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WHO ARE WE? ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AT THREE MIDWESTERN TUITION DRIVEN PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

BY

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WHO ARE WE? ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AT THREE MIDWESTERN
PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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**Who are we? Organizational Identity at Three Midwestern
Private Colleges and Universities**
Abstract

The overall purpose of this study is to better understand the organizational identity issues that private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions face as they navigate a strategic planning process. This study answers three research questions. First, how do faculty and administrators, that have recently undergone a strategic planning process, define its organizational identity? TO what might these definitions be attributed? Second, were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process? If so, how were they addressed? What were the conflicts, themes, or focus of discussion? Third, if issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning process, how did the institution resolve these issues of identity?

Three institutions, all private, tuition dependent, and located in the Midwestern region of the country, were studied through individual interviews. These schools have all recently completed a formal strategic planning process, and therefore are believed to have issues of identity fresh on the minds of the faculty and administrators that participated in them. These institutions also face similar pressures to maintain relevancy and financial success in a competitive marketplace. This study found that differences in perspective between full time faculty and administrators, differences rooted in academic legitimacy versus strategic management concepts, influences the view each group has of the organization identity, as well as the way in which issues are addressed. Finally, this study found that leadership, particularly leadership of the institution president, had an impact on the coherence of the organization identity, as well as to what extent the institution has resolved any issues of identity.

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Chapter One

Introduction, Research Questions, and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this case study was to understand better what organizational identity issues might arise for private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions during a strategic planning process. These institutions, in particular, have faced issues of survival in increasingly competitive environments. Three research questions guided the process. First, how do members of small, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions who have recently undergone a strategic planning process define their organizational identity? To what might these definitions be attributed? Second, were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process? If so, how were they addressed? What were the conflicts, themes, or focus of discussion? Finally, if issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning process, how did the institution resolve them?

Much like an individual who experiences questions of self-identity, an organization will often find itself asking the question, "Who are we?" (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). Questions of identity such as "What do we stand for," "Whom do we serve," and "What are our goals, purposes, and core values?" will likely dominate an organization that is experiencing strategic planning processes and subsequent changes to its messages, policies, operations, or technological innovations (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Whetten, 2006). During these times of strategic planning, the identity of the organization becomes particularly significant and the question "Who are we?" underlies much of the communication, decision-making, and behavior of the organizational members as they navigate the process (MacDonald, 2012; Phillips, 1983). The university is an especially interesting example of a complex

organization that potentially undergoes a reevaluation of its own organizational identity

when faced with a strategic planning process and thus invokes many theoretical questions

regarding organizational behavior (Childers, 2012). For this reason, I use the strategic

planning process as a context for studying the relevant issues of organizational identity at

private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions.

This study seeks to answer the research questions posed via the study of three

cases, all four-year, private, tuition-driven liberal arts institutions that have completed a

formal strategic plan in the last five years. These three institutions were chosen because

they have made decisions, not simply to meet the demands of a shifting external

environment, but even more significantly, to ensure organizational survival. They are all

tuition-driven private colleges and universities that were founded on historically

traditional liberal arts principles, but found themselves in increasingly competitive and

market-driven environments.

All three institutions under study served as mid-nineteenth century pioneers in the

Midwest region for providing higher education in small, private settings. Case institutions

A and B share an important characteristic that was critical in the case selection for this

study. In the 1970s and 1980s, they both established relationships with the U.S. military

and formed military base branch campuses, which served as an entry into an enduring

commitment to adult learning programs. This occurred at a time when financial stress

was high and the revenue from the military alleviated the threat of closure for these

institutions. Later, when technology allowed it, the military encouraged both case

institutions A and B to provide online programs to meet the changing needs of enrolled

military personnel. The branch campuses and online programs as well as the mass

marketing of these offerings have, at times, conflicted with the organization's identity as

a traditionally established historical liberal arts college. These questions of identity

continue to rise at each of these two institutions as they find themselves in an increasingly

competitive market. The third college selected for this study, case institution C, analyzed

the option of adult learning and online programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s,

especially when faced with financial pressures to do so. However, it was ultimately

decided that this strategy was unsustainable and inconsistent with the organization's

mission and identity.

Organizational Identity Defined

Albert and Whetten (1985) clearly defined organizational identity as a constructed

entity formed by the organizational members and based on what these members believe

to be the central and distinctive character of the organization. It is this entity that filters

and molds the organization's interpretation of and ultimate action on an issue (Dutton &

Dukerich, 1991). While the research on organizational identity casts a wide net over

many areas of study, MacDonald (2013) specifically defines university identity as the

"central and ongoing representation of a university that suggests shared beliefs, values,

and its organizational culture, which over time create metaphors for its unique qualities"

(p. 154).

Despite Albert and Whetten's (1985) pioneering work on defining organizational

identity, inconsistencies and confusion abound in the literature (Brunninge, 2005). In

some instances, organizational identity is portrayed as a socially constructed property of

the observers, whereas in other instances, it is the organization itself that determines the

identity (Brunninge, 2005). In addition, some authors, like Albert and Whetten (1985)

claim that organizational identity is highly stable, while others argue that it is fluid,

changing as a reflection of the environmental circumstances (Brunninge, 2005; Swidler,

1986).

Whetten (2006) sought to again clarify the definition of organizational behavior in

response to two decades of research that reflected an inconsistent view of the concept. To

do so, he delineated between organizational identity, organizational culture, and

organizational image. In its essence, organizational identity is defined by *organizational*

identity claims, or the "central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish

it from other organizations" (p. 220). These identity claims, formulated and articulated by

the organization members, make up the uniquely defining aspects of the organization that

allow it to occupy an original place in society. Furthermore, identity claims will surface

when organization members are speaking on behalf of the organization and when facing

"profound, fork-in-the-road, choices-those that have the potential to alter the collective

understanding of 'who we are as an organization" (Whetten, 2006, p. 221).

While Whetten (2006) does not address the comparison, organizational identity

and organizational mission are also often confused with one another when speaking of

the defining aspects of the organization (Abelman, 2012). While organizational identity is

the fundamental and consistent characteristic of the institution, mission is the core

purpose by which the institution expresses those enduring aspects (Albert & Whetten,

1985; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). The mission is meant to provide a guide for action and

decision making for the institution and can serve as a powerful message of direction to

external constituents and shared purpose to internal members (Morphew & Hartley,

2006). Furthermore, the mission statement is a formal statement of this message (Hartley,

2002). Several participants in this study used the words mission and vision

interchangeably, yet it is important to note that mission was not a focus of this study on

organizational identity.

Strategic Planning as a Context for Studying Organizational Identity

The intention of this study is to understand further the organizational identity

issues that face private, tuition-driven, liberal arts institutions. It is not the intention of

this study to understand further or explore the strategic planning process, but rather to use

the strategic planning process as a context for studying organizational identity. The

context of strategic planning was chosen because the proceeding literature lends support

to the idea that organizations will face issues of identity as they experience a strategic

planning process. Therefore, it was assumed that, by speaking to members that have

recently undergone a formal strategic planning process, there will be a recent setting for

open discussion of identity from which the institution members can draw.

There is a direct connection between strategic planning and organizational

identity (Childers, 2012; Swidler, 1986; Whetten, 2006). Strategic planning is the process

of aligning weaknesses with challenges, strengths with opportunities, and goals with

vision, all built upon the basis of the organization's self-view (Keller, 1983; Bess & Dee,

2008). The repeated questions, "Who are we," "What do we value," and "Why do we

exist?" are foundational to the strategy the university or college believes it needs in order

to navigate an environment rife with challenges and opportunities. The ongoing process

of developing, implementing, and assessing tools such as strategic plans will force

members of the university or college to review the institution's identity continuously and

seek congruence between the visionary aspect of a strategic plan and the clear identity of the university (Ellis, 2010).

Swidler (1986) argued that the long-term influence of the approach taken during strategic planning processes centers on the meaning systems that the members create. When articulate, explicit, and highly organized, these meaning systems can have a significant and positive influence on the focus of a strategic plan for the institution (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Keller (1983) in turn said that as resources shrink, colleges and universities must bring their members together to make decisions and compromises that have purpose and stability, specifically in the form of a strategic plan. Furthermore, when a university or college experiences strategic planning, there is a tighter coupling between action and ideology (Swidler, 1986). The impact that these conversations and strategic decisions have on the ultimate behavior of the organization can be much more meaningful to the members and organization as a whole than when there is heightened desire to reassess identity and take action (Swidler, 1986).

Theoretical Framework

The three case institutions studied have faced relatively consistent financial pressures in their histories and have completed recent strategic planning efforts to mitigate these pressures, ensuring growth and survival. The study of how an organization might address identity issues during these times of financial pressure, while maintaining a congruence between who it *says* it is and who it *actually* is, has significant organizational behavior theoretical forces.

With this in mind, my study will focus on two prominent organizational behavior constructs. The first, strategic management, is commonly applied within the context of a

firm, and the other, institutional theory, is often attributed to the higher education

environment (Childers, 2012; Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007). These were not only

chosen because of their prominence in the literature, but also because of their paradoxical

qualities in relation to one another. One is counterintuitive to the other, and they both

speak to the conflicting influences college and universities with traditional liberal arts

roots have within an increasingly competitive and threatening environment.

Broadly, strategic management analyzes the major initiatives taken by the

organization's top leaders within the confines of the present external environment and

available resources (Hambrick, 2004). It further involves the notion that an organization's

mission, vision, and objectives must serve as the guiding forces for the development of

all policies and plans. Resources are then allocated to implement these policies, plans,

projects, or programs designed to achieve the goals and vision of the core mission and

purpose of the organization (Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007). The strategic management

literature, as well as research on strategic planning, argues that strategic plans and

mission statements must be useful, clear, measurable, and an accurate representation of

the organization's true and unique function in order to allow for success and survival

(Keller, Nichols, 1994; Stone, 1996).

In contrast to the strategic management notion that organizations will only survive

when they emphasize their uniqueness within a competitive market, institutional theory

supports the concept that organizations, especially highly institutionalized ones like

universities and colleges, exhibit a high level of isomorphism when grappling with issues

of identity and change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional theory argues that

organizations are constrained by isomorphic pressures to adopt structures and practices

that are similar to other organizations seen as more credible or legitimate. Isomorphism, or a constraining process that forces one organization in an environment to resemble other organizations in the same conditions, is the mitigating concept of institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Hawley, 1968). This theoretical perspective would suggest that, as the organization works to navigate external pressures to establish a unique competitive advantage in the environment, typically for survival reasons, it will want to reject strategies that might set it apart from other institutions that are seen as legitimate and reputable (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Morphew, 2002). The maintenance of practices that are viewed as legitimate become of utmost importance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

Not all organizational behavior issues can be studied in the context of one organizational theory. Often times, two or more theories, perspectives, frameworks, or models of organizational behavior together can guide researchers to a greater understanding of a particular issue (Berger, 2000). These three cases are examples of universities that clearly grapple with the competing forces of institutional theory and strategic management. Institutions like these, namely, ones that exhibit behaviors of isomorphism and still find themselves in a strategic and competitive marketplace, might grapple with the paradox that this environment will create (Childers, 2012).

Methods

In this study, I sought explore organizational identity of the private, tuition-dependent liberal arts institutions. A qualitative study provides for a broad exploration of organizational processes related to this topic as well as helpful introductory findings for further study. Additionally, a case study provides a deeper understanding of a particular

phenomenon, particularly one that can be bounded by time, policy, space, or other

defining characteristics (Merriam, 2009). The three cases selected for study here are

bounded by their similar institutional qualities, the time period in which I collected data,

and the presence of a recent strategic planning process. The concepts of strategic

management supports the understanding of the strategic planning process. While strategic

management argues that organizations must focus its efforts on what is unique and

distinct about itself in order to survive, the strategic planning process is a method of

living that uniqueness out in organizational decision making (Rowley, Lujan, Dolence,

1997). The open nature of my study, my willingness to uncover unanticipated findings,

and my interest in understanding the organization identity issues and resolution processes

of these types of institutions lent themselves to a discovery process that the qualitative

case study method provides (Merriam, 2009).

       In an effort to explore thoroughly the experience that these three organizations

had as they faced questions of identity, I primarily interviewed faculty and

administrators. The interview transcripts were coded for themes based upon research

questions, but also uncovered unexpected findings that were not anticipated prior to the

formulation of the research questions. In addition, I also reviewed self-studies, strategic

plans, and other public documents made available on institution websites. The institution

self-studies, strategic plans, and web material provided me an understanding of

institutional history, transitions, and current demographics of the student population.

These documents were not coded for themes, per se, but were used to inform the results

chapters of this study.

Significance of the Study

The questions posed in this study are significant due to the increased pressure on institutions, particularly those that face an increasingly competitive environment, to make strategic adjustments to respond to these environmental changes (Carey, 2015; Dutton & Dukerich; 1991). Higher education is experiencing a time of intense pressure to perform. The spotlight on small, private liberal arts institutions is brighter than ever as tuition continues to rise and the quantifiable return on investment becomes a higher priority for parents and students alike (Carey, 2015; Childers, 2012). The closures of these types of institutions make mainstream media headlines, raise renewed conversations regarding the changing nature of higher education, and identify the small, private, tuition-driven college as a particularly threatened institutional type (Carey, 2015). Many advise that the way to survive in these changing times and adapt to changing student needs is with the innovation of business strategy (MacDonald, 2013). When universities and colleges then begin altering their traditional methods of curriculum delivery, enrollment management efforts, or general messaging to constituents, to more closely mirror that of a business, there can be ramifications for the identity of the organization. This might particularly be true for the faculty and administrators that subscribe to the legitimacy at the institutionalized college or university (MacDonald, 2013).

These three cases are examples of two colleges and one university facing financial and environmental pressure to adjust strategy in an effort to survive within a competitive market. The struggle to achieve and sustain financial stability and to maintain a strong identity is not exclusive to these three organizations. Across the country, there are many other colleges and universities that find themselves in a similarly difficult situation

(Childers, 2012). Questions of identity and purpose abound when economic conditions require these organizations to adjust strategy in an effort to compete and survive. Through the study of these three cases that represent many others like them, a greater understanding of the potential factors that might lead to an identity struggle is provided. Organizational productivity, constituent satisfaction, and institutional success are all at stake when identity is threatened. This study will shed light on how three institutions, which exist within the same competitive and shifting environment, experience issues of identity as they work to survive and thrive as a college or university. There is an openness to the purpose of this study, as reflected in the qualitative case study method, which allows for both unanticipated and unexpected findings and understandings of the concept of organizational identity at struggling, private, tuition driven colleges and universities. These findings, both anticipated and unanticipated, will allow a deeper understanding of organizational identity and the more we know about how these organizations define their identity, what identity struggles occur during strategy formulation and self-reflection, and how issues are resolved, the better chance we have of effectively navigating organizational identity issues in the future.

Conclusion

There are a significant number of American universities and colleges grappling with identity issues as they face increased pressure to achieve and sustain institutional stability (Childers, 2012). Competition for enrollment, funding, and public support is becoming more intense and the perception that higher education is a definitive public and private good is increasingly threatened (Carey, 2015). In an effort to survive, university and college leaders must make difficult decisions that might be viewed as threats to an

organizational identity that is rooted in traditional academia (MacDonald, 2013). As these

strategic decisions are navigated, an institution will often face the difficult and soul

searching questions, "Who are we," "Who do we serve," and "What do we value?" This

study allowed a greater understanding of the following: (1) How members of these types

of institutions define its organizational identity, and to what the definitions might be

attributed; (2) Whether issues of identity were considered during the strategic planning

process, and if so, how they were addressed; and (3) If issues of identity were presented

during the strategic planning process, how these institutions resolved the issues.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In this chapter, I begin by providing a review of the research on organizational identity. This includes early work on defining organizational identity, its evolution from the study of individual identity, the perspective of organizational identity as a social construct, and finally the postmodern perspective that organizational identity is dynamic and emergent. Next, I provide an understanding of the current research on strategic planning and why it can be used as a context for studying organizational identity. Although this is not a study of the strategic planning process, a background understanding of research on strategic planning; and, more importantly, the connections previously made between strategic planning and organizational identity is essential. This is because organizational identity is a key factor in the process of strategic planning. Finally, I will provide an explanation of institutional theory, strategic management, and the conflicting influences they have on organizational identity at private, tuition-driven, liberal arts colleges or universities.

Research on Organizational Identity

Arguably, the most widely cited definition of organizational identity was provided by Albert and Whetten (1985), who defined identity as an organization's "self-description of what is central and distinctive about itself" (as cited in Childers, 2012, p. 28). These statements of identity make up the uniquely defining aspects of an organization that allow it to occupy an original place in society. Albert and Whetten (1985), like many in the study of organizational behavior, also said that the behavior of the organization mirrors that of the individual. Erikson's (1959) early work on individual identity development

was defined by life-cycle events, meaning that, as one's experiences change, self-esteem within one's contexts change, along with the basic beliefs and values that form self-identity. These notions of transition and change in human identity have been transferred to that of organizational identity in such a way that common concepts of life events such as birth, growth, maturity, decline, death, and even revival are transferred to the organization (Whetten, 2006; MacDonald, 2013).

Additional understanding of the relationship between individual and organizational identity theory was established by Elsbach and Kramer (1996) as they studied Top 20 business school programs and the faculties' reactions to rankings in *US News and World Report.* The programs were faced with an identity threat when their rankings did not meet the internal expectations or the external messages of their host schools. The authors studied how the program members responded to the perceived threat to their identity and found that sense making was the most common method for dealing with the threat. A threat to the identity of the academic program was viewed as a threat to the identity of the individuals who were affiliated with it. Therefore, to deal with this dissonance, the members affirmed positive perceptions of the school's identity by focusing on the areas not recognized by the rankings in which the school was strong, compared to its competition. By studying these sense making methods during times of threatened identity, Elsbach and Kramer were able to develop a new framework of organizational identity management that draws from individual theories of identity and self-affirmation, again strengthening the "psychological interdependence" (1996, p. 467) between individuals' social identities and their perception of their organizational identity.

