knew she didn't know the strengths of the institution.	An interim president served for a year after a vote of no confidence in her predecessor. The board of trustees was demanding immediate cutbacks to balance the budget.	She sought the perspective of experienced presidents and her identity as someone who drives execution and transparency was shaped by predecessor's weaknesses.	Mentioned there is little time for reflection given the travel demands.	Priority setting was an integral part of how she influenced the thinking of people in the organization.

Urban Tech Institute	Said he couldn't "assimilate information." In his words: "If this is your first day at Urban Tech Institute and I throw at you hundreds of facts, you can't assimilate them, but if you have been here six months and I throw a hundred facts at you, you can assimilate 90 of them. So everybody wanted to talk with me my first week here, and I knew nothing. I knew almost nothing about the place, just what I read, and they didn't realize that I couldn't assimilate, and in two days I would forget what they had said, but if I had been here six months and they talked with me, then I can sort it in my head, in a certain place, and I can remember it. So that is where I am now, actually I have compartmentalized a lot of the information, and it has taken me…I say it took about six months to get to a place where if so and so came into my office and started talking about something, 'oh yes, I have heard that before. I know about it.' And then we start having a rational, intelligent conversation about it."	University was on an upswing after dealing with crime problems and budget deficits fifteen years early.	As an engineer he mentions "multiple channels" of information gathering to avoid a sampling problem. That means learning about the organization through survey data, informal interactions, and meetings with every different constituent group. He said he was trying to reduce the "noise on the signal" to get a correct perception of the organization. In this manner, sensemaking was driven by accuracy and not plausibility (e.g. Weick, 1995).	Says he has become more reserved and subtle in the way he expresses his opinions because of all the constituents he deals with (alumni, the community, and the board of trustees, etc.) He also mentions "you can't think aloud. That is for sure."	Says that institutions bring in outsiders because "they want to do different things." He started a strategic planning process that he oversees and began changing the promotion & tenure process.
Buchanan College	He had members of the search committee become trusted advisors to help him make sense of the organization. He relied on them to help him distinguish the motives of people by asking them, "all right this person approached me yesterday and this is what they said." The trusted advisor would help him interpret the person's motives and perspective. He also resisted imposing a vision on the organization. He said to people, "Give me a year, and then I will tell you what I think perhaps our collective vision is or should be."	There was no immediate crisis. He says, "No financial crisis, no personnel crisis, no programmatic crisis," but he says, "Even if there is no crisis, you are thrust into a situation where you have to be the president and learn about being the president simultaneously…You have no, there is no break in period. I mean the day you walk in people start handing you documents and say, you know, 'here's the financial forecast for next year, we need your approval on this budget.' You know, so the first two months were, are, absolutely a blur.' This demonstrates the immediate role requirements that exist regardless of whether there is a crisis.	He spent his entire career at three major public universities and described this as a "tremendous advantage" in understanding the much smaller Buchanan College. Second, he led a process to develop the school's strategic plan with a committee of 40 people as a way to reduce equivocality and answer the question 'what should we do next?' Third, in describing the continual conflicts he had with faculty, he repeatedly described himself as someone who would "say no" and that he was willing to say to faculty "this is what we are going to do." This demonstrated the commitment to an identity that was articulated in the hiring process.	Stressed to his staff that he wanted to be "in the loop."	He held two "salary forums" on campus to challenge assumptions that there should not be merit salary increases. Faculty and staff continually said, "That is not the Buchanan way. All of us are equal." Instead, he argued for the value of rewarding and recognizing employees that are exceeding expectations. He says, "There is a train wreck about to happen here, and I suspect that this will be the first issue where the faculty say, 'We don't want merit salary increases,' and I am going to say, "Well, we are doing to do this."