Tajfel and Turner (2004) also theorized that a person's social identity is based on social categorization and a desire to boost one's self esteem through the use of comparisons with others. This phenomenon is then transferred to the university environment in the form of comparisons with other universities that are competitive in nature (Pelham & Swann, 1989; MacDonald, 2013). It is argued that the sense of self is defined through comparisons with others and is formed by categorizations, identifications, and comparisons based on value judgments of who is the in-group or out-group. These comparisons are frequently used by university members when describing one's university in comparison to others; e.g., "we are elite private, they are not" (MacDonald, 2013, p. 155).

Another view of the role of individual identity development in the literature that is particularly interesting, especially in light of the nature of the three universities chosen for this case study, is the suggestion that individuals remain in a constant state of conflict between feelings of inferiority and superiority (MacDonald, 2013). This state of conflict, and its influence on organizational identity, has shown to be quite convincing in the context of higher education (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). At the university level, the attempt to resolve this conflict is illustrated through the decision-making processes and conversations that occur as statements of strategy, mission, or self-studies are developed (Gioia et al., 1994). While exploring the institution's identity, and by attempting to resolve any conflicts within that process, the questions of "how are we better than others?" "how are others better than us?" and "how can we be true to ourselves while still maintaining legitimacy?" abound (Gioia et al., 1994).

Organizational Identity as a Social Construct

Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organizational identity as a social construct, arguing that it is the subjective property of observers. Their concept of organizational identity rests on two basic assumptions. The first is that organizations are social bodies that are often treated by society as extensions of the individual. They are granted "powers to act" and these actions are viewed as analogous to an individual's behavior (Whetten, 2006, p. 221). The second assumption is that, just as identity is defined by a person's unique view of oneself, it is also defined at the organizational level in a subjective and observable state (Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Tangney, 2003).

To further explain, Albert and Whetten (1985) began to address the underlying identity question, "who are we as an organization," by developing a useful acronym: CED, or Central, Enduring, and Distinguishing. They explained that an organization's identity is expressed by what is central to the structure of the institution. By digging deep into the layers of the actions of the organization, one will theoretically be able to find the central purpose and character of the organization. Also, organizational characteristics that are unbounded by time or environmental forces are what are enduring and take part in forming the organization's identity. This is also referred to as the institution's legacy and makes up the lasting impact and mission of the founding members of the organization. Finally, the distinguishing factors of the organization, meaning what makes it unique and distinct from other organizations like it, takes part in forming the organization's identity (Albert & Whetton, 1985).

Supporting the CED framework, and arguing that organizational identity is defined by the way internal members interpret the organization, Dutton and Dukerich

(1991) found that organizational identity is created over time through the experiences and needs of its members. They affirmed Albert and Whetton's (1985) socially constructed view of organizational identity and claimed that organizational identity is self-identified as central, distinctive, and enduring to the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Furthermore, Albert and Whetten (1985) suggested that organizations can have a dual identity and illustrated this duality using the modern research university as an example. They opined that the university exhibits both a church-like identity and a business-like identity. The church represents the normative identity of the institution, meaning the identity that is directed by ideology, culture, and educational functions of the institution (Albert & Whetton, 1985; Parsons, 1960). The business, meanwhile, represents the utilitarian identity of the institution, expressed as the identity that is directed by information and economic production (Albert & Whetton, 1985).

Hatch and Schultz (2004) also contended that organizations construct their own identity by mirroring the external and internal perceptions of the organization's culture and image. They go further to explain the act of "imbedding" (p. 387) identity through a process of critical reflection by members as they "understand and explain themselves as an organization" (Hatch & Schultz, 2004, p. 387).

Clark (1972) also spoke to the concept of culture, commitment, and organizational identity in his writings on what he termed organizational saga in higher education. Saga is defined as a stream of events, a historical story that includes a written or spoken interpretation. Saga is not just a story; it is a story that has a strong base of believers. Clark argued that it is this belief in the story that defines the pride and identity of the group. This concept of saga is then transferred to the organizational context by

Clark; he ultimately defined it as a "collective understanding of unique accomplishment in a formally established group" (1972, p. 178). He further stated that stages of organizational development are linked by the retelling and rewriting of the group's historical accomplishments. The emotion, interpretation, and sentiment expressed by the group's members transform an organization from a formal system to a 'beloved' place that attracts the devotion of its members. This concept of the organizational saga supports the study of organizational identity, as stories, emotional beliefs, and institutional spirit all form identity. Clark put university values, beliefs, operations; and, most importantly, identities into categories that created an "us versus them" mentality.

The Postmodern Perspective of Organizational Identity

For some time, both Clark's (1972) views on organizational saga in higher education and the CED framework by Albert and Whetten (1985), served as conceptual frameworks for organizational identity research (Childers, 2012; MacDonald, 2013). This was until others argued that the comparative nature of Clark's view of organizational saga was flawed (Rush & Wilbur, 2007) and others challenged Albert and Whetten's socially constructionist view of organizational identity from a post-modern perspective (Gioia, Schultz, & Corely, 2000; Tierney, 2001). These post-modernists argued that identity is in fact not enduring, and is, instead, unstable, adaptive, and reflective of a changing environment. These studies argued that meanings and definitions are dynamic and will change over time. Organizational memory fades; therefore, legacy can also weaken and evolve.

Others later expanded the discourse on organizational identity by looking away from Albert and Whetton's (1985) dualistic notion of a church-like and business-like

identity and instead focused on the evolutionary nature of the concept (Gergen, 2001; Schein, 2004; Tierney, 2001). Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) suggested that organizational identity is not fixed and agreed upon, but is, rather, unbounded and closely connected to the dynamic nature of organizational image. As image changes and adapts; so, too, does institutional identity. This flexibility of identity is argued to be a critical component of change as well, and even goes on to reject legacy's importance in organizational identity, as Albert and Whetten (1985) maintained in the concept of CED (Gioia et al., 2000; Tierney, 2001).

Strategic Planning and Its Use as a Context for Studying Organizational Identity

While organizational identity is defined by an institution's defining attributes, organizational strategy defines how the institution realizes its identity (Ashforth & Mael,1990; Childers, 2012). Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence (1997) defined strategy as "an agreed-on course of action and direction that changes relationships or maintains alignment" (Ellis, 2010; p. 7). The process of strategic planning is a time in organizational history that is open with opportunity for identity evaluation (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Keller, 1983). When an organization explores a strategic planning process, then the questions of identity and purpose are foundational to the decision-making process (MacDonald, 2013). It is more common for institutions to articulate their identity, and thus raise questions of discrepancies or inconsistencies in those articulations across organizational members, when strategic planning is occurring (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Childers, 2012; MacDonald, 2013).

In addition, any subsequent strategic change, identified as a redefinition of the organization's mission and purpose or a substantial shift in goals and priorities from the

original strategic planning process, can provoke questions of organizational identity by

members (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). Changes in resource allocation

patterns, organizational structure, or organizational processes can affect mission or goals

and bring up questions of identity and culture as an organization (Gioia et al., 1994).

These shifts are disorienting for the members of the organization as they seek to reconcile

the threat to identity. The foremost question in their minds is: If we are *this*, then how

will this change fundamentally affect who we are as an organization (Tushman &

Romanelli, 1985)? These changes in strategy that stimulate a reevaluation of identity

require not just a mandate from external forces (or top-down decrees from internal

members) but instead a process of a renegotiated social construction of identity (Berger

& Luckman, 1967; Gioia et al., 1994). Some members who find themselves dealing with

feelings of inferiority and superiority, or a desire to be seen as legitimate, do not view

changes in strategy as symbolic in nature, or even just a change in structures, processes,

and goals, but rather a fundamental change in the socially constructed reality of the

organization (Bartunek, 1984; Ginsberg, 1988). This alteration is, indeed, what Gioia and

Chittipeddi (1991) term a 'cognitive reorientation' of the organization, one that requires

an acceptance of the disruption and lack of continuity that colors a transition in strategy

(Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). This acceptance of a new conceptualization of the

organizational strategy is complicated and can be fraught with identity issues and threats

(Smircich, 1983).

     Organizational misunderstanding and poor implementation of the strategic

planning process commonly occurs when long range planning is mistaken for strategic

planning (Ellis, 2010). The work of organizations often includes the development of

goals, carrying out plans to accomplish such goals, assessing these accomplishments'

level of success, and then beginning again with revised or reworked goals. Although this

can be a productive method of goal setting and completion, this is in fact not strategic

planning (Ellis, 2010). As described by Mintzberg (1994), "the most successful strategies

are visions, not plans"; and, while planning is "calculating," strategy is "committing" (p.

107). The calculating style of planning is characterized by the fixation on a destination,

followed by concerted efforts taken to get there, with no concern for the members'

preferences (Mintzberg, 1994). Conversely, the committing style of strategic planning

fosters a shared vision among an organization's members that transcends the value of the

plan alone and infuses the members with energy and focus on what matters (Mintzberg,

1994). It is a process that "detaches strategy from operations and thinking from doing"

(Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 244).

The ubiquitous study of strategy and strategic planning in organizations equally

extends to higher education. Although strategic planning was introduced during the 1960s

to private business, it developed as a key component of higher education administration

in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Keller, 1983; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). Keller

(1983) was the first to argue for the need for strategic planning in higher education, and

defined it as an iterative process that develops and changes as it progresses. This, he

argued is not a negative thing, but instead allows the organization to adapt and adjust to

the environment as it fluctuates.

While Keller (1983) did not include suggestions for how to specifically conduct

strategic planning, his groundbreaking work did allow for others to take on that effort

(Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). During these early experiments with strategy,

universities were mostly participating in "long-range planning," rather than strategic planning, in the sense that the process was largely internal and linear (Presley & Leslie, 1999). Presley and Leslie (1999) described strategy in higher education as a means of establishing direction, focusing effort, and guiding that effort through a considerable length of time; and, unlike the long-range planning of the early years, it allows for a flexible reaction to unforeseen challenges and opportunities. They also remind us that the main goal of strategic planning in higher education is to enhance practice. The focus here, as Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1997) and Kouzes and Posner (1995) also wrote, is on the importance of guidance for the organization, as opposed to the operations-driven nature of traditional planning.

Despite this understanding of the relationship between strategic planning and identity evaluation, there is little research that uses strategic planning as a context for studying organizational identity in the vulnerable tuition-driven, private, liberal arts institution (Childers, 2012). These type of institutions are existing in an increasingly competitive market place and must make strategic decisions based upon the changing needs and desires of its prospective students. Yet, they also have institutionalized traditions of academia that arguably persist due to the forces of isomorphism. It is due to their precarious place in the higher education hierarchy that I selected these three institutions as cases for study.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory is primarily centered on the behavior of organizations and is the basis of isomorphism (Childers, 2012; Hatch, 2006). Isomorphism is defined as a constraining process that forces one organization to resemble other organizations that

inhabit the same environmental conditions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Hawley, 1968). Selznick (1957) originally argued that organizations are shaped by both internal and external environments, and later development of the theory stated that:

> *Organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedure defined by the prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340).

Meyer and Rowan (1977) also argued that organizations that operate within the same environment tend to become homogenized and demonstrate similarities to one another. They further expanded this theory by claiming that organizational survival is dependent upon an institution's ability to demonstrate similarities in culture, symbols, language, and functions with other organizations that are viewed as legitimate (Childers, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The institutionalization, or the embedding of values and objectives into culture and structure of an organization, of these legitimized norms is established as external audiences accept them (Bess & Dee, 2008; Childers, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) also argued that organizations are open systems that are dependent on the external environment for resources and legitimacy. Pfeffer and Salancik claimed that organizations must internally adapt to these external demands to be successful and survive. Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978)'s original studies were followed by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) famous address of

Weber's (1952) 'iron cage' of institutionalized organizations. In this study, the concept of

institutional isomorphism, also called neo-institutionalism, reiterated that organizations

are restricted by the pressures of their external environments (DiMaggio & Powell,

1983). They argued that these pressures manifest themselves in organizational decisions

that work to maintain 'sameness' with others in the same industry or marketplace. These

isomorphic tendencies are exhibited in three specific ways, according to DiMaggio and

Powell (1983). This includes: (a) a tendency to conform to specific rules or laws of

behavior, termed coercive conformity; (b) a tendency to copy other organizations'

behavior intentionally and in an effort to mitigate uncertainty in the competitive

marketplace, termed mimetic conformity; and (c) a tendency to adhere to universal

standards among all organizations in a particular industry, termed normative conformity.

    These isomorphic tendencies are all widely argued to be prevalent in the highly

institutionalized arena of higher education (Bess & Dee, 2008). Specifically, coercive

conformities will present themselves in processes such as accreditation, mimetic

conformities will present themselves in academic decisions that attempt to attain a more

prestigious position in the highly hierarchical higher education industry, and normative

conformity is more greatly driven by social and cultural expectations that lend legitimacy

to an organization (Dill, 2001; Bess & Dee, 2008).

    While institutional theory argues that colleges and universities will conform to

traditions of academia; for example, the tenure process or a liberal arts general education

curriculum, and obey the homogeneous standards of the industry in an effort to legitimize

their purpose and qualifications as an institution of higher education, there is,

nevertheless, a place for innovation and change in higher education. This place, however,

is argued to be inhabited by institutions that can afford to risk nonconformity. These institutions are found to be on the extreme ends of academic reputation and perceived legitimacy, either those that are at the top tier of the hierarchy or those that have little positive reputation to lose (Bess & Dee, 2008). It is the many institutions that exist between these two extremes, like the three chosen for this study, however, that provide an interesting context for the forces of institutional theory as they relate to organizational identity.

Within the theoretical framework of institutional theory, it can reasonably be argued that, when a university or college that adheres to this isomorphic behavior in observable ways (i.e., faculty tenure and promotion structure, traditional methods of course content delivery, adherence to a liberal arts general education curriculum), any decisions made that might set themselves apart from these industry standards of legitimacy will serve as a threat (Childers, 2012). This threat to one's organizational legitimacy directly translates to a threat to one's organizational identity (MacDonald, 2013).

Strategic Management versus the Forces of Institutional Theory

Although institutional theory lends a greater understanding to why universities and colleges might make decisions that are motivated by concerns for legitimacy, it does not fully explain the impact that these forces might have on institutions that are finding themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace. The case institutions of this study subscribe to the traditional customs, values, and functions of academia, and certainly exhibit isomorphic behaviors in this manner, yet they also exist in a highly saturated and increasingly business-minded market (Childers, 2012; Gordon, 2002; Kennie, 2002).

There has been a reasonable threat to each of these institutions' survival; and, to meet these challenges, organization members have had to make strategic decisions that increasingly mirror a business. For this reason, I have selected strategic management as a companion, and arguably competing, framework to institutional theory as I explore the identity issues at these case institutions.

Broadly, strategic management is built on the process of monitoring and checking the organization's progression toward the successful completion of shared vision, all with the goal of maintaining a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). This competitive advantage is obtained by making decisions and implementing strategies that maximize the unique qualities of the organization, not by maintaining the isomorphic tendencies that institutional theory suggests (Childers, 2012; Hitt & Ireland, 1986; Kennie, 2002; Porter, 1985; Thompson & Strickland, 1987). Strategic management, although a traditionally business-minded concept, did emerge in academia (Kennie, 2002). In general, it has become increasingly crucial for navigating a higher education system that is burdened with limited resources, increased competition, and external demands (Gordon, 2002). In the hierarchical environment of higher education, these burdens are arguably intensified for the non-selective, tuition driven, private liberal arts college or university. These institutions have to navigate the external demands and changes that threaten their survival each year as enrollment patterns continuously shift (Bess & Dee, 2008). Yet, they are also institutions that have history and culture that are rooted in the institutionalized notions of liberal arts education and traditional academia. These institutions, therefore, will arguably have a unique challenge of maintaining a clear and concise organizational identity (Childers, 2012).

Strategic management literature also puts a clear emphasis on the importance of identity as what distinguishes a strategically managed organization from other organizations that operate within the same environment (Pearce & Robinson, 1991). These studies also argue that the institution's messages of identity should reflect the firm's uniqueness, distinctive competence, or position in the marketplace (Davies & Glaister, 1997; Sidhu, 2003; Thompson & Strickland, 1994). Many others have also argued that a clear identity gathers an organization's members around the same purpose or central theme (Ireland & Hill, 1997; Bartkus, 2000; Verma, 2009).

The contrast created between institutional theory and strategic management inform the theoretical framework for this study. The argument that organizations must exhibit isomorphic behaviors to maintain legitimacy and survive, contrasted with the argument that an emphasis on uniqueness is needed to maintain a competitive advantage and survive, is believed to exist at these tuition-driven, private, liberal arts institutions. The relationship between these theoretical forces might arguably lead to issues of identity at a university or college that finds itself straddling both the higher education and business worlds (Carey, 2012; Gordon, 2002). These theoretical assumptions supported this study's quest to uncover how members of these organizations define their identity, what issues of identity might surface during times of strategic decision making, and how any issues of identity were resolved.

Conclusion

The literature on organization identity is expansive. We know a great deal about what organization identity is, what influence it has on organizational behavior and success, and how threats to identity or identity struggles might influence an organization's

effectiveness. We also know that strategic planning processes are a context that is ripe for identity issues to surface. There is less understanding, however, regarding how institutions that find themselves in an increasingly competitive and business-minded environment define their identity or reconcile any issues of identity that might exist. This qualitative case study explores how these types of institutions define their identity, how a strategic planning process uncovers issues of identity, and how identity struggles might be resolved at these colleges and universities.

Chapter Three

Methodology

To discover how members of these three institutions define its organizational identity, how issues of identity were addressed during their most recent strategic planning process, and how they resolved any issues of identity, I conducted a qualitative case study of three private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions. These two colleges and one university have a historic and traditional liberal arts education as a foundation of their mission, yet have faced financial struggles over the course of the last twenty to twenty-five years. These three schools have made varying strategic decisions in an effort to face issues of organizational survival and these decisions have had an impact on the perceived organizational identity of the institution. I used the competing forces of institutional theory and concepts of strategic management to inform my data collection and analysis and a case study design as a research method. This method was utilized to bring a greater understanding of how members of these institutions define their organizational identity and how they worked to resolve any identity issues that might have presented themselves within the context of strategic planning.

My research questions are inductive in nature and lent substantial support for the case study methodology. A case study can provide a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon, particularly one that can be bounded by time, policy, space, or other defining characteristic (Merriam, 2009). For this study the defining characteristic is the organizational unit of the small, private, liberal arts college or university. These cases are also bounded by the six month period in which I collected data, the presence of a recent strategic planning process, and by the varying processes by which each institution

defined and resolved its organizational identity. Finally, the nature of my research questions, and my interests in understanding the organization identity resolution process of these types of institutions, lent themselves to a discovery process that the qualitative case study method provides (Cronbach, 1975; Merriam, 2009). While I did have some assumptions based upon personal experiences, and were also rooted in the literature, I did not have a hypothesis to test. This allowed for an interpretation of the case study data that might uncover a greater understanding of the organizational identity issues and processes of resolution of which I studied.

Case Site Selection & Descriptions

In selecting these cases, I have used purposeful sampling, as is typical of qualitative case studies. Merriam (2009) details a purposeful sample as necessary in order to gain as much information as can be gleamed from a case. An "information-rich" (p. 230) case is needed for in depth analysis and to maximize learning, and purposeful sampling is the most logical method of sampling to ensure this (Patton, 2002).

In this study, I knew that I must study institutions that had a traditional liberal arts curriculum, an established full-time tenure and tenure track faculty, and residential campuses that provide traditional undergraduate education to traditionally-aged students. These key characteristics were necessary for a juxtaposition of the forces of institutional theory with the concepts of strategic management. These institutions have institutionalized values and functions that adhere to standards of legitimacy in higher education, yet also operate within a highly competitive, enrollment driven market. They all compete for the same community of students and presumably grapple with the balance of academic legitimacy while still working to maintain a unique and competitive

advantage. Enrollment drives these institutions' ability to make necessary capital

improvements, attract and fund qualified faculty and administrators, and provide a

generally stable operating budget from year to year. While the historical highlights of the

institutions informed my understanding of each case, the focus was placed on the last

twenty to twenty-five years. This provided a time period that included an increase in

external pressure to maintain relevancy in academia, an increase in competition for

student enrollment, and significant financial woes. This was also all during a time when

technological disruption in higher education was increasing in impact on the small,

private college and university (Carey, 2015; Childers, 2012). Finally, each case had to

have completed a strategic planning process within the last five years in order to qualify

as a potential case. This allowed for a similar context across all institutions and support

for my assumption, based upon supporting literature, that an organization that has

recently participated in a strategic planning process will have questions of organizational

identity, and the possible resolution of issues of identity, fresh on the members' minds.

     For the purposes of this study, Dolence and Norris' (1994) strategic planning

engine model was used to determine whether or not the institution had in fact completed

a strategic planning process. This model links strategic decision making with

organizational key performance indicators, or KPIs. The model is a ten-step method

detailed as follows:

1. Development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).
2. Perform an external environmental assessment.
3. Perform an internal environmental assessment.
4. Perform a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis.
5. Conduct brainstorming.
6. Evaluate the potential impact of each idea on each strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (cross-impact analysis).
7. Formulate strategies, mission, goals, and objectives.

8. Conduct a cross-impact analysis to determine the impact of the proposed strategies, goals, and objectives on the organization's ability to achieve its KPIs.
9. Finalize and implement strategies, goals, and objectives.
10. Monitor and evaluate actual impact of strategies, goals and objectives on organizational KPIs.

This model was selected because it adheres to the complex nature of colleges and universities (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). After I selected the cases that possessed the qualifying institutional characteristics, I then searched their websites for evidence of a recent strategic plan. Once I found this evidence, I then contacted the chief academic officer and requested a meeting to determine whether the institution would be a willing participate, as well as be a good fit for the study. Dolence and Norris' (1994) strategic planning engine model served as a guide to verify that the institution had indeed completed a strategic planning process in the last five years.

Case institution (A) was purposefully selected because it met all the needs listed above for my study, but also because it was known to me as an institution that has successfully expanded its delivery of online curriculum and adult learner programs. Established in the mid-19th century in a small, Midwestern town; it has a residential campus that is small, historic, and picturesque in its traditional academic buildings. The school has a modest endowment of just under 64 million dollars, and has an operating budget that is 90% funded by tuition dollars. There are approximately 1,100 full time and 500 part time undergraduates currently enrolled in what is considered the traditional academic programs. There are an additional 1,200 graduate students enrolled in the six graduate degree programs offered through the School of Graduate Studies and approximately 17,000 enrolled undergraduate students in its adult accelerated and online

degree programs. Case institution (A) has a small campus that is filled with institutionalized notions of a small, liberal arts college, yet also has an extensive and complex organizational structure for delivering higher education to its nearly 20,000 enrolled students. It is this contradiction of a small college with a large and complex online presence that specifically qualified it as an interesting case to study.

Case institution (B), was also purposely selected because it met the criteria of having a small, residential, and historic campus found in the Midwest region. It is also tuition driven and recently underwent a strategic planning process. Based upon prior knowledge given to me by a colleague, I also selected this case institution because it had achieved a reputation of having success entering the online and adult learner market and serves as an exemplar to other institutions that were either also in that market, or looking to possibly enter. Like Case A, this school also relies primarily on tuition dollars, but has focused on endowment growth in the last decade and has grown the fund from just under 20 million in 2005 to over 140 million today. There are over 1,100 full time students enrolled at the residential campus and an additional 2,000 students enrolled in the evening programs on campus. There are also an additional 18,000 students enrolled in nationwide programs at locations around the country. Found in 13 states, these locations are primarily housed at military installations, serving active duty, retired military and their dependents. Finally, there are over 6,000 students enrolled annually in the college's online education program. In addition, the college has a small graduate studies program, enrolling approximately 1600 graduates in five different Master's programs. While they have the teaching assistance of hundreds of adjunct faculty members around the country, there are only 69 tenure and tenure track full time faculty members solely responsible for

creating and supporting the curriculum for these almost 30,000 students. Like Case A, this college has surface characteristics of a typical, small, private liberal arts institution, but clearly possesses a highly complex organizational structure under that surface. I felt this quality would provide an interesting setting for the study of an organization's identity issues and subsequent resolution through the strategic planning process.

Case institution (C), is a small, residential, private faith-based college located in the Midwest. There are currently 1825 full time, degree seeking undergraduates enrolled in its 47 different majors. This college has a four year residential requirement and currently states that 85% of its students live on campus. This religiously affiliated organization leans heavily on the values and standards of its faith to inform its mission, identity, and strategic choices.

I chose this institution as my third and final case because, not only because they completed a strategic planning process within the last five years, but also because unlike Case A and B, this college made the decision to reinvest in its historic mission of a faithful, residential, and liberal arts institution and reject a strategic move into the adult learner market. This decision was made despite experiencing the same financial pressures to do so as Case A and B. I thought it would be interesting to understand how that decision might affect how its members define the organizational identify as well as the affect it might have on identity resolution of the college during its strategic planning process.

During the case selection process, I also became aware that their concerted decision to focus on faith, community, and a residential liberal arts education coincided with consistent and unprecedented enrollment growth over the last 15 years. The college

has built five new residence halls and one new academic building in the last decade in an

effort to keep up with this growth. While there are differences in mission and strategic

decision making, institution C is clearly tuition dependent and maintains a very small

endowment of just over 18 million dollars. When faced with the opportunity to reach out

to adult learners and expand the mode of curriculum delivery to online programs, college

leaders definitively determined that a decision like that would be inconsistent with the

College's mission of providing a faith based education in a residential community. It was

this decision to refocus on the faith-based, residential, liberal arts values, while still

competing for the same prospective students as the other institutions, which made this

institution a relevant and interesting choice for this study.

Participant Selection & Descriptions

The interview participants at each of the three case institutions were found

through the primary point person at each school. This role was filled by the Provost (or

titled Academic Dean at institution C) at each case institution. I contacted each of these

individuals and asked for his or her willingness to participate in my study as a case

institution. After receiving the appropriate approval at each school, and determining that

the institution had completed a strategic planning process in the last five years as defined

by Dolence and Norris' (1994) strategic planning engine model, I then received the

contact information for roughly 20-30 faculty and administrators at each institution.

These individuals were identified as those who had participated in the most recent

strategic planning process at the college or university. Through repeated email and phone

call requests, I was able to secure interviews at each institution to receive sufficient

redundancy of responses. Below is a table of the gender, years of service to the

institution, and general roles of each participant at the case institution:

	Case Institutions A	Case Institution B	Case Institution C
P1	Male, 3 years, administration of adult learner and online programs	Female, 25 years, administration of adult learner and online programs	Male, 6 years, administration of student services
P2	Male, 12 years, administration of student services	Male, 4 years, administration of academic programs	Male, 19 years, full time tenured faculty
P3	Female, 10 years, tenured graduate faculty	Male, 18 years, administration of adult learner and online programs	Male, 6 years, administration of financial services
P4	Female, 6 years, graduate faculty	Female, 7 years, administration of academic programs	Male, 10 years, full time tenured faculty
P5	Female, 15 years, administration of student services	Female, 5 years, administration of student services	Female, 28 years, administration of student services
P6	Male, 4 years, administration of academic programs	Male, 15 years, administration of financial services	Male, 5 years, full time tenured faculty
P7	Male, 7 years, tenured faculty & administration of academic programs	Female, 14 years, tenured full time faculty	Female, 12 years, full time tenured faculty, administration of academic services
P8	Female, 6 years, full time tenured faculty	Male, 18 years, tenured full time faculty	Female, 4 years, administration of student services
P9	Male 5 years, full time tenured faculty	Male, 20 years, tenured full time faculty	N/A
P10	N/A	Male, 12 years, tenured full time faculty member	N/A

Data Collection Process & Interview Protocol

Interviews at each case institution were conducted over a six month period

between spring and summer of 2014. I began each interview by succinctly explaining the

purpose of my study, providing informed consent paperwork, and notifying the

participant that our interview would be digitally recorded and used only for transcription

and accuracy of data analysis. I also reiterated the language in the consent form that

identifying institutional or personal information would be limited in the inclusion of the

study. The digital file of each interview was saved on my personal laptop under a

password protected file. No names or titles of the participants were included in this file,

but instead coded by Institution A, B, C and then Participant 1, 2, 3, and so on. The date,

time, and length of interview was included in each transcript as well as the identifying

code to allow for proper organization on my part as the researcher. This system for

ensuring confidentiality was included in my explanation to the participants prior to the

interview protocol commencement. I also ensured that no other members of his or her

institution would be made aware by me of participation in the interviews. These

conversations and protocols were important for maintaining trust between myself and the

participants.

       The length of each interview ranged in time from 28 minutes to 75 minutes and

was driven by the responsiveness of the participant. The interview protocol was based

upon my three research questions; (1) how does the participant define his or her

organization's identity, (2) were issues of identity considered during the strategic

planning process, if so how were they addressed and what were the themes of the

discussion, and (3) if issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning

process, how did the institution work to resolve these issues? I also asked clarifying

questions about the participant's position at the institution, time of service, and his or her

role in the strategic planning process. I ended each interview with two key questions that

often provided crucial contributions to the data; (1) what do you believe will change with

regard to the university's goals, mission, vision, or purposes in the coming years, and (2)

is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to speak to with regard to your organization's identity, strategic processes, or future goals?

In many cases, participants guided the tone of the discussion and my follow up questions, and while not listed in the original protocol, led to information relevant to the findings of this study. This semi-structured approach to data collection via participant interview is commonly accepted and can provide a deeper knowledge of the case and a richer understanding of the responses to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). As recommended by experts in qualitative case study research, the adequate number of interview participants was determined when redundancy of information was reached (Lincoln, 1995; Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

The interview protocol was as follows:

- What is your current role at the college/university and how long have you been a part of the organization?
- How would you describe the institution to those that might not be aware of your college/university?
- How would you describe the current identity of the organization?
- What was your role in the recent strategic planning process?
- What do you believe motivated the development of the most recent strategic plan?
- What was your personal motivation/reason for participating in strategic planning at your institution?
- What do you believe were the most rewarding aspects of participation in strategic planning?
- What do you believe were the most frustrating or challenging aspects of participation in strategic planning?
- How did the conversations in the strategic planning process speak to the identity of the university?
- What do you believe are the most influential factors in the development of strategy at your college?
- Who do you believe are the most influential individuals in the development of strategy at your college?
- What do you believe will change with regard to the university's goals, mission, vision, or purposes in the coming years and how might the institution's identity affect or be influenced by these changes?
- Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to speak to with regard to your organization's identity, strategic processes, or future goals?

This study's research questions were primarily answered through participant interviews, yet some documents were helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of each case. The documents available for my review included completed strategic plans, published self-studies, mission and vision statements, and the external messaging publically available in brochures, mailings, advertisements, and websites. While I had already read through each institution's' strategic plan, self-study, and public website materials prior to conducting the interviews, I again read these documents following the data collection and interview analysis process. While much of the information in these documents were irrelevant to my research questions, they did provide useful evidence of definitions of identity, tone of language that either supported or contradicted participant perspectives, as well as demographic and statistical information that is necessary for telling the story of each organization. I used these documents to inform the sections on institutional demographics, history, and transitions in the results chapters four, five, and six of this study.

Data Analysis

It is clear that the qualitative research process in "emergent" and the "meaning making" that takes place during data analysis is not often a linear process (Merriam, 2009, p. 169). As Merriam suggests is the process for most qualitative studies, the informal analysis of my data began during the first interview and continued until all interview transcripts were reviewed. The formal process of data analysis was conducted, however, and began with a complete reading of each transcript, grouped by case institution, to determine broad themes relevant to my three research questions. A second reading of each transcript was conducted to allow time to make notes and determine a

coding strategy to categorize quotes by research question for each case. Statements from participants were organized into segments that followed these research questions. While the interview protocol allowed for an organization of data by research question, there was a semi-structured format to the interviews that allowed for key additional information. This additional information was open coded, as Merriam (2009) suggests might occur during this type of data analysis. This additional data, which was not directly in response to an original research question, was categorized by theme and led to additional findings relevant to the study. These additional findings were not necessarily 'secondary' findings, but at times key to the purpose of this study. They were termed additional, however, because they did not directly address the original research questions. Again, the inductive nature of a qualitative case study allows for unexpected findings that might not fit into the structure of the original research question (Merriam, 2009). Finally, I did a cross-case analysis of the themes for each individual case and sorted them into categories by case institution. This allowed me to analyze what themes were prevalent at one case institution versus another and begin to structure the reporting of my findings analysis.

To strengthen the validity of my data, I often clarified responses with further questions, provided a reflection of the participant's response with my interpretation, and then when necessary, followed up with the participant via email for information that I felt had been overlooked or misunderstood in the interview process. Although it was offered, no participant requested to see a copy of his or her interview transcript, or a copy of results before my analysis. One participant has since requested a final copy of the study due to personal interest.

A content analysis that coded for themes, similar to that of the interview transcripts, was not performed in the review of the self-studies, strategic plans, and website material. Instead this information was organized by the following categories; (a) institutional history; (b) student and faculty demographics; (c) mission, vision, and values; (c) definitions of identity; and (d) statistical information regarding enrollment trends and endowment funds. The segments of text from each of these categories were used in the reporting of results, but primarily as a tool to provide a rich description of each case institution.

Limitations

As with all research, there are limitations to this study, particularly those specific to the qualitative methodology. The use of three cases allows for a thorough analysis of the organization, yet it also makes the findings of this analysis difficult to apply to a broader population of universities and colleges. A thorough analysis of data within the theoretical framework can be detailed extensively for three cases, yet that understanding may or may not apply across many other universities and colleges that have similar characteristics, identity issues, or environmental pressures. In addition to the ability to generalize to other cases, the findings will also be heavily dependent on the skills, attitude, experiences, and mindset of me as the researcher.

My biases about the universities (both positive and negative) will also provide an additional challenge and required a conscientious data collection process. My intent to focus on the organizational identity of the institution within the context of the strategic planning process, and not the outcome of the strategic planning processes itself limited these personal biases. I made this clear to those I interviewed, and helped participants

understand my intentions to study the process and issues of identity (judgment-free) and

not concern ourselves with the subjective success or lack of success of the organization as

a result of their decisions or strategic planning.

Finally, consistent with other qualitative studies, the findings of this study are

dependent on the memories of the participants. Some of the steps of the strategic

planning process at these cases occurred as much as five years ago, and the memories of

those that participated in these initial events will likely have weaknesses and

inconsistencies to be considered. While the documents that were recorded from these

events remain unchanged through the years, they are also dependent on the accuracy and

interpretations of those that were responsible for their wording. These issues were

unavoidable, but were acknowledged and alleviated with thorough interviewing (both in

number of participants and quality of time spent on the process) and member checking.

Chapter Four

Findings--Case Institution A

The results of my study of case institution A will be presented by first providing an introduction to the university. This will include the current enrollment statistics, faculty information, and method of curriculum delivery. I will also provide a brief account of major institutional decisions and transitions in the university's history. Next, I provide an explanation of the most recent strategic planning process at the institution. While this is not a study of the strategic planning process, the process is being used as the context for studying organizational identity. Therefore, an understanding of how the strategic plan was developed, as well as who participated, is an important factor in understanding issues of identity issues at the institution. I then present the results of this case study organized by my three research questions. Finally, a section on additional findings for Case institution A will be presented.