Loyola Jesuit University	Handled simultaneously being in charge and learning about the organization by telling people, "we are going to have to make some tough calls" but saying, "we are not ready to respond yet." He also spent his first months building relationships with the board of trustees and senior administrators "to help them to see new possibilities."	They faced a population and economic decline in the surrounding urban county causing both financial and enrollment difficulties. He said he had the "luxury of a level of dissatisfaction with the current economic challenges and a hope that I could change that that gave me a level of freedom that not every new president has." To this end, he was involved in a "level of transformation that he felt was necessary."	Led a university-wide planning meeting to collectively determine priorities and achieve a workable level of certainty about what to do next. The process was a collective exercise where post-it notes were placed on the wall, grouped into categories, and dots were placed next to action-steps that individuals thought were important. This is a prototypical case of the sensemaking maxim—how do we know what we think until we see what we say?	Mentioned difficulties of being isolated and that people did not know him and it is hard to have information flow within that. He also said he "didn't know how to value the information he got."	He described how he had to persuade and convince the campus of the objective factors it was facing. In his inaugural speech he asked questions such as: Why are we here? What will be the result of our time at Loyola Jesuit University? How will we know we have succeeded? And what will our choices leave for those who follow us? This demonstrates the use of retrospect in sensegiving.
Pierce College	In the student newspaper at Pierce College, a political science professor said that the new president "had a sense of what he does not know. This is refreshing."	Described the financial situation as "strong and stable;" Had to "re-establish trust" between faculty and administration because of the previous president.	Spent time meeting with students and alumni of all generations in which they spoke about meaningful experiences at Pierce. There were many salient features of the new environment because he was coming from a much larger research university. His experience in Washington DC shaped how he viewed the presidency, with a view of leadership as one of negotiating with various interest groups.	Shorter interview; he did not mention anything specific in this category.	Thought deeply about the core identity of the organization and how that could be reflected in a tagline marketing phrase.
Hamlin College	In her inaugural address she spoke about not settling too firmly on a judgment because "when we settle – we arrogantly and misguidedly think we know." She says, "It is a really good strategy to recognize that you have an awful lot to learn." She used the search committee to help with her first several months. She says that, "If the search is done well, the search committee knows what needs to be done at a college."	She followed an interim president and spoke about a lack of positive organizational identity and a need to get the campus to "boast."	Relied on the search committee to help put some major decisions in context and she trusted their judgment. She spoke more readily of coming to a common, unified identity for Hamlin in comparison to presidents at larger universities.	She was not asked specifically about this and did not mention anything without a cue.	"One of the things that I started doing immediately was telling people they had to boast more about this institution, that we were too modest." In a barrier to sensegiving she says, "a college president is like a cemetery proprietor: you have a lot of people under you, but no one is listening." She also mentions the benefits of being an outsider. "I think that being a president means being a leader in some ways of being out front, seeing things, maybe if you are an outsider you have a luxury of seeing things that maybe other people didn't see and knowing that it will make a difference for you to focus on those things and to lead an institution that way."

Adams College	Said she knew she did not know enough to finish a strategic plan, so she bought time with process such as setting up committees. She had the search committee morph into the transition team.	Was being asked to do things and make decisions right away, before she officially started (Immediate role requirements). Decisions had been put on hold for her. She was considered good at budget management which was a weakness of her predecessor.	Described her experience much like an ethnographer. She says, "Total immersion. So, and it would be immersion in the sense of walking around campus, I wanted to physically see the different buildings. I wanted to see where faculty were working so I would go into buildings and if a door was open I would talk to faculty members or staff members. Tried to attend, there was actually a surprising number of events in the summer that take place and so trying to attend any event that was taking place, faculty presentations, student events, and just trying to soak up what the culture was like."	Mentioned how she was constantly being asked to make decisions on significant topics in which she did not have enough information because she was not physically present before her start date. Said in many cases people were not willing to put issues up front or put them bluntly. Also mentioned difficulties of not knowing who to trust. Most people have a personal agenda.	Said the primary goal for Adams College would be "national visibility." She was criticized in the student newspaper for not having a "catchy new slogan" like her predecessor.
Wilson College	Told himself it is a "marathon and not a sprint" and that he needed to be patient. He made very specific early changes to signal to the campus that they are capable of change. He says he balanced learning about the place and forming a strategic agenda by "making sure that I did a few, very small, very symbolic, concrete things where faculty could see change." In this manner he had a "small wins" approach (Weick, 1984)	"Stalled," "everybody was pretty frustrated with feeling stagnant," "entering a place that was hungry for change," "solid financially" but he was told he didn't have time to listen and learn his first year. People said, "No, we need change and direction. Let's go."	Stressed the importance of the "chemistry" of his senior staff to help him think through issues on campus.	Mentioned little time for reflection and that he had not had dinner at home for eight consecutive evenings prior to the interview. Also said he has gotten into trouble by "saying things that were just ideas" such as the need to build new athletic facilities and a student center. It became a headline in a paper.	The president said that "unless we developed a focused agenda, we wouldn't get anything done." So he set out on a process of agenda formation that resulted in six priorities to pursue and "organize the campus around." He also described a process of instigating ambiguity among faculty through a symbolic change to their governance structure. Overall, he mentioned several ways he was trying to change the culture to become more strategic in its behavior.
Lincoln College	He came to campus in April at "one of the most intense times of the academic year…and it was an absolute whirlwind, just craziness, and my adrenaline would get pumping and I'd come home at night and would have trouble sleeping because I was so…you know there were so many things going through my mind. It was a challenge because I didn't even know building names and peoples' names, and so it was the proverbial drinking from a fire hose." He focused on listening and changing his mind demonstrating an attitude of wisdom in holding knowledge cautiously.	They had a failed search in the first attempt to find a president. Mentioned that being in the Northwestern US they do not have the population/enrollment issues and competition that plague most of the colleges in the Midwestern US. Overall, "the college itself was in pretty good shape."	Said having a mentor was "extremely helpful, very, very helpful" because the problems or questions he face were novel and complex and he wanted to see how an experienced president would interpret the situation. He also announced that he was going to meet with every faculty member in his or her office for half an hour or 45 minutes during the first year of his presidency. Through this he learned "the faculty were even better than I thought." This was a means of constructing positive reasons for his past choice of accepting the position.	Mentioned having time blocked off to avoid getting "swallowed up by the speed of events."	Said he was "quite clearly brought in to do fundraising." Thus, he was more of an externally-focused president that was less concerned with changing the mindset or culture of the campus. Said he was "trying to encourage the campus to think bigger and to aspire for more." This was particularly true in their aspirations for fundraising. He says, "when I am talking to faculty and to the rest of the staff, I really want them to believe that this place is much better than they have realized it is, because it is!"