Introduction to Case Institution A

Initially, case institution A appears as a typical four year, private university. It was established in the mid-late 19th century as a small, religiously affiliated liberal arts college who offered a private education in a region of the country not yet saturated with private higher education options (Institution A, Self-Study, 2014). It has a beautiful campus with historic buildings and a dedicated and traditionally trained tenured and tenure track full time faculty. There are over 50 active student organizations that supply the 1,100 full time traditionally aged students with a healthy and engaged co-curricular experience (Institution A, Website, 2015). Currently 357 of these full time students come from outside the United States and represent 103 countries around the world (Institution

A, Website, 2015). This large percentage of international students allows for a diverse classroom and co-curricular environment for students, faculty, and staff to enjoy as well as an interesting commitment to globalism that treads through the liberal education curriculum and its learning outcomes (Institution A, Self-Study, 2014).

It is after greater examination, however, that one can see that this university is much more complex than it might seem on the surface. In addition to its 1,100 full time 'day time' students that attend class in the traditional 16 week, in class format, the university also has nearly 17,000 students that enroll in an 8 week term, accelerated, degree seeking program (Institution A, Website, 2015). These accelerated courses are offered at 40 campus centers around the country as well as in the online format. Five terms each year for eight weeks each allow working adults the opportunity to complete an undergraduate degree in less time and with more flexibility of schedule (Institution A, Website, 2015). It is this distance learning component, placed within an institutionalized system of faculty and curriculum delivery, that makes this university such a complex, and fascinating, case for this study on organizational identity.

Institutional History and Transitions

Understanding the history of this school is a critical piece of understanding the university's current organizational characteristics. Institution A was founded in the mid to late 19th century in a small Midwestern town that now serves as a suburb to a larger city. Originally a college, the school started as a tuition-free institution of higher education and all of its first graduating class, made up of three men and four women, were expected to work in the organization's farm and building operations in exchange for a private education (Institution A, Website, 2015). This arrangement was considered an

experiment at first, but after several years of success and growth, the college continued

operation and graduated hundreds of students that might not have had the opportunity to

gain an undergraduate degree (Institution A, Self-Study, 2014). The school's motto

centers on this originally established notion of labor in exchange for an education and

provides a source of notable pride throughout the current university community. What

began as a trial, this method of providing access to private education for those who are

willing to work for it, has extended through the decades and now presents itself at the

institution as a place of open access and affordability for all students, especially those

that might not have doors open to them elsewhere for financial or academic reasons

(Institution A, Participant 7, April 7, 2014).

While the college maintained an isolated, but relatively successful existence for

one hundred years or more, it was in the early 1970s when financial struggles led the

college to begin reaching out to the military and began establishing branch campuses, or

campus centers at military installations around the county (Institution A, Participant 7,

personal communication, April 7, 2015). This military degree completion program was

successful enough to allow the college two more decades of growth and success. Then in

the early 1990s the college once again faced exceedingly low enrollments and financial

troubles. It was during this time that the college came quite close to closing its doors due

to financial instability (Institution A, Participant 7, personal communication, April 7,

2014)

It was then in, in the late 1990's that Institution A became one of the first

institutions of higher education in the country to begin trialing online courses. This

decision was a strategic response to the financial struggles and threat to survival which

the institution was facing at the time. (Institution A, Self-Study, 2014). By the year 2000

it had already established a fairly successful online degree program that flourished at the

military base campus centers. It was because of this growing student population, and an

expansion of the Graduate School, that the College made the strategic decision to change

its name from College to University. This boom in their accelerated and online degree

programs continued for several years as the main campus, historic and small, continued

operating as the small, private, Liberal Arts College that it appeared to be. It was also

during this first decade of the 21st century that the University began expanding its focus

into several different areas beyond adult learning, the military, and its core liberal arts

tradition (Institution A, Participant 7, personal communication, April 7, 2014). It began

allocating resources to an international center for music, greater recruitment of

international students, and a more serious effort to partner with the local businesses and

government leaders in a variety of academic endeavors. The leadership at the time was

ambitious in pursuing new opportunities and endeavors, and even with the multitude of

directions it was taking, and widely diverse type of student characteristic served,

determined that the best strategy for branding the complex university was by using the

term "we are ONE university" (Institution A, Participant 6, personal communication,

March 31, 2014).

Despite efforts to label the university as a unified institution with a clear and

focused mission, by 2005, the university was experiencing enrollment decline, low

endowment, and dissatisfaction among the faculty regarding the presidential leadership

and direction of the university. It was also during this time that the accreditation body

visited the University, observed these struggles, and addressed the concerns of faculty

workload, gaps in student assessment, and inconsistencies between the delivery of face to

face curriculum versus online (Institution A, Participant 6, personal communication,

March 31, 2014). As stated in the University's 2013 self-study:

> *In 2005, when the [accrediting agency] visited [our university], the team*
>
> *report contained many concerns. Broadly defined, the team found three*
>
> *main areas for concern: "lack of coherence and communication among*
>
> *the disparate units of the institution,… an insufficient number of full time*
>
> *faculty,…[and] the overall plan for assessing student academic*
>
> *achievement is not yet sufficient.*

Following this report, and subsequent efforts to address these issues, it became

clear that significant change must occur and in 2009 a new President was appointed by

the Board of Trustees. A refocus on faculty strength and governance followed, and the

university was able to move forward and begin to make progress toward resolving these

concerns of the accreditation board, while also open up a more transparent dialogue with

regard to organizational mission and values (Institution A, Participant 6, personal

communication, March 31, 2014).

The Strategic Planning Process

The most recent strategic planning process formally began in 2012. Although

there was a previous strategic plan developed under the leadership of the former

presidency, it was set to expire in 2012. In addition, that plan had not been fully realized

due to changing financial circumstances; it was superseded by a 2010-2011 Action Plan.

This action plan was developed in response to several difficult transitions at the

university. This included a change in presidency, an unfavorable accreditation review,

and general concerns regarding faculty governance, academic freedom, and financial

viability (Institution A, Participant 6, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

As the action plan ended, and the accreditation issues had been resolved,

organization members began working to determine the next phase in institutional

strategy. The strategic planning process for Institution A followed Dolence and Norris

(1994) strategic planning model in the sense that they developed key performance

indicators, completed external and internal assessments, and a SWOT analysis at each

department level. The first three steps of this process coincided with a revision of the

mission and vision of the institution (Institution A, Participant 5, personal

communication, March 31, 2014). At the time, there were words and phrases included in

the mission that reflected the vision of former leadership and that were believed to be

unfavorable to the image of the institution (Institution A, Participant 6, personal

communication, March 31, 2014). Many members took issue with the inclusion of the

term *entrepreneurial* as a description of the university in the previous mission statement.

It conjured ideas of for-profit post-secondary education that were seen as an undesirable

message for the institution. There was also a desire to shorten the statement and make it

less vague; thus, the committee worked to resolve these issues and completed the process

with the president's oversight (Institution A, Participant 5, personal communication,

March 31, 2014).

Following this mission and vision revision process, and the development of KPIs

and SWOT analyses at the departmental level, a strategic planning commission was

established to continue the planning process. (Institution A, Participant 6, personal

communication, March 31, 2014). This group consisted of thirty faculty, administrators,

and board members and was charged with determining the goals and objectives of the institution for the next five years. The institution was at this time addressing the seventh step in Dolence and Norris' (1994) model, but Institution A termed these strategic priorities. This commission included many of the same individuals who worked on the mission revision process, and thus the commission continued many of the same conversations of purpose, identity, and vision into the strategic planning process (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

After several months of meetings, and what some organizational members identified as slow-moving yet productive discussions, the Board of Trustees and president of the university outsourced the planning process to a consulting firm. It was the opinion of Participant 2, 6, 7, and 8 at this institution that the reason for this decision was because the faculty and administrators on the strategic planning commission were not moving quickly enough on their own and needed an outside agency to formalize and quicken the process (personal communications, March & April, 2014). This firm had never advised an institution of higher education through a strategic planning process, but was charged with focusing the discussions and moving forward on a more condensed timeline (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

After the consultants entered the process, the remaining members of the commission were divided into five committees, each responsible for clarifying and developing one of the five priorities of the strategic plan (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 31, 2014). The work of the consultants at this time was consistent with the Dolence and Norris (1994) strategic planning model and included a cross-impact analysis of the proposed strategic priorities, and a plan for implementation

with the use of metrics (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 31, 2014). Although, the remaining process of developing the plan was reported to move much more quickly with the consultants present, but several members also identified the experience as fraught with discontent and frustration (Institution A, Participants 2, 5, 6, 7, & 8, personal communications, March & April, 2014). Again, the consulting firm had worked with government and public organizations exclusively in the past, and was viewed as "unprepared" to meet the unique challenges of higher education strategic planning, particularly for a university as complex as Institution A (Institution A, Participant 2, March 31, 2014). In particular, faculty members were concerned with the implications of language such as "costumers," "clients," "business units," and "satisfaction" as representations of students, constituents, academic departments, and student learning (Institution A, Participants 2, 5, 6, 7, & 8, personal communications, March & April, 2014).

Despite these concerns, the Board of Trustees required a timeline that forced an expedited process of strategic plan development. The department chairs or directors were each asked to devise a purpose, a list of basic services that the unit provides, and a set of metrics to which it would be held accountable, all serving as the foundation of the plan. One administrator recalled that, when the department or unit did not develop these materials, the consulting firm would intervene and do so for them (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

Finally, the plan was completed with considerable oversight by the consulting firm, and published with marketing materials in the fall of 2012. It is set to expire in 2017 (Institution A, Participant 2, personal communication, March 30, 2014). At the time of

my interviews with the participants, the strategic plan was two years old and there were varying opinions on the current success of the plan. Some participants argued that the plan served as a focus of discussion for the institution, and while no plan is perfect, still provided a clear direction of action. Others argued that the plan was "doomed to fail" because of the process that had led to the development of the strategic plan. While an understanding of the strategic planning process, or its successes and failures, was not the focus of this study, it still provides a background for exploring how the institution members defined their organization identity, what issues of identity arose during the strategic planning process, and how those issues were or were not resolved.

Results

Research Question 1: How do members of the university define its identity?

Through my time getting to know this first case institution, it became clear that the organization sees itself as many things to many people. It serves traditionally-aged students on a residential campus, it spends considerable resources recruiting international students from around the world, it has received national recognition for its service to the military, it has a relatively small, but not insignificant Graduate School, and it markets itself heavily to the degree seeking adult professional through the evening and online course platforms. These purposes all lead to what many termed a difficult task of identifying a succinct and focused organizational identity.

When asked, 'what is the identity of your institution', the participant responses fell into three distinct categories, all organized below in three separate sections.

Our identity is dependent on context

To begin, the first category of response to my request for an explanation of the organization's identity included varied approaches to the response 'it depends'. These included, it depends on the type of students one is working with, or it is determined by the type of university function one is referring to. One administrator defined the university's identity as such:

In categories, I obviously, being involved in [specific school identified here], I think that it is an important part of what [we] do. We have a large student body on the undergraduate campus, then the online [is a] major part of what the University has been about and still is, and a subsection of that is the military bases.

Another administrator reiterated this dissected approach to defining the organization's identity with the following:

It depends on what level you operate at. If you are working at ground level face to face with a student, your identity is that student you are seeing. So, the identity is different based upon what you do.

Or as a faculty member explains:

When you are a faculty member, your perspective is one of a teacher, as a developer of programming and curriculum and helping learning. So you look at the organization as delivering a product. When you are an administrator you really look at it as a business operation and how do you make all the elements come together.

In this first category of response, there were also acknowledgements of the university's wide range of students it serves,

We have the [online delivery of curriculum], which is most of the

institution. We have the small part that is the [main] campus. Then we

have the business school that is claiming 50% of the enrolled students, we

have the military, people coming from the community colleges.

But also the belief that this ambiguity is in fact what defines the organization's

identity,

I think [we serve] everyone. Students all around the world. We are without

borders in who we serve.

Our identity is accessibility.

The second category of responses to the question of organizational identity also

addressed the type of student served at the institution. Yet, unlike the unfocused direction

of the first category, these respondents pointed to the open accessibility of the university

admissions and the fact that the institution served the underserved. This distinction was

made with pride and took on an unapologetic tone, as made evident from these three

separate responses.

When people look at our University, what they know about us is that we

are affordable and we give a good education. You don't incur a lot of

debt, and if you don't have a lot of opportunities, then this one will give

you a chance to succeed.

I think at this time we are an inclusive institution, an institution that gives

second changes. We serve many students that cannot get in elsewhere, and

we embrace them. In my personal experience I have seen people that have

not had any hope of career advancement until they came here. Doors were

closed everywhere else. So it is a school of open access to people to

quality education that they wouldn't get many other places. We are an

inclusive institution, we are not elitist.

Our institution was founded on the promise that private education should

be accessible and affordable, and that was 135 years ago, so as the

decades have passed that has been baked into our DNA and the values of

that. So, are we ok with that? Are we ok with not necessarily being the

first choice of students that have a lot of choices, but being the first choice

of students that don't have a lot of choices? I certainly am. I think that

gets right at the core of our question about identity, and who we are.

<u>Our identity is unclear and difficult to define</u>

Then, the third and final category of response I received from the participants, when asked to articulate the identity of their institution, was really not a definition at all, but rather a reflection on how difficult that question is to answer:

I think that we have a really strong case of multiple personality disorder

or dissociative identity disorder (laughs) in some ways and the reason I

think that is true is that some of the faculty have an idea of what [the

institution] is, other faculty have a different idea of what [the institution]

is. The administration seems to have an idea of what it is, the students

want to be a college like all their friends colleges that they go to and they

want to have their choice of institution reaffirmed by what they say, and

staff as well. But no one of these groups have sufficient power to define the

overall university and create a strong single identity for the university.

Additionally, another administrator also said that he has thought deeply on the identity of the university, but in doing so remarked on the difficulty that the organization has had as a whole in articulating that identity, not by providing his own clear definition:

We are not going to get there [achieving our goals] until we answer that

question of who we are. Understanding who we are and who we serve.

One of the things that has been an issue with consistently [defining our

identity] is who we serve. It is either a super long list or just boils it down

to we serve everyone.

Or as one faculty member concisely responded,

That has always been a problem here. It can't decide on who it wants to

be, who it wants to serve.

Research Question 2: Were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process? If so, what were they? Specifically, what were the conflicts, themes, or focus of discussion?

The most recent strategic planning process that this university undertook was an extensive one, in both time and resources given to it. The process spanned the course of several months and began with a revision of the university's mission and vision statements, continued with a coordinated and collaborative effort across all levels of the university, and then ended with the outsourcing of the process to a consulting firm that, along with the Board of Trustees and President, ultimately determined the strategic priorities and wording of the final plan. The participant interviews found that there were

in fact, issues of identity considered during this lengthy, and what three members termed

a "painful" process. These issues that were presented during the strategic planning

process fell into two main categories and are detailed below.

Yes, there were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process

To begin, several individuals who participated in the strategic planning process

definitively agreed that identity issues were addressed during the process. This was first

detailed by an academic administrator here:

> *We spent a lot of time on issues [of identity]. We spent a long time talking*
>
> *about accessibility, affordability, and adaptability. It was really soul*
>
> *searching.*

This explanation of soul searching continued with a more detailed account of the

mission revision portion of the strategic planning process, as explained by an

administrator here:

> *There was good conversation about priorities, and conversations*
>
> *reflecting who we think we are, what our priorities are. I mean we have a*
>
> *long list of core values, it was all kind of mixed together. It wasn't linear,*
>
> *there were some questions of identity.*

The faculty were in agreement with the above comments of administrators, and

explained that issues of organizational identity were certainly discussed during the early

mission revision portion of the strategic planning process. As one faculty member details

here:

Yes, that was the reason why it took us four months to just redraft a mission and vision, because we were trying to answer those questions [who are we? what do we value?].

Another administrator also addressed the amount of time the planning process took, but with a more frustrated perspective, while still providing evidence that identity issues were in fact discussed during the strategic planning process:

> *When we started working on the priorities that is when the gloves started*
>
> *coming off. When we were discussing 'who are we really?' Are we kidding*
>
> *ourselves when we say we provide this quality education when we don't*
>
> *have some basic things technology-wise and when we have crumbling*
>
> *facilities. Well yes it does, no it doesn't, blah, blah, blah… So all of these*
>
> *conversations went on endlessly, which is why it took us 13 months to*
>
> *deliver a strategic plan.*

<u>*'We are not a business'*</u>

While there was a consensus among the participants that identity issues did come to the surface during the entire strategic planning process, the source of these issues fell into two distinct categories. The first, category was led by the responses of the full time faculty members that felt that the university could not be viewed as a business, and to present it in that way as a foundation for strategy is flawed. One full-time tenured faculty member expressed his concern for how this perspective was presented in the final strategic planning document:

> *I wasn't terribly impressed by it. It didn't seem to mention faculty or*
>
> *learning at all. The students are definitely the focus, but [our] financial*

position, technology, branding, and customer service were the other focus.

It looks like a business plan.

Many of the participants explained that the consulting firm brought in to expedite the construction of the strategic plan were the reason why this firm-like language was the tone of the final plan. As expressed here by one full time faculty member:

The way things were presented to the faculty in making that strategic plan

work was not the best thought out. The people that were leading the

planning were not the best choice in many faculty opinion because they

had only done this for business previously. This [consultant] had never

developed [a strategic plan] for higher education so instead of focusing

on how this was going to be helpful, I think there was some bogging down

in the procedures of it. People questioning definitions, people questioning

the questions by the agency that was brought into do it because they had

no background in higher education.

Two other faculty members reiterated the impact that the use of business minded language had on the process, by discussing a particular word of contention, 'customers' in the process and final plan,

Well, that was a big issue, customer service. They are not customers, they are

students. The faculty were really concerned about using that word, but the view

that we were just finding a way to serve people prevailed.