Harrison College	Said that telling people where to go is a dangerous thing when you are coming in from the outside, especially when you do not know the culture or history of a place. This demonstrates an awareness of knowing what he does not know.	He said he was coming in at a time when "it was obviously very, very unstable—three years with three different presidents." People didn't know "who is on first."	He mentioned when asked how he learned about the organization that it was important to speak with the alumni on the board of trustees. He had alumni on the board that had been students at Harrison going back to the 60s. He says, "Having 60, 65 years of history, affiliated with this place as student, as board member, really was a very rich set of data for me."	He said that "It truly is the case; the president is often the last to know about some things that are going on."	He focused his remarks to the campus on four E's: community engagement, resource enhancement, student experience, and academic excellence. He said these "were the broader frames that were used to kind of move some deliberate activities along." He also began referring to Harrison as a "New American College." The New American College model reconciled the competing interests of faculty, parents, students, and employers, who all have competing demands for educational quality and professional skills.
Hayes College	Said it was important to find an insider who could be "his guy" to get the "real dope."	Declining enrollments and budget deficits. He needed to make changes but was limited because of the freshman class already being set. He did start to undertake large changes.	To figure out what he should do next, he says, "I actually went and talked to a few other presidents in the area, on the guise of introducing myself, but really trying to pick their brain about what the hell is going on. What am I supposed to be doing here?"	Mentioned the difficulty of "thinking out loud." He says, "Boy, say it and it's a *fait accompli*, and that surprised me."	After he visited several high schools in the region, the he says he had to "change the mindset" of the admissions office. He re-labeled and re-organized many functions of the college that were externally-oriented to be labeled as "marketing."
Arthur College	Said figuring things out was not rocket science and it took about five minutes to figure out that enrollment was the biggest problem. He said he wasn't going to spent tons of time listening, "The place couldn't handle it." This demonstrates the opposite of the attitude of wisdom.	The organization was facing declining enrollments and financial difficulties. Under these circumstances, he could challenge the assumptions and worldview of members more directly.	Had difficulty reconciling the quality of the institution with his self-perception, thus described vigorous means to improve the standing of the organization.	Worked to meet people on their "home turf" so people would feel more comfortable and be less guarded in what they said.	Spent his time raising the standards of the administration and faculty. He did this by symbolic acts, like getting upset at coaches for not dressing up for recruits, faculty for not showing up for office hours, and staff for not keeping a new fireplace going. He said the "power of persuasion at a place like Arthur is much more face-to-face."

Appendix B: Letter Requesting Participation

Dear President <insert name>,

I am sure you have a busy schedule, but I am conducting a dissertation as a fourth-year Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan that may help improve transitions to the presidency. This research may help future presidents in similar positions and give you a chance to have an impact on the future success of higher education organizations.