There were concerns with some of the terms used because they were

inappropriate for higher education. The vocabulary was such as

'customers' and while that may have made sense on an administration

level, it did not sit well with faculty who have a different focus with

students. They do not look at the students as the unit that are going to

make money for the university. Words are all important, so it was just an

unfortunate approach.

The notion that words mattered when identifying themselves as less like a firm,

and more like a reputable institution of higher education, extended in the mission

statement revision process as well. One administrator explained this aspect of the process,

Words matter in academics, so we spent a lot of time talking about what

words meant. We had an earlier word in a previous document [referring to

previous mission statement], *'entrepreneurial', and we pushed back from*

that because that sort of puts us in with the for profits, making money, and

we wanted to make sure we separated ourselves from that identity, and

there was some angst over that, so we removed it.

This desire to separate themselves from other institutions that behave more like a

firm, specifically for profit institutions, was also illustrated by the inclusion of the mid

19th century year of founding of the university in the revised mission statement, strategic

plan, and new marketing materials. One faculty member spoke to this concept of history

and tradition as an important factor of the organization's identity:

One thing that came out of the strategic planning is that we need to put

out there that we are old, that we are not one of these new fly by

[institutions], that we have been around since [the mid-19th century], so

that is why you will now see that on all of our marketing and publications.

'We are a business'

The second perspective that presented itself as a source of identity struggle during the strategic planning process was the need to focus the current strategy on the ways in which the university will achieve financial security. The survival of the university was attributed to its willingness to behave as a business, and strategy, or language used to articulate this strategy, will need to mirror those of a firm. One administrator that works primarily with the adult learner aspect of the organization expressed this sentiment explicitly:

> *What has happened over the last decade, as you know, is that higher*
>
> *education has become, a business, an in your face business, and people, in*
>
> *particular people in the adult learner and military market have moved in*
>
> *with the goal of making money.*

Another academic administrator reiterated this notion of the firm-like operations of the university when asked what issues presented themselves during the strategic planning process:

> *There is still a place for liberal arts, but I think we need to be more*
>
> *strategic in our programs and improve our product in terms of online*
>
> *learning.*

It was once again, an administrator, versus a faculty member, who continued this perspective by identifying the policies that are impeding the success of the university, and removing or revising those policies to be more 'student friendly':

> *We have these things called barnacles that are on the side of the ship.*
>
> *They will not sink the ship, but they will not allow the ship to operate as*

effectively and efficiently as possible. So we identified these barnacles,

everything from our [liberal education] requirements, to how we

recognize credit from other institutions, to how we deal with the military,

what we accept and what we don't accept. We have developed some

barnacles and we are trying to chip those off the ship one by one. Those

kind of practices, tend to be unfriendly, and certainly doesn't help with the

problems that we have getting students, making it tougher for them than it

needs to be.

These two conflicting perspectives in the strategic planning process brought out an 'us versus them', or faculty versus administration, tone for many of the participants who I interviewed. As one student services administrator details:

There really were, and are still, two consistent schools of thought amongst

the group. There was the academic focused half, led by a lot of faculty,

then the realistic half, that thought we should not use words that are

ambiguous and bring their own connotation [of who we are as an

organization].

Or as another adult learning programs administrator articulated it:

They [the full time faculty at the home campus] are really focused on what

they are doing on campus. A lot of them have been here a long time, a lot

of people that are really outdated with current educational practice, let

along practices that really make you money in the adult learner market.

They are good people, and collegial, and part of the team that is focused

on getting along, but they don't understand the business.

This notion that full time faculty might be holding back the success of the institution was further articulated by one academic services administrator:

I think it is incredibly difficult [to strategize] *because we have the online learning* [aspect of the university] *with a perspective of the institution as having competitors in the adult online market and they see competitors who have been able to leverage their own positions and do it better. Whether it is because they have more money, or have a different focus, or market better, whatever it is, they just see that we are losing a competitive advantage. So that is their identity, if we want to continue to be in this market, we need to work quicker, we need to be more adaptable, some of our products need to look better. But if you are sitting here in the full time environment, you don't see that. The good news is people are starting to see that better, so there is a lot more movement in fixing these constraints that are holding us back a little bit.*

Research Question 3: If issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning process, how did the institution resolve these issues of identity?

The third and final research question that I asked in this case study, how did the institution resolve any issues of identity during the strategic planning process, was based upon a major finding theme presented in the literature. That is, that organizations will experience questions of identity during times of strategic planning, and that with open dialogue, a proper process, and a commitment to resolve these questions or inconsistencies, a clear identity should emerge (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Whetten, 2006).

It was the finding, however, at case institution A that no such resolution of identity emerged. The institution was clearly viewed as many different things to many different people. This disjointed definition of its identity, coupled with the conflict between the academic traditions of faculty and the firm-like tendencies of the administration, led to an identity struggle that was in fact not resolved during the strategic planning process, or even two years later during the time of my interviews. Evidence of this unresolved identity struggle was presented through the unclear and inconsistent responses to the first research question of this study, 'how do you define your organization's identity'. It was also became clear to me that many of the respondents agreed that identity issues underlay much of foundation of the organization's behavior as one administrator explains:

> *I would say we have had an identity struggle, but not an identity crisis. We*
> *have tried to figure out who we are and be comfortable with who we are*
> *and who we serve in that broad sense. But there are different kinds of*
> *groups that define us.*

Additional Findings

As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is quite possible for inductive studies such as this one to find unexpected results that might not have been originally anticipated when formulating the research questions. These unexpected results are not 'secondary' findings, but are often times key to a full understanding of the case. While I originally sought to discover how the case resolved its identity issues, it became clear through interview data that in fact no such identity resolution had occurred. This understanding during the actual interview process led me to ask the unplanned, yet critical question, *why*

was it not resolved? The answer to that question was quite unanimous among those I

interviewed. It was believed that it was not resolved because the organization members

were not given the opportunity to work through these issues of identity before the

leadership, namely the Board of Trustees and president, outsourced the strategic planning

process to a consulting group. This roadblock to identity resolution was articulated by

one administrator:

> *We barely got into that [discussions of identity] and then we had a big*
>
> *switch. A lot of the conversations had taken us somewhere and then we*
>
> *came back from one weekend and everything had changed. So it was a lot*
>
> *of wasted effort.*

As the above organization member explained, while the process was becoming

lengthy, and somewhat frustrating to some, it was also viewed as critical to an ultimate

resolution of identity issues. Yet when this resolution seemed on the horizon, it was

abruptly halted by the outsourcing of the process. Another faculty member reiterates this

turn of events:

> *The president at the time was working with the consultants very late in the*
>
> *process. All of a sudden the consultants came in and it took a completely*
>
> *different turn.*

Another administrator provides an additional opinion relating to how the identity

resolution process was undermined:

> *The conversations that drove the [strategic] priorities, was where the*
>
> *process started to degrade. The Board was holding the president to a*
>
> *certain timeline, which was mistake number one. Not allowing that time*

line to shift, giving us an extra 60 days wouldn't have hurt. The process

started to degrade and there were steps that had to be skipped along the

way.

This perspective, that the process was unnecessarily rushed, and therefore harmful

to the organization's process of identity resolution, was reiterated by a faculty member:

There was an unfortunate effect of trying to push through the planning

faster than I think it should have been. That created a sense of urgency

that tarnished the trust factor, I thing that [used to be] there. The meetings

were put tougher very hurriedly.

Further understanding of why the hiring of consultants was disruptive to the

identity resolution process was provided by another administrator:

The process they were using was very contradicting to the notion of

academics, talking about customers, clients, business units, so they were

having to adjust what they were doing to move forward. People didn't

want to proceed calling themselves business units. So, it was rushed for

the faculty and often times they came out of that process with no

[resolution]. So, the [plan] was forced upon them by the consultants and

administrators because they didn't produce it themselves. So that created

angst.

Conclusion

Even other institutions will look at ours and say we are particularly

complex even in the higher education world. We are even more complex

than others, so [moving] past that and developing our [strategy] has its

challenges.

This statement by an academic services administrator was found to be the only

consistent perspective of identity by all the participants of the organization. Institution A

has a complexity to its organizational structure that certainly contributes to a complexity

in defining its organizational identity. The results of this case study found that there was

no real consistency in definition of identity by its organization members. It also found

that while identity was certainly a major issue in the process of the most recent strategic

planning process, there was no resolution of identity struggles. The issues of identity

were found to be attributed to two main categories; (1) that the institution must operate

more like a firm in its effort to remain competitive in its highly saturated market; and (2)

that messages, policy, and strategy that reflect a firm-like mentality are seen as a threat to

the traditional, liberal arts identity of the organization, particularly for the faculty. In

addition, it was a unanticipated result of this case study that the reason the identity issues

were not resolved during the strategic planning process, and still remain, is because of the

decision to halt the 'painful' but potentially productive internal process of dealing with

those issues and move forward instead with a formalized process of strategic planning led

by consultants unfamiliar with the higher education industry.

Chapter Five

Results--Case Institution B

The results of my study of case institution B will also be presented by first providing an introduction to the college. This will include the current enrollment statistics, faculty information, and method of curriculum delivery. I also provide a brief account of major institutional decisions and transitions in the college's history. Next, I detail the most recent strategic planning process. The strategic planning process provided a context for studying the identity issues at this case, therefore an explanation of the development of the plan as well as an understanding of who participated in the formation of the plan will be provided. I then present the results of this case study organized by the three research questions. Finally, a section on additional findings for Case institution B will be presented.

Introduction to Case Institution B

Much like the university detailed in the previous chapter, Institution B resides on a small, but picturesque campus in the Midwest region of the country. It is also a four year, private college that was established in the mid-19th century, and now provides a liberal arts and sciences degree to approximately 1,100 traditionally aged undergraduate students. Its campus, with its historic buildings and traditional artifacts, employs 70 tenured and tenured track faculty, 80% of whom hold a terminal degree in their academic field (Institution B, Website, 2015). The students are provided a customary undergraduate co-curricular experience with over 30 student clubs and organizations to choose from as well as five men's and seven women's organized athletic team sports (Institution B, Website, 2015).

This college, though, much like that of Institution A, has an organizational structure that is much more complicated than it at first appears to be. In addition to its 1,100 full time 'day time' students that attend class in the traditional 16 week, face to face format, the university also has approximately 26,000 students each year that enroll in an accelerated degree program (Institution B, Website, 2015). These accelerated courses are offered at 36 campus centers around the country, in an evening program at the headquarters campus, and in the online format. This traditional four-year institution has provided a system of degree completion that allows working adults the opportunity to gain an undergraduate degree with a variety of modes of curriculum delivery to choose from (Institution B, Website, 2015). As is the case with Institution A, this College provides a fascinating case with which to study struggles with organizational identity. It has a large function of the organization that runs much like a business, but is governed by full time, traditionally trained faculty, and operated within a highly institutionalized environment of small, private higher education.

Institutional History and Transitions

Understanding the complexity of this organization takes a thorough approach that begins with an explanation of the history of the College. Institution B has a history rich with momentous organizational transitions and decisions that have led them to be the unique college it is today. Founded in the mid-nineteenth century, the College was originally established as a Christian affiliated, small women's college in an area that did not have other options for women to gain a college degree (Institution B, Participant 1, personal communication, May 15, 2014). By 1856 the all-women's college had 150 students, 85 of whom were residential. The Civil War began a decade after the College's

establishment and despite the turmoil of the time, faculty continued to teach and there was never a missed day of classes (Institution B, Website, 2015).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Institution B had graduated hundreds of students and expanded its campus with construction of several academic buildings (Institution B, Participant 1, personal communication, May 15, 2014). The College's most current self-study, written in 2012, remarked that the College had historically been a "risk-taking institution," which educated underserved populations. This risk taking seemed to continue in the early 1900s when the College shifted from a four year college to a two year junior college. This mission persisted until 1970 when the College "profoundly" changed its mission, and thus its name, to become a co-educational private college that once again granted baccalaureate degrees (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012).

It was just a few years later when the College, as its self-study claims, became "a pioneer in teaching adult learners at extended sites." These extended sites were noticed by the military, and at its request, Institution B became one of the first colleges in the country to establish campus centers at military bases to educated military personnel and their dependents (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012).

Then, in the year 2000, the college launched its first online classes. What began with ten online classes for 180 enrolled students is now nearly 900 classes, enrolling approximately 13,000 students at any one time. Since the establishment of its online degree programs, the College growth has been considerable and now includes nearly 30,000 total student enrollment (Institution B, Website, 2015).

The Strategic Planning Process

While the strategic planning process for Institution A was non-linear, and seemingly fraught with conflict and discontent, Institution B's strategic planning process was formulaic and quite non-eventful in its progression. Since 2005 the college has used its accrediting agency's criteria and core components as a framework for its own institutional strategic planning (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012). In 2009-2010, the college began formulating the most recent plan, basically a renewed version of the same one they had first developed in 2005 (Institution B, Participant 1, personal communication, May 15, 2014). A self-study steering committee was appointed by the president in early 2010 and included five pairs of committee co-chairs, each pair assigned to one of the five accreditation criterion. One co-chair was a full time faculty member and the other co-chair a member of the administrative council. In addition to the co-chairs, each of the five committees include one Board member, another full-time faculty member, two staff members, one alumnus or alumna, and one student. The academic dean steers all five committees and thus serves as the self-study coordinator (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012).

The work of preparing the self-study for accreditation then became the work of the strategic planning process as defined by Dolence and Norris's (1994) strategic planning model. Organizing resources, drafting reports, and "deepening their narratives" regarding the criterion, was the work of the committee for the next eighteen months (Institution B, Participant 1, personal communication, May 15, 2014. Then the final self-study was presented as the newly revised strategic plan in 2012 (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012).

The institution's current self-study (2012) explains the connection between the self-study and strategic planning process:

Institutional and departmental planning have occurred simultaneously

with preparation for reaccreditation; in fact, they are one and the same

activity.

The self-study goes on to argue the benefits to formulating their strategic planning process in this way and include such examples as, the decisiveness of the criteria, the familiar higher education language, the clear prompts for evaluation, and strong guidance for departmental planning activities. It reiterates that while other institutions have used self-studies to "coordinate" and "inform" their strategic plans, Institution B's "strategic plan is its self-study, and [its] self-study is its strategic plan (Institution B, Self-Study, 2012).

This statement was supported by the responses I received from participants as they described the strategic planning process. They all detailed a highly organized system of stating strategic goals, all based on the criteria of the accreditation agency, then having each department report progress toward meeting those goals on a quarterly basis. The institution did develop key performance indicators (KPIs) as Dolence and Norris'(1994) strategic planning model requires, but those KPIs were aligned based upon the goals of the accreditation agency (Institution B, Participant 2, personal communication, May 15, 2014). There was also a SWOT analysis at each department level and the development of goals, as the model also details, yet those goals were pre-determined by the accrediting agencies criteria, not as a result of the members' brainstorming (Institution B, Participant 1, personal communication, May 15, 2014). When the college faced reaccreditation in

2012, they revised the strategic plan accordingly. The members of the institution who sit

on the accreditation committee are also responsible for the strategic planning process,

because again they are one in the same. All of the participants I spoke to at Institution B

were members of this twenty person committee of full time faculty and administrators.

Several members of the committee stated a contentment with this process. They

unanimously claimed that the process was seamless, efficient, and void of conflict or

contentious discussion.

Again, while the purpose of this study was not to explore the strategic planning

process itself, it was used as a context to study organizational identity and therefore

providing an explanation of the process supports my efforts to better understand how the

college member's defined their organizational identity, if issues of identity surfaced

during the process, and how issues of identity were eventually resolved.

Results

Research Question 1: How do members of the college define its identity?

Much like Case A, this case institution has a complexity of structure that affects

the organizational identity. It serves traditionally-aged students on a residential campus

governed by a traditionally trained full time faculty, yet provides undergraduate and

graduate education to almost 29,000 more students around the world through an

accelerated adult learning model of curriculum delivery. When asked, 'what is the

identity of your institution', the participant responses I received fell into four categories,

detailed in subsections below.

We are primarily a non-traditional college

The first category of response to the question of identity, was that it is a non-traditional college first and foremost, with a small residential aspect serving as a secondary identity. One administrator defined the university's identity as primarily a non-traditional school:

> *The reality is that [the College] is a school of non-traditional learners.*
>
> *Over 92% of our revenue comes from non-traditional students. Of our*
>
> *30,000 students, over 29,000 are non-traditional students. So, we are a*
>
> *non-traditional school.*

Another administrator, specifically responsible for the administration of adult learner programs agreed;

> *I would describe [the College] as a non-profit, adult focused institution*
>
> *that engages in adult higher education and has grown out of a historically*
>
> *small private liberal arts institution that still persists but has become a*
>
> *smaller part of the general organization.*

We are primarily a small, residential college

The second category of identity was an opposite view of this first perspective. This identity was defined as a full-time traditional liberal arts school first, with an adult learner aspect serving as a secondary identity. An administrator in the adult learner function of the college, argued that the institution's identity was defined by the small, residential liberal arts campus and the students and faculty that inhabit it.

> *I tend to believe, certainly 30,000 adult learner students versus 1,000 day*
>
> *students would make you believe that it is an adult learner driven*

institution, which is not the case. It is very much a [traditional, full time]

student driven school. If someone were listing the student populations in

order of importance it would be, full-time traditionally aged, adult

learners, military, and online, in that order.

<u>We are both</u>

While the participant in the category above was alone in this view, a third category of response to the identity of the college included the most consensus. This was that the College has a 'split' identity. It is equally a traditional, full time residential, and non-traditional school. This view was held by three faculty members and two administrators and expressed in the responses below, beginning with a faculty member's view:

Well, I think there are a couple of identities. One is the traditional daytime

college which is a very small sort of atmosphere kind of place. It has a

very traditional, liberal arts perspective. The adult education side of

things, is very student oriented, but adult students have different needs.