Briefly, I am studying how college presidents make sense of their experience when they enter the position. What is surprising? What is unexpected? This dissertations derives from statistics like these: Of 2,148 presidents surveyed by the American Council on Education in 2006, 25 percent believed they had not received an accurate and full disclosure of the institution's financial condition; 20 percent said they had not received a realistic assessment of the institution's status; 19 percent felt the board's expectations had not been disclosed; and 20 percent felt the search process did not disclose the institution's expectations.

While you may or may not have experienced a great deal of surprise when you began, this research seeks to understand the transition process and how new presidents identify and interpret the stream of experience during their first year (sensemaking) and how they influence others toward a redefinition of organizational reality (sensegiving).

In order to understand this process, I am seeking to interview on your campus for *at least* 60 minutes. Your identity will remain confidential and no identifying information of your institution will be disclosed. Enclosed is a brief description of this research. If you think you might be interested in helping, feel free to email: rsmerek@umich.edu or call 617-417-0596. I will follow-up with an email or phone call shortly.

Thanks for any time you can give.

Sincerely,

Ryan Smerek

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Sensemaking and Sensegiving among New College Presidents

Researcher: Ryan E Smerek
Faculty Advisor: Michael Bastedo
Telephone Number: 617-417-0596

Ryan Smerek has requested your participation in a study entitled, *Sensemaking and Sensegiving among New College Presidents.* You understand that this participation is entirely voluntary and that you can withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation. If you choose to withdraw from participation in this research, all records collected and identifiable to you will be destroyed and removed from the research database. Your notification of withdrawal will be in writing to the researcher. You may also skip any interview question at any time.

You understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how new college presidents interpret their experiences and define organizational reality for others. You appreciate that there are no costs associated with participating in the study, and there is no compensation for taking part in this study. If you do have concerns, the researcher, Ryan Smerek, will attempt to address them to your satisfaction.

The interviews will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. Your name will not be revealed in the study. You will have the opportunity to receive a copy of the audio recording, and, upon request, you may obtain a copy of your transcribed interview.

You understand that the dissertation will be published along with related articles, and that it may be presented at conferences or other educational programs. Steps to assure your confidentiality include: 1) digital recordings and transcripts will be stored on the researcher's password-protected, private computer, and, 2) transcriptions will contain only coded initials for all proper names, pseudonyms will be utilized in the research report, plus, organizational data will be disguised. Although confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, confidentiality is a priority that will be recognized throughout the study and addressed wherever possible. You understand that at any time you may request the removal of particular data from the study, and the researcher will eliminate that material from the study files and from consideration in the study.

You understand that at any time during the course of this study, Ryan Smerek will address any questions that you may have. He can be reached at 617-417-0596 or emailed at rsmerek@umich.edu Should you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board, 540 E. Liberty Street, Suite 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933, email: irbhsbs@umich.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Bastedo at 610 East University Ave Room 2108C SEB Ann Arbor MI 48109-1259, (734) 615-3349, email bastedo@umich.edu

Your signature below acknowledges that you have read the above statements, discussed this study with Ryan Smerek to your satisfaction, and that you agree to take part in this study. You understand that by signing this informed consent form, you do not give up any legal rights.

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

I will begin by describing my basic research objectives and questions…

1. Looking back over your first several months, how would you describe the context in which you were hired?

   a. Given all the higher education organizations you know about, how turbulent or crises-laden would you describe the college when you arrived?

2. How did you go about learning the ropes of your position?

3. As you look back on your first years, are there events that stand out in your mind as surprising, puzzling, or very challenging? Could you describe each one? How did you respond? (*Look for specific stories and events)*

4. Have you set forth a vision for the organization? Why or why not? (*sensegiving*)
   a. If so, how did you come to articulate this vision?
   b. How did you communicate it to the campus community?

5. Did you feel you had to balance learning about the college and setting forth a direction? Some people describe this as being and learning about the presidency.
   a. How did you manage this balance? What mindset did you take?

6. Some people say that when they became president people "stopped telling them the truth" or that "they are the last person to hear about something." Does that resonate with you?

7. What do you think of this quote from a college president?

   Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived ideas about where you are going to take an institution to which you are new, because you simply cannot know. You can't know enough about a new environment to recognize where the strengths are and where you might need to push the institution to grow. It takes you a couple of years to figure it all out. It is like a big puzzle (2005).

8. Do you feel you have to manage a lot of unexpected things? How do you do that?

9. Tell me about how your views of leadership have changed since you began?

10. Is there anything else that you see as important that we have not covered?

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