Then an administrator expressed this similar view of the organization's identity:

I think we are both, we try to balance between the traditional and non-

traditional world. I think [the College] serves a wide range of populations

because we serve nontraditional students, but we also serve traditional

students.

Continuing, a faculty member argued for this 'split' identity, but then expanded upon this view with the suggestion that the identity is somewhat difficult to articulate succinctly, due to the wide variety of students it serves:

> *Well I think most people would agree that we really have a split identity.*
>
> *We don't have sort of one good vision that describes what we do. We do*
>
> *have a traditional, fairly residential program that serves kids coming right*
>
> *out of high school, with our residential life activities, and sports. Then we*
>
> *have our adult program that has online, and then the programs that we*
>
> *have all over the US at different military campuses. So, I don't feel like we*
>
> *have sort of ONE picture. It is split into these two parts.*

Finally, an administrator close to the work of serving the adult learner population, vividly explains how this dual identity comes to pass on campus:

> *How we look today, we look like a traditional liberal arts and sciences*
>
> *college. Red brick buildings, ivy creeping up the sides, manicured lawns,*
>
> *students from 17-23 years old wandering around, athletic fields and*
>
> *gymnasiums, an active student dining hall, dormitories. All the things you*
>
> *would expect to see if you were coming to a small, private, liberal arts*
>
> *college. However, we say our school gets bigger as the sun goes down. We*
>
> *also have all of our online, military, and evening adult learners that*
>
> *compromise another 29,000 students.*

<u>We do not know who we are</u>

Then, the fourth and final category of response I received to my question, 'what is the identity of the college', was defined by the perception that the identity was unclear, or that that the two perspectives of the institution were in such conflict with one another that no true identity existed. Two faculty members and one student services administrator

expressed these beliefs as detailed below. Beginning with a faculty member's thoughts on the issue:

> *Well, I think it is a national College, because we are in 32 states, plus our online presence. Now I think others probably think it to be more, well for example, [here at the main campus] most people don't realize that we have a national presence. They think it is a local private liberal arts institution People at sites around the country probably think it is a school for [military personnel]. So we have probably a conflicting identity, from what the faculty here at the home campus think we are and what others think we are.*

Additionally, another faculty member candidly expresses the organization's current struggle with defining its identity:

> *That is what we are struggling with. We are trying to be a small school with 1,000 traditional students with backpacks and basketball teams and all that, but at the same time we are a school serving 29,000 nontraditional students and we are trying to do that in the same way. We really don't have an identity and I think that is what we have to decide what we are before we can move forward. So, I am not sure that we really have a clear identity quite honestly.*

This view of an unclear identity was not solely held by faculty members, but also clearly and succinctly expressed by an administrator:

> *I think part of the problem that [the College] has right now is that we are trying to figure out what our identity is.*

Research Question 2: Were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process? If so, what were they? Specifically, what were the conflicts, themes, or focus of discussion?

Unlike the case detailed for Institution A, this college did not appear to experience much angst or indecision in the formulating of their current strategic plan, nor did the process uncover any identity issues or crisis. At the time of our interviews in the spring and summer of 2014, the college was currently two years into its most recent strategic plan, similarly to Institution A. Yet, the circumstances behind the planning process and the member's views of the plan itself were quite different than the experience I observed at the first case institution.

While the plan was technically two years old, it was only an updated version of a strategic planning format that the college had been using since 2005. At that time the institution decided that the most efficient and effective way to structure a formal strategic plan was to do so using the accrediting agency's criteria directly. The criteria and core components of the accreditor agency have been used explicitly as the key performance indicators for the college's strategic planning. I determined through my interviews, that the institution had experienced the model's steps and therefore completed a strategic planning process (Dolence & Norris, 1994). This determination was supported by Dolence and Norris' (1994) argument that the model, although appearing linear, is in fact a non-linear process in practice. Many colleges and universities already have "identified and defined a set of KPIs, that are crucial to the overall efficiency, operation, and effectiveness of the institution" (p. 103) prior to the start of the strategic planning process

(Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). For Institution B, these KPIs were in fact

predetermined by the accrediting criteria.

As the self-study explains:

Institutional and departmental planning have occurred simultaneously

with preparation for reaccreditation; in fact they are one in the same

activity. Other institutions have connected strategic planning with the self-

study; however, 'coordinate', 'interact', and 'inform' have been the action

verbs to describe these connections. Simply put, [our college's] strategic

plan is its self-study, and [our college's] self-study is its strategic plan.

This strategic planning process was a topic that each of the participants had a

universal response to when asked. The process was uniform and did not seem to create

any considerable conflict or disagreements among the administrators or faculty. As one

administrator described it:

We match up our strategic planning process with our reaccreditation

process. It was a seamless process. All of our goals were pulled directly

from our accrediting body and then we developed key goals that we

thought maybe we weren't meeting during that period. So we would focus

on working toward those key goals and then those goals would be updated

yearly.

When I asked this same participant what was the most challenging aspect of the

experience of formal strategic planning, the response given was much different in tone

than those I received at Institution A when the same question was asked:

Well I don't know if there was anything extremely challenging. It was

pretty straight-forward for the most part. Maybe getting all departments to

submit what they are supposed to be submitting on time and answering

what they were supposed to be answering. I don't recall any discussion or

conflict on the actual plan, because it was all based on the accreditation

body so it is really hard to argue with that.

This unremarkable strategic planning process was reiterated by a faculty member

as well:

I can't remember any particular example where there were any strong

feelings about anything, if that makes sense. I don't think any

conversations that stuck in my head were particularly emotional or with

people having strong feelings.

The literature states, that organizations will experience questions of identity

during strategic planning, yet that clearly did not occur at Institution B (Whetten, 2006).

While the strategic planning process did follow Dolence and Norris' (1994) model, the

key performance indicators were determined by the accrediting agency's criteria. This

arguably did not allow for a true and open discussion by the organization members that

should support organizational identity discourse. It was quite apparent that there were in

fact identity struggles present at the organization. There was little consistency in response

to the question of identity, and some, like the administrator stated below, explicitly

argued that there were identity struggles at the college:

I think we are still challenged internally with our identity.

With this understanding in mind, that I present findings that speak to the issues of identity at Institution B. These findings are organized into two sections. First, are the two perspectives of identity struggles that were presented by the administrators and the faculty; and second, is the finding that while there was no resolution of these identity issues during the strategic planning process, there was evidence of a resolution process taking place at the time of my interviews. An understanding of why and how this process had begun will be explained.

Issues of identity at Institution B

The administrative perspective

As the study interviews unfolded, it became clear that there were two distinct perspectives among the organization members and these conflicting perspectives that contributed to the institution's identity struggles. The first theme, or perspective, was the notion that because of the college's commitment to the competitive adult learner market, that it must operate like a business. Also, this perspective included the opinion that the full time faculty, with their traditional and institutionalized notions of liberal arts academia, were serving as obstacles to success. This concept of success, specifically was defined by positive patterns of enrollment, superior customer service, and fluid delivery of curriculum.

It was the opinion of several administrators that the organization was in a tight business-like market, and had to operate in such a way that reflected this. The first perspective of this was presented by a chief administrator at the college:

> *It is a business, regardless of faculty may think, it is a business. You still*
> *have to collect the money, you have all these laws, and regulations and*

people to satisfy, parents, alumni, students, and all these constituents to

satisfy.

An additional explanation of this firm-like view was expressed by another administrator that worked closely with the adult learner population:

Competition is tough. I think we are going to have to out service or

competition. Any [student] that we touch, we can't let them get away. We

have to do everything the best that we can do it, so we can land every fish.

The notion that the institution is operating as a business in an increasingly competitive market was again reiterated by an administrator:

It is a tough business. Like in 2000, when we got into the online business,

there were still lots of institutions holding online education at arms'

length. Oh, no we aren't doing online. If you are not sitting at the feet of

some professor that is not really education…well you know times have

changed and there has been a lot of crow eating since then. Nationally,

there are a lot more hogs at the trough now and that is making it harder

because we aren't getting as big of a share of the online market.

This perspective, such that the organization must operate in a way that keeps it attractive to adult learners, and survive in an increasingly competitive market, was expanded upon by even more administrators who I spoke with. They continued a common argument as well, that the full time faculty were in fact an impediment to efforts to maintain a competitive advantage in the adult learner market:

I think that our primary challenge through the years is that our

governance is still based on the small private model, that there is a small

core of full time faculty members, who have primary responsibility for

institutional governance and leadership and at the same time these faculty

don't necessarily understand or appreciate what is going on in the adult

realm. They tend to think about things through the lens of a small private

college. There is no question that the decision making at the faculty

governance level tends to lag behind where the actual institution is

operating.

Another administrator expresses this view of the faculty's ill-conceived notion of the college's identity here:

That is the elephant in the room. They [the full time faculty] think that the

world revolves around traditional academia, but that is not the reality of

running our business. We are a non-traditional school, but the faculty

think that we are a traditional school, but we are not.

Another administrator provides a more detailed understanding of how this view of the faculty can negatively affect the institution's ability to recruit and retain adult learners:

You might have a curriculum that is maybe fine for an 18 year old,

traditional student, but that course requirement might not be appropriate

for a working mother, or someone in the military, or someone that has

been out in the workforce for years and years. So, there might be a

[student], you have that goes "Ok, I'm not going to [Institution B] if they

are going to require that, I am going to go to this other school other here,

where they don't have that kind of requirement. That is the obstacle that

the faculty has presented.

This comment by another administrator provides more evidence of this view that faculty present obstacles to the recruitment and retention of adult learners:

If we aren't offering what they [adult students] need in a time frame that

they need it, then that is going to hurt our organization. If you can't offer

it because you are getting opposition from the faculty saying well we don't

want to do that. You want adult friendly programs, and ultimately that has

hurt us in some ways.

Again, another concern is presented here that the faculty mindset is impeding the progress and success of the institution:

A lot of this school has evolved, as we are now this big non-traditional

school, centralized and organized. Yet, in my opinion the faculty side has

not evolved. That is one aspect of the school that has not moved along.

The frustration with the traditional faculty mindset, and the obstacles that it caused, was at times presented as outright contempt, rather than just mild frustration. Not surprisingly, these respondents were all from administrators, including the one below:

To be candid, the full time faculty could often times not care less about

enrollment. They don't know the business of the college. Some of them

have a sense that the adult learner programs subsidize what goes on in

[their world], but most of them try not to think about that. I am painting a

broad brush, some of them get it, but a number would not dirty their hands

with that kind of work [recruiting students]. They have tenure and they

waltz in three times a week for 50 minutes or so, do whatever it is they do,

and then march out. Getting faculty to participate in anything innovative

is not our strong suit.

Resentment for the faculty's role at the institution, especially in relation to the academic advisement of students, is exhibited here:

I advocate for professional advising of students [to provide better

customer service], but that is faculty business and they shouldn't be let off

the hook for that. I hate to let them off the hook for more than they are

already let off the hook for, but I hate to see students poorly advised. They

just don't get very good advisement from the full time faculty.

Again, these administrators expressed the view that the institution is a business, and one that operates in a highly competitive market. Many argued that their ability to compete in this market is impeded not just by faculty views, but also the faculty's unwillingness to put the effort into curriculum innovation:

We need to innovate our curriculum to stay competitive. I think post 911

we were in a position where we should have been able to do Homeland

Security degrees and things like that, but our full time faculty, that just

looked like work to them, so they panned on that. So we did nothing and

that bubble passed. Same thing with Health Care Management. The

faculty didn't have any expertise and there was no energy to hire new

faculty or take on any of those chores to get any of that done.

Another administrator expresses this same frustrated view of the faculty's lack of

participation in the work required to ensure a successful operation the adult learner

segment of the college:

They want a lot of control but they refuse to come in during the summer to

review anything. Wow, the air must be getting really thin up there

[laughs]. It is one of those things that we struggle with.

Additionally, frustration with this perceived unwillingness by the faculty to

participate in the success of the competitive adult learner market was evident here:

I think that they [the full time faculty] believe that the way they teach it

[the curriculum], in sort of an ivory tower kind of thing, face to face, 16

weeks, 3 times a week, is the only way. There are some that believe it is

the one and only way to do it. While you will still hear some of them say

negative things about teaching online, while still accepting the paycheck.

So, it is a frustrating situation. They are a hard nut to crack, they aren't

having a love affair with the adult students necessarily.

Finally, the contempt for full time faculty by administrators is further expressed in

the context of adjunct faculty qualifications:

I always find it interesting, the traditional faculty go get a degree, they

come in and they teach. Our folks [adjunct faculty teaching in the adult

learner programs] have to have a Master's degree and then come in as

practitioners, the vast majority work in the field. So it has always been

interesting that our faculty that have never done anything but go to school

are somehow given credence for knowing the most, or being the expert in

a field, and it's like 'why do they get the automatic anointment of being

the experts in the field when our faculty [adjunct faculty teaching in the

adult learner programs] have the same credentials plus all this pragmatic

experience?

Issues of identity at Institution B

The faculty perspective

As a matter of fact right now, a lot of people will say we are at a sort of

crossroads right now trying to figure out who and what we are and what

we want to be. Faculty here view [our College] as what we should be, as a

traditional liberal arts college.

This faculty member's comment above illustrates the agreement that there are

identity struggles at the institution, yet the perspective of how those identity struggles are

viewed is quite different from the administrator perspective I observed.

While the administrators often spoke to the business of the organization, the

faculty viewed those business-like characteristics with indifference at best, and open

disdain at worst. The function of the College, and the strategic decision making that

optimized these functions were viewed quite differently. Administrators and staff talked

of business, competitive markets, customers, marketing, and bottom lines. The faculty

spoke of legitimacy in curriculum, and the harm that these firm-like characteristics had

on the academic reputation of the College. Here two separate faculty members used

language that sheds light on this perspective:

There are always pushes from various directions to be more vocational

oriented, but I think we [the faculty] resist that pretty well and the

traditional liberal arts perspective is ingrained enough in the institution so

we are able to resist that. The adult students have very different agendas

from kids coming right out of high school and there is a necessity to cater

to that, it makes me cringe to say it, but to complete in that market.

We are a very traditional faculty from very traditional fields that want to

be involved in traditional higher education. We all think that it hurts our

students when they go out into the world, after a traditional, rigorous

education, and then they go out in a world where [Institution B] is an

adult, online, kind of place and not viewed as all that different from the

for-profit type places.

Two other faculty member spoke of the tension faculty felt toward the adult

learner programs, especially when told that they would not survive without the funding

provided by these adult student enrollments:

It is kind of a tense relationship. The full time faculty hate to be told, well

you know you are really being funded by the adult program.

It is like if you have a company that builds cars and the sales people sell

all the cars and they say 'look, we are bringing in all the money. Well ok,

but you are the last step in bringing in all the money. You wouldn't even

have the cars to sell if it weren't for the people designing the cars, and

building the cars, and running the whole organization.

Another faculty member spoke to the discomfort she had with the credentials of the organization members that were administering the adult learning programs:

One of the main problems that I think that the full time faculty have with

the adult programs, is that most of the administrators are not what we

would think of as academics. They are mostly coming from ex-military,

many of them have come with an MBA from who knows where, not a very

strong credentialed school, and that causes a lot of the tension.

She continued with concern for the qualifications of the administrators to make critical academic decision:

You start to feel like we are talking different languages because most of

the full time faculty went to a traditional college in seat and we were in a

traditional graduate program, probably full time, or we were graduate

assistants, and we were on campus and went through that process. The

feeling is that so many academic decision are being made by people that

have no idea what it is about, you know?

Other faculty became even more candid in their feelings toward the credentials of the adjunct faculty teaching in the adult learning programs, as expressed here:

It makes sense that if you have a program that is being taught by super

highly qualified full time faculty versus one that is being taught entirely by

adjuncts then the quality is probably not going to be the same, no matter

how much certain people would like to believe that it is.

To reiterate, this view was shared by another faculty member:

Most of our income comes from adult learning, but without the full time

programs to create a foundation for what they do, they are just a bunch of

adjuncts with no direction, with no basis for anything that they do.

The faculty perception that the adjunct faculty, as well as the adult education and online programs administrators, are unqualified to make decision that affect the curricular integrity of the institution was common. Yet, these same faculty expressed disdain for the volume of responsibilities they held to deliver the curriculum to the adult learner population. The work load was not what they felt they had 'signed up for' as a professor at a small, liberal arts college. This was illustrated clearly by one faculty member that had been at the institution before the online delivery of curriculum was established:

The full time faculty have to do things that we don't want to do, but have

to, to support the adult programs. All of the online programs are

completely controlled by the faculty here and there is a lot of

administrative work that we do to make sure that everything is working.

So most of us are people that came here, because we were people that

wanted to teach at a small college and inspire them, and help them

achieve their goals, and we feel like a lot of our time to do that is taken

over by running this massive business of the online courses.

Research Question 3: If issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning process, how did the institution resolve these issues of identity?

This lack of conflict, or organizational struggles of any kind, created by the formal strategic planning process was quite different from what I observed at Institution A where the process was more convoluted, less linear or systematic. Where they had

discontent and strife throughout the experience, the members I spoke to at this college

were so unconcerned about the formulaic process of the formal strategic planning that it

became unnecessary for me to ask these questions during my subsequent interviews.

After four interviews, with responses similar to the one above, I quickly learned that the

process was never a place that identity struggles or a crisis surfaced. This lack of conflict,

or even true discussion, of organizational identity during the strategic planning process

led to the finding that there was also, in fact, no resolution of identity issues during the

process as well.

<div align="center">**Additional Findings**</div>

Similar to Institution A, there were several finding themes for this case that were

unexpected, and came as a result of the inductive nature of the study. These findings are

being termed 'additional findings' in the section below, not because they are secondary or

less important to the understanding of the case, but because they were unexpected based

upon the assumptions made from the literature, and outside the boundaries of the original

research questions.

Identity struggles addressed by leadership

While it was clear that no identity resolution process had taken place during the

most recent strategic planning process, or at any time since the completion of that plan in

2012, discussion of identity was just beginning to surface at the institution right in the

midst of my time interviewing the participants in the summer of 2014. My interviews

with faculty and administrators at Institution B extended over a two month period in the

summer and early fall of 2014. During this time a new president took over the college

and was starting a fresh organization-wide conversation with regard to institution

identity. While my interviews ended at the same time that their task force on identity resolution was beginning, it is an additional finding of this study that the new leadership was influencing the College's road to identity resolution.

Evidence of this was presented to me through both faculty and administrator interviews. Beginning with a faculty view:

The new president that has just come in, and he talked to a lot of people to

get the lay of the land, as he should, and quickly realized that there is a

big elephant in the room, which is the relationship between the [main

campus] and the other venues. So he was the first person to even

enunciate that this was even a problem; because it was one of those things

that everyone knew, but it was so politically incorrect to even say it [that

there was an identity issue].

Additional support of the finding that the new president's entrance into the college opened up an identity discussion was presented by another faculty member:

We had a big faculty meeting right before the start of the new fall

semester, and the new President spoke and one of the things he spoke

about was this identity crisis between the traditional program and the

adult programs.

This newly open discussion of identity issues at the college was viewed positively by several members of the faculty in particular:

A new person can come in and say that we are having an identity crisis,

and it is ok, and he [the new president] did, and at least everyone on the

faculty was thrilled that this was something that could actually be talked

about and dealt with.

Another faculty member expressed a sense of relief with the approach of the new president with regards to addressing issues of identity:

So the new President, in my personal opinion, brought in some new energy

to that conversation because he didn't seem particularly entrenched in

either position. I think he brought the issue to the table and said we need

to just fix this and move on with our lives. We can't have every academic

decision falling back on these problems. We need to move on for the

health of the institution. I feel very optimistic that something will get done.

He seems more willing to address the issues rather than pretend that they

don't exist.

Not all feelings were purely positive, but even with a slight sense of unsettlement, there seemed to be a fairly optimistic view of the new leadership:

I think our new president is very bright, and has good ideas. He has some

ideas for restructuring that is scary for some of us, but I think he has good

ideas and good energy so I think it is exciting times.

Finally, the effect of this new president's approach was put into historical context by one tenured faculty member:

It is a schism that has existed for a while and now we have a leader that is

going to try and tackle it. I have never seen it quite like it is now, where

we have everyone like, 'hey we probably need to have some discussion on

who we are and what we want to be and how we want to be structured'

My interviews ended right before the first meeting was to take place of the new task force appointed by the president. He had charged this group with answering the very question I was asking in my interviews, "who is [Institution B]? He was asking them to not only answer that question, but to also devise a plan for resolving the organizational identity crisis that the college members were just beginning to openly face as a community. It is my finding that this influence of leadership was the reason why the beginning phases of organizational identity resolution were commencing, not because of the strategic planning process as I had anticipated with this case study.

Conclusion

The results of this case study found that there were a variety of definitions of identity by its organization members. It also found that while identity was not an issue that presented itself during the most recent strategic planning process, it was still a major issue underlying the organization's decision making processes. The issues of identity were found to be attributed to two main perspectives; (1) that of the administration, which is that the institution must operate more like a firm in its effort to remain competitive in its highly saturated market and full time, traditional faculty are an impediment to this effort; and (2) that of the faculty, which is that the adult learner aspect of the organization is not a desirable part of their work or institutional identity and serve as a threat to the liberal arts identity of the organization. In addition, it was an unanticipated result of this case study that the reason the identity issues were just beginning to be addressed was because of the role of the new president in openly addressing these issues for the first time.

Chapter Six

Findings-Case Institution C

The results of my study of case institution C also is presented by first providing an introduction to the college. I provide a brief account of major institutional decisions and transitions in the college's history, and then a description of the strategic planning process. Again, this is not a study of the process itself, but understanding the process as a context for exploring identity issues at this case is necessary. Next, I present the results of this case study organized by my three research questions. Finally, a section on additional findings for Case institution C will be presented.

Introduction to Case Institution C

This small, private college is also located in the same geographic region of the country and shares several characteristics with the first two case institutions. It is tuition dependent, serving a residential and traditionally-aged student population, with roughly similar academic preparedness. Yet, the similarities mostly end there. Unlike the other two, Institution C made the conscious decision at the turn of the 21st century to not enter the adult learner market and instead carve out a faith-based niche. This strategy was devised to separate themselves from other similar, and struggling, small private colleges in the Midwest (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014).

As mentioned, this case college is small, private, and located in a rural small town in the mid-west. It has a strong faith affiliation and currently enrolls approximately 1,800 traditional full-time students, 85% of whom live in one of the ten residence halls on the attractive and historic campus (Institution C, Website, 2015). The college has shown an ability to reach outside of the area to attract students, boasting 75% student enrollment

from out of state residents (Institution C, Website, 2015). While there are four graduate

programs, it is primarily a baccalaureate granting college with 49 undergraduate

academic programs (Institution C, Website, 2015). Despite its strong liberal arts tradition,

the most prevalent programs at the institution include more professional programs such as

education, business, and the recently added, but quite popular nursing and engineering

degree programs (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014).

Institutional History and Transitions

Founded in the mid-19th century, this college began with six male students who

were to be prepared for a life of religious work. After several decades of this specialized

instruction, the college began expanding the curriculum in 1915, and by 1927 became an

accredited liberal arts college (Institution C, Website, 2015). Concurrently, in the mid-

19th century, women of the same faith began an academy for women in the same small

town. That academy eventually evolved into a junior college by 1924 and then quickly

became a senior college and began graduating bachelor degrees in 1932 (Institution C,

Website, 2015). There was continued cooperation with the sharing of faculty and facility

resources between the two institutions over the majority of the twentieth century, yet they

remained separate institutions until 1971. At this time financial strain required that the

two become one co-educational institution (Institution C, Participant 5, personal

communication, March 26, 2014).

While officially one organization, they still remained on separate campuses for

another decade, while students and faculty were bused back and forth between campuses.

During this time, the organization was strained with student enrollment and financial

resources that continued to remain quite low (Institution C, Participant 5, personal

communication, March 26, 2014). It was then in the early 1980s that the college could not continue to sustain this arrangement, and despite the ramifications that it meant for tradition and alumni support, the leadership made the difficult decision to close one campus and combine all resources and operations to the other. This continued to be a difficult time in the college's history, however, and enrollment remained stagnant at around 700 students each year (Institution C, Participant 3, personal communication, March 27, 2014).

By the late 1990's the president and cabinet leadership were having extensive discussions regarding the survival of the institution (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014). It was during the same time period that other small, private, tuition dependent, liberal arts colleges around the country were struggling with survival and closing their doors (Carey, 2015). Institution C was aware of the decisions made by peer institutions to expand course offerings to adult learners and online, but this college's decision was to instead focus on the small, residential, and faith-based mission (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014). While the financial struggles did not subside overnight, the college has had 15 straight years of enrollment growth and currently enjoys a surplus in operating budget that alludes many of its peer institutions (Institution C, Participant 3, personal communication, March 27, 2014).

The Strategic Planning Process

The formulation of the most recent strategic planning process for Institution C began in the summer of 2011 when the president's cabinet, consisting of senior administrators, held a retreat to begin a white board process of strategic planning

(Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014). The early stage

of their process aligned with Dolence and Norris' (1994) strategic planning model,

including the establishment of key performance indicators and the brainstorming of goals

(Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014). The current

president had assumed his position in the fall of 2004, launched a capital campaign in

2005, and enjoyed several years of enrollment and campus growth over the next five

years of the campaign. In the summer of 2011, the president and cabinet members were

ready to begin planning for the next phase of the college (Institution C, Participant 1,

personal communication, March 12, 2014).

During this retreat, they performed a standard SWOT analysis to uncover current

challenges, external threats, and visions for a successful future of the college, all again

reflective of the Dolence and Norris (1994) strategic planning model. Through the

findings of publications such as Arum and Roska's (2011) *Academically Adrift* and Van

Der Wef's (2009) *The College of 2020,* the cabinet members felt acutely aware of the

college's vulnerability (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12,

2014). They felt that the small enrollment, traditional liberal arts curriculum, and

geographic location of the institution, along with limited graduate programs, put the

college in a weak position and thus it was time to begin "shoring" up these areas of

weakness (Institution C, Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2014).

After the retreat, each department devised a white paper of their own,

determining how they see themselves in ten to fifteen years. Then, after reading each

paper, the cabinet clarified the issues and completed another SWOT analysis, posting it to

the entire campus community for input (Institution C, Participant 5, personal

communication, March 26, 2014). Each department or small group of the college

participated in the planning process by writing recommendations that were based on the

organizational identity questions, "who are we," "who do we serve," and "what do we

value?" Several months of small group sessions, feedback postings on the portal, and

cabinet and faculty meetings led to a final decision in the spring of 2012 to move forward

with a finalized plan (Institution C, Participant 8, personal communication, April 10,

2014). The chief financial officer and the academic dean co-chaired the entire process

and ultimately devised the final plan, taking into account the feedback collected over the

previous year. The Board of Trustees reviewed and approved the eight-year strategic plan

the same year (Institution C, Participant 8, personal communication, April 10, 2014).

Results

Research Question 1: How do members of the college define its identity?

Unlike the first two cases presented in this study, this college only serves

traditionally-aged students on a residential campus governed by a traditionally trained

full time faculty, and does so with a mission driven approach. When asked, 'what is the

identity of your institution', the participant responses I received were consistent across all

respondents. There were fewer participants at this case than at the other two, and the

reason for this was that redundancy of information was reached much more quickly. The

identity was defined as a faith based, residential, liberal arts college. My question, 'what

is the identity of your college' was met with succinct, consistent, and clear responses. As

one academic administrator succinctly explained:

> *We are a small [faith based] liberal arts college, that is the general*
>
> *identity.*

This response was quite concise, but another faculty member was able to respond to that question with one word:

Faith. That is the strongest message of identity here.

While all respondents agreed with these statements of identity, others were willing to expand upon his or her understanding of the organization identity:

We are a community that focuses on faith and scholarship. That is on the lips of every employee, so we know our identity. You will talk to various people in this organization and they will say the same thing....community, faith, and scholarship are the main tenants of our identity and mission.

Another member of the college reiterated the connection between mission and identity:

[Our identity] is connected to our mission, which is to educate men and women in a community of faith and scholarship.

In addition, members of the college spoke to the unique and identifying qualities that help form the organizational identity as an academic administrator does here:

What makes us distinctive in the world of small liberal arts colleges is our faith component.

Another administrator reiterates what makes the institution different and unique with regard to organization identity:

In all these ways we think that we do community as good as anyone else in the country. We honestly believe that. Our faith component has I think really been a major piece of how we have managed to succeed as well. Some schools have moved away from their faith foundation, sometimes

that may help them and sometimes it doesn't. We are a small private

[faith-based] college, this is who we are, this is our niche.

Finally, the identity at the institution was not only presented uniformly and

clearly, but the very fact that it has a clear identity served as a source of pride for its

members:

I think the college has always had a good solid healthy self-perception

about who we are. I have worked at other schools that to some extent had

an identity crisis, they weren't sure who they were or what they did, but

this school has always rallied around the community of faith and

scholarship focus.

Research Question 2: Were issues of identity considered during the strategic

planning process? If so, what were they? Specifically, what were the conflicts,

themes, or focus of discussion?

Issues of identity were considered during the strategic planning process

While the findings suggest that this institution had no issues of identity conflict,

or struggle in the same sense that Institution A and Institution B had, identity was still

heavily considered in the most recent strategic planning process. The participants all

agreed that the identity of the institution informed all aspects of the strategic plan. When I

asked the participants if, and how, identity was considered during the most recent

strategic planning process, the responses were again quite similar to the following:

It just goes back to that [our identity], community, faith, and scholarship.

We just know our niche is that and the integration of the three.

One administrator explained that, not only was the issue of identity addressed during the strategic planning process, but that identity serves as the context for all organization decision processes:

> *The question of identity is pretty top of our minds in everything we do. We*
>
> *talk about it a lot. How does this support our mission, how does this*
>
> *reflect our values? Those kinds of questions. It is just woven into all of our*
>
> *conversations.*

This universal focus on identity was again reiterated by another administrator:

> *We were very focused on our identity, we are not going to change that. We*
>
> *are going to even brand that even further. We aren't hedging our bets, we*
>
> *are going all in. We are going to live or die by that.*

When another academic administrator was asked how the identity influenced the strategic planning process, the colorful response helped me further understand how much the identity of the college underlie all organizational decisions:

> *That is a hard question to answer specifically, because our identity is the*
>
> *water that the fish swim in.*

What was the focus of the identity conversations during the process?

While the identity universally was described as a paramount influence in the strategic planning process, the members also supplied a specific understanding of what the focus of discussion was during the planning. The three tenants of the college identity are community, faith, and scholarship. During the early stages of the planning process, they convened to discuss how they were really living out those tenants as an organization. Early on, it became clear that all agreed that while the community and faith life at the

institution was strong, they had work still to do in the area of scholarship. An organizational identity will include those things that 'uniquely' identify an organization from others (Whetten, 2006). Many members detailed that the 'niche' of the institution was community and faith, yet the scholarship piece was not meeting that same standard. So, it was this observation that became the focus of the strategic plan. As one faculty member explains:

> *We have to offer something that is different that makes us not generic. It was our faith commitment, but the other thing that we recognized is that all the faith commitment in the world is not going to help you unless the academic excellence of the institution is both real and perceived.*

This was not a view of the faculty alone, an administrator expressed the same perspective of the theme of the most recent strategic planning process as it pertained to the organization's identity:

> *From a faith standpoint, we think that we do that well. So then, we look at scholarship and say what can we do better here? [This strategic plan] has a lot of focus on how we get to a higher academic reputation. Without changing what we are doing with the community and faith, we need to focus on our scholarship aspect.*

Another administrator reflected on this strategic approach to strengthening the academic quality of the institution:

> *We were finding that our peer institutions were ranking us low on academic performance. So we thought we needed to shore that up. Our mission is community, faith, and scholarship and we were thinking on*

community we were doing pretty well, on faith we were seen as one of the

leading institutions in that area. What we weren't was the scholarship

piece. So how do we do well in all areas? We know the emphasis had to be

more on the academic piece.

Finally, another administrator remained consistent with the others by explaining

the thought process involved in approaching the most recent strategic planning process as

it related to issues of identity:

So we said first, what are we doing well? Well our community is very, very

good. Faith life, is probably the reason students come to us the most. We

are authentically [faithful] Then we turn to the academics and we say we

aren't really there. We are good at academics, but not excellent, so for

this strategic plan we all had to come together to make sure we are more

prestigious academically.

Research Question 3: If issues of identity were presented during the strategic

planning process, how did the institution resolve these issues of identity?

Again, there were no identity issues to be resolved at Institution C, at least in the

same way that they were present at Institution A and B. There was no struggle or conflict

of identity, and therefore the strategic planning process here did not include a resolution

of identity. As was clear from the evidence presented in response to the second research

question, there were pieces of the mission of the institution that were not being truly

reflected in the identity of the college. The mission stated that it was a community of

faith and scholarship, yet only the community and faith aspects of that mission had

institutionalized in the organization's identity. This realization became clear early in the strategic planning process, and was the central focus of the plan.

Additional Findings

Just as was the case with Institution A and B, there were two additional findings that emerged from Institution C. The first unexpected finding is an understanding of why the identity of the college is so strong. What is that attributed to? This was not an original research question, yet a question that begged to be asked nonetheless. The second finding connects to the strength of the identity, and what negative ramifications that can have on an organization; especially from the perspective of the faculty. Both finding themes are discussed below.

Why is the identity strong?

While there was no evidence of identity struggles during the strategic planning process, there were meaningful explanations provided of why the members thought the college identity was as strong as it was. These responses fit into two categories; the first was an attribution of leadership, and the second was because of an organization's commitment to traditional liberal arts foundation and a rejection of an entrance into the adult learner market, even when financial struggles might have called for it.

Leadership

To begin, leadership decision making was acknowledged as a significant factor for strength of identity by several organization members. When one administrator was asked why the identity of the institution was so strong, the response below was given:

> *It was because of leadership. When [the current president] came in, he*
>
> *had a lot of energy, and he just started moving. He started us towards,*

'what do we do best?' [He argued] that we need to be true to our mission,

let's not go in all these different directions. So we embraced that and we

started growing.

Additional support for this view of the strength of leadership was expressed below

by another administrator:

Everyone was on the same page, and just the synergy that developed

under this president was wonderful.

More credit was given to the current president's leadership approach as exhibited below:

More than anything, [the new leadership] gave everyone at the school a

clear vision, so if you were going to make a policy, or anything, it had to

fit with that mission.

While the above statements were all expressed by administrators, one faculty

member joined the common view of the current president's positive influence on the

college's strength of identity:

The president came in [in 2004] and said look we really need to focus on

mission so we went through this long process to do that. No one thought

we need to change who we are or what our mission stated, we just needed

to refocus on our values.

Rejection of entrance into adult learner market

Related to this decision of the president to refocus on the mission, in an effort to

strengthen the college's organizational identity, was the conscious decision to not enter

the adult learner and online market. Financial troubles were intense in the first few years

of the 21st century, and many peer institutions were beginning that process of expanding

revenue by providing online curriculum. This institution, however, decided to refocus on the mission and identity of a residential, liberal arts, faith-based private college. Insight into why they rejected an entrance into the profitable adult learner market was provided by faculty and administrators alike, but the perspective for each was slightly different. One administrator spoke to the history of the college's decision making on the issue:

> *In the early 2000s we talked extensively about moving into the adult degree completion market, including online programming, but we ultimately decided that it was not consistent with our mission. While we recognized that money was very attractive. It was just inconsistent with our mission.*

The inconsistency with mission and identity that an entrance into the online market would create was reiterated by another administrator:

> *The challenge for us [to do adult learner and online programs] is our residential component. How do we do that and stay true to our commitment of community?*

Again, the threat to the college's identity that the highly profitable adult learner market would create was an obstacle that the organization members were unwilling to address, as recalled by one participant:

> *We believe in our [residential mission]. Once you start doing online programs it becomes difficult to justify that residential [piece]. You are not developing that community in the same way. I know that you are talking to tuition dependent schools, and that is a critical piece for us. We want to bring in as much tuition as possible, but we are not going to look*

at some of those revenue sources that we just couldn't justify, if we are a

residential campus then how do we justify that?

The above comments were solely expressed by administrators, and focused on the threat that an entrance into the adult learner market would have to the college's identity. Faculty members, on the other hand, felt as though move into the adult learner and online market would be primarily a threat to the college's academic integrity, as expressed by the two separate comments by faculty members below:

Honestly, based on my feelings about colleges which have extensive

degree completion programs, I think it would have made us less

academically attractive. Fewer higher achieving students.

They were afraid of losing that [small, college identity], and to some

extent we are one of those colleges that have a strong liberal arts

component and a lot of the initiatives that were being done at that time

were more vocational; nursing, engineering, that type of thing; and there

was the thought that is not what we want to be. I think there was fear that

we would become something that we didn't want to become.

Can we focus too much on our faith identity?

The second additional finding that was unanticipated, but important nonetheless, was the notion that the college was too focused on its faith identity. While the administrators attributed the last fifteen years of straight enrollment growth to a strong faith identity, the faculty members viewed the issue slightly differently. They agreed that the reason the college had had recent success was because of the decision to invest in that identity of the community and faith, but they argued that this has possibly been at the

expense of academics. All four faculty members I spoke with expressed this opinion. To

begin, one faculty member expressed this view:

> *The administration has decided to go for a certain niche, to go with the*
>
> *idea of building enrollment by maximizing that market [faith-based] niche.*
>
> *I think that is a little risky by being able to deliver that identity every day*
>
> *in the classroom.*

Another faculty member expanded on this perspective that the college

administration too focused on the faith identity:

> *I think the [administration] has relied too much on faith. I admit, I am not*
>
> *big on the service and community stuff. I think faith is fine, I support the*
>
> *educational mission, but the church provides so many opportunities to*
>
> *fulfill a life of faith, why would you pay four years of private tuition to get*
>
> *that when you can have it for free through the church?*

Or as one member succinctly stated:

> *The teaching has taken a back seat to the [faith-based] identity.*

Another participant argued that the strong faith identity was used as focus to

obtain financial security through increased enrollment,

> *The College was successful at coming through a tough period where a lot*
>
> *of private schools [in the area] failed and went under. I think it is a little*
>
> *like someone that lived through the depression, we will never be hungry*
>
> *again. They had a single minded focus of building enrollment. That is why*
>
> *we have all these buildings, all these dormitories, but is it all about that?*

When the faculty member above was asked what 'it was all about' so to speak, the academic quality of the admitted student was addressed:

I think it is better if we have [fewer] students. Not have remedial

programs, let those students go to community college and then come here.

Why do you want to buy a sick goldfish? Especially, why do you want to

buy a sick gold fish if you have no plan for getting that goldfish well

again?

Despite this expressed frustration, these same faculty overall felt pleased with the focus on the scholarship piece of the College's mission. First, one faculty member expressed this view below:

Yes, [I agree with the sentiment of the plan] because it is focusing on

academics overall. I think it is a wonderful strategy by our administration

to get our [standards] up and we need to improve our academic

reputation.

Another member expressed a feeling that academics should be the priority over community:

I think to get undergraduates so caught up in the community based events

just sets them up for mediocrity, so, I think we are now trying to get better

students that are focused on academics.

Finally, another faculty member observed an improvement in the academic quality in students and attributed that to the college's new strategic focus on scholarship

I know the administration, the marketing, admissions, whoever does that

kind of thing, is working hard to get better quality students in. We are

getting better students that are willing to work and we can see that in the

classroom.

Conclusion

This study found that the identity, as defined by the organization members, was clear and consistent across the institution. It also found that while there were no struggles or conflict during the strategic planning process with regard to identity, it did inform the plan. Specifically, the members acknowledged that the community and faith aspect of the institution's identity was strong, but the scholarship piece had not yet become an institutionalized aspect of the organizational identity and this would be the focus on strategy moving forward. This case study also found that there was no resolution of identity during the strategic planning process because there was no struggle or crisis to resolve. Finally, two additional findings were present at this case institution. First, was an understanding of why the identity had become such a strength of the college, even when financial instability was a concern. This was attributed to presidential vision coupled with an unwillingness to enter an adult learner market for fear of a threat to organizational identity and institutional mission drift. The second additional finding, was that there were concerns that the institution had become too faith based, too concerned with this niche as an effort to increase enrollment, all at the expense of academic quality.

Chapter Seven

Cross-Case Results and Analysis

In this chapter I will present cross-case results and analysis that emerged from all three case study sites. These three cross-case results were reflective of the source of the identity issues, the nature of the identity issues, and the remedy to the identity issues.

Cross-Case Results and Analysis

There were three cross-case findings that emerged as the source, nature, and remedy for organizational identity issues at the case institutions. The source of identity struggles was defined by a difference in perspective between faculty and administrators, specifically whether or not the organization is a business and should operate as a business. This conflicting perspective was found to be the basis for any identity issues present at the case institutions. Who we are, what do we value, and who do we serve were questions that were answered quite differently among these two groups of individuals and shed light on the state of organizational identity at each institution. The second cross-case finding, tension between faculty and administrators, serves as the nature of the identity struggles at the institutions. This tension took different forms at each institution, but emerged as a finding theme at each case. The third and final cross-case finding, the influence of leadership, has been identified as the remedy to issues of identity at the case institutions. These findings are presented in the Table 8:1 below.

Organizational identity: cross case results

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Academic integrity vs business strategy (Source)	'We are a business' versus 'we are not a business' perspectives serve as source of identity issues.	'We are a business versus we are not a business' perspectives serve as source of identity issues.	No identity issues. Source not present.
Faculty/Administrator Tension (Nature)	Presented as shared governance issue.	(1)Faculty viewed as an obstacle to success of the 'business'. (2)Symbiotic, yet contentious relationship between faculty and adult learner programs.	Presented as shared governance issue.
Leadership (Remedy)	Negative impact on identity. Viewed as obstacle rather than remedy to identity struggles.	Positive impact on identity. Viewed as remedy to identity struggles.	Positive impact on identity. Viewed as reason for lack of identity struggles.

Academic legitimacy and institutional survival for the tuition driven institution

This first cross-case finding serves as the source of identity issues and most

closely reflects the theoretical assumptions of this study. Institutional theory, serving as

the framework for this study, states that highly institutionalized organizations, like

colleges and universities, will exhibit behaviors and make decisions that mirror those of

more highly regarded peer institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1997; Rowan, 2006). In an

ultimate goal of survival, the institution will work to maintain legitimacy through

traditionally accepted and comparable practices as other organizations that it aspires to

resemble (Powell, 1991). Conversely, these three institutions exist within a competitive

market, and have exhibited behaviors that more closely mirror those of a business. The

central assumption of strategic management is that organizations must focus on what

makes them uniquely different from their competition, not the same (Barney, 1991;

Kennie, 2002; Porter, 1985). The theoretical forces of institutional theory are arguably in

conflict with the foundational argument of strategic management and thus provide an

environment open for organizational identity struggles (Childers, 2012).

This cross-case finding details the source of this conflict in perspective,

specifically one of emphasis on academic legitimacy in relation to the need for strategic

management of external threats in an effort to survive. This conflict was divided between

faculty and administrators perspectives and emerged as the source of issues of

organizational identity across all cases.

Faculty perspective-we are not a business

To begin, the faculty at Institution A and B were concerned with the 'business-

like' behavior of the university, and for Institution A the concern centered specifically in

the context of the strategic plan, as detailed by one faculty member here:

There were concerns with some of the terms [in the strategic plan] used

because they were inappropriate for higher education. The vocabulary

was such as 'customers' and while they may have made sense on an

administration level, it did not sit well with faculty who have a different

focus with students.

Another faculty member at Institution A reiterated this concern that the strategic

plan too closely resembled a message of a business, rather than a reputable institution of

higher education:

Our financial position technology, branding, customer service [was the

focus of the strategic plan]. It didn't mention learning or faculty at all. It

looks like a business plan.

Although the strategic planning process did not provide a context for uncovering issues of identity for Institution B, the source of identity issues was also the difference of perspective between faculty and administrators. One faculty member expressed frustration with the focus on the business of the institution, at the expense of academics:

> *We are told that we have this big dependence on sources of income that is nowhere close to our daily lives as faculty members here, so we are told where we are all day is not actually important.*

This concern over presenting the organization as a something that more resembled a business, rather than an organization with academic integrity, was apparent in the messaging of the institutions as well. Here a faculty member from Institution A explains:

> *Words matter in academics, so we spent a lot of time talking about what words meant. We had an earlier word, "entrepreneurial", in previous documents, and we pushed back from that because that sort of puts us in with the for-profits, making money, and we wanted to make sure we separated ourselves form that identity, and there was some angst over that.*

The faculty exhibited disgust with administrative actions that conflicted with their view of the organization's identity as a small, academically rigorous, liberal arts institution. Here a tenured faculty member at Institution B explains this perspective:

> *They want to be able to offer things like certificates, things to help working adults get ahead in their jobs, and for us [full time faculty] that is too vocational. That is not something we will ever allow to happen. That*

hurts the adult side of the operation because that keeps them from offering

something that their students want.

An unwillingness to acknowledge the adult learner side of the organization, one that is viewed as a drain on time, and less favorable to the full time traditional faculty was also expressed:

I think the full time faculty would love to be our own entity and frankly a

lot of them would like to split and never have to deal, never the twain shall

meet.

A disdain for the perceived negative reputation that the adult leaner and online operations causes for the college was also provided by one faculty member:

I guess it is an identity thing. Most of our time and contact is with the

traditional students. We are very traditional faculty from very traditional

fields that want to be involved in traditional higher education.

Administrative perspective-we are a business

While the faculty expressed concern for the business-like actions and strategies of the institutions, conversely, the administration continued to maintain the perspective that the organizations were businesses and must operate strategically in order to survive as a college or university:

When you are a faculty member, your perspective is one of a teacher, as a

developer of curriculum and learning. When you are an administrator you

really look at it as a business operation.

To further support this finding, an administrator at Institution B illustrates the difference in perspectives of the institution's identity between faculty and administrators:

We are a school primarily of non-traditional learners, but from an

appearance standpoint here [at the main campus] we look like a

traditional liberal arts school with a residential campus and that is the

mentality of our faculty, which is not the viewpoint of our administration.

Another administrator at Institution A, who works closely with the adult student population, reiterated this perspective:

If we want to continue to be in this market, we need to work quicker, we

need to be more adaptable, some of our products need to look better. But

if you are sitting here in the full time market, you don't see that.

Again, the administrators at Institution B, expressed the perspective that the faculty's traditional views were not rooted in the reality of the organization's purpose and operations:

That is the elephant in the room, they think the world revolves around

traditional academia, but in reality that is not the reality of running our

business.

An administrator at Institution B provides further evidence of this conflict in perspective and the opinion that faculty provide an obstacle to success as a business organization:

The faculty that are full time on the main campus determine the programs

that we can offer online, which is good because that tells you have full

time faculty that are reviewing the programs, but hard too because you

have faculty that are maybe stuck in the traditional mindset and to be

competitive we need to be thinking more outside the box.

An administrator at Institution A exhibited a similar frustration with the university's past behavior, behavior driven by the traditionally trained full time faculty, that was perceived to not be rooted in the reality of the 'business' that the institution is in. This comment speaks directly to the conflict that exists due to the competing forces of institutionalism and strategic management:

The problem is the university remains focused on their traditional, liberal

arts students. What has happened over the last decade, is that higher

education has become, a business. An in your face business and people, in

particular people in the adult learner market, have moved in with the goal

of making money. These institutions have a clear focus of who their

customer is and what they have to do to tailor their product for their

customer to complete a degree quickly, at a relatively good price, and

without hassle. We have not been able to do that. We have just been

wedded to our traditions and have ignored the marketplace.

It was found that the source of identity issues at Institution A and B, academic legitimacy contrasted with business-like behavior that threatens those notions of legitimacy were not present at Institution C. They chose not to enter the adult learner and online market, for two main reasons. One, it would conflict with the residential, small, liberal arts identity of the institution and two, because those types of program deliveries were viewed as distasteful and as a threat to the academic integrity of the institution. It

appeared that the very reasons that Institution C rejected an entrance into the adult learner

market was the same reasons there was an identity conflict at Institution A and B. While

one of the findings for the case study of Institution C was the notion that the college had

become too focused on its faith identity, specifically at the expense of academic quality,

the existence of a source of identity struggles, defined as the conflict between the

priorities of academic legitimacy versus a firm-like strategic management of the

institution, was not present.

Faculty versus administrator tension

The second cross-case result surfaced as the nature of identity issues at all three

case institutions and was identified as the tension that existed between faculty and

administrators. Evidence suggested that an 'us versus them' mentality was impacting the

organization's ability to define a clear identity, or resolve issues of identity that were

present. These tensions took different forms at each institution.

At Institution A, the tension that existed between faculty and staff centered

mainly on the issue of shared governance. This is illustrated by one faculty member:

This is an extraordinarily complex institution in terms of competing goals

and interests. So, we are competing about who runs the institution. Is it

finance, accounting, and other areas like that or is it academic affairs?

There had been significant conflict under the previous president with regard to

faculty's feelings of involvement in institutional decision making. This issue had since

been corrected with a change in leadership, and concerted effort to empower the faculty:

When I first came here [under previous presidency] I thought it was a very

paternalistic organization. I thought the faculty were held at a distance,

we will let you know what you need to know when you need to know it

mentality. What has changed is that level of communication has shifted

180 degrees. There is more opportunity to engage faculty more

collaboratively.

This change in direction with regard to shared governance was seen as an

overcorrection, however, to some administrators at the institution:

Everyone is happy we got past the shared governance issue but now at this

point we won't make a decision without asking faculty senate first. I am in

meetings and we are trying to make a decision and someone says, did we

check with faculty? Here are five Deans in the room and the Provost and

you say I need to personally get a yes from faculty? It was overcorrected.

While shared governance was the main source of tension between faculty and

administrators at case Institution A, there were two main sources of tension at Institution

B. The first, was the feeling by the administrators that the faculty's efforts, or at times

lack of effort, were an impediment to the success of the institution. Evidence of this

feeling was provided mainly by administrators in the adult learning division of the

college, as made evident with this administrator's comment:

Getting faculty to participate in anything innovative is not our strong suit.

This sentiment of frustration with faculty effort was reiterated here:

They know their discipline, their subject matter, they may or may not be

good teachers, but they have tenure and they waltz in three times a week

for fifty minutes, do whatever it is they do and then march out.

The frustration by the administrators toward the faculty's willingness to innovate

curriculum was a continued source of tension at Institution B:

> *We were in a position where we should have been able to [add a new*
>
> *degrees], but our full time faculty, that just looked like work to them, so*
>
> *they panned on that. So we did nothing.*

The other source of strain between faculty and administrators at Institution B was the idea that the adult learner and online programs needed the faculty to legitimize their curriculum, while the faculty needed the adult learner and online programs to fund their employment. Neither side of the college was particularly fond of these notions, despite their reluctant acknowledgement of the truth that might reside in them. Beginning with one faculty member's views:

> *A lot of time goes into doing things that we don't want to do, but have to,*
>
> *to support the adult programs for the most part we are ok with it because*
>
> *we understand that the reason that we are not dirt poor is because of*
>
> *them, or the biggest reason.*

The comment above touches on the resentment the faculty often exhibited with regard to the effort that had to be put forth to maintain the large, profitable, yet distasteful work of operating the adult learner programs. The faculty member below, also acknowledged this phenomenon and reiterated the tense relationship that it created between the faculty and administrators:

> *It is kind of a tense relationship. The full time faculty hate to be told well*
>
> *you know you are really being funded by the adult programs and the adult*
>
> *programs get their back up if the full time faculty question what they are*
>
> *doing and if they are being run properly. So it is not a totally happy*

relationship.

One faculty member below touches not just on the tense relationship, but also the symbiotic nature of the two sides of the institution:

To have accreditation you have to have faculty in charge of the

curriculum. So at this point one could not do without the other.

The faculty view that the administrators of the adult leaner programs are reliant on the work of full time faculty to maintain legitimacy is also an important point made below:

The entire curriculum is controlled by the [full time faculty], our courses

are their [adult learner programs] courses, the master syllabi are the

same, and all academic decisions are made by us, so it has a certain

legitimacy that [they wouldn't have otherwise]. I think they are kind of

afraid of that, and I think there has been some us versus them tension that

has come about from that.

Despite the acknowledgement of a symbiotic relationship, one administrator expressed the belief that the faculty have disdain for this fact:

Some of them [full time faculty] have a sense that the adult learner

programs subsidize what goes on in the traditional campus, but most of

them try not to think about that. That is a fact. In rough terms, for every

dollar that a full time student brings in, it cost us $1.75. They are

unbelievably subsidized, and that is fine, we need them, we need a

traditional faculty and faculty governance to deliver the curriculum.

The tension between administrators and faculty at Institution C was expressed

somewhat differently than it was at the first two case schools. Here the tension seemed to be expressed from faculty only, with little to no reference to it by the administrative staff. The source of the tension resided in the perception that faculty did not have the power to inform strategic decision making, especially as it related to the impact of identity on academic quality, as they felt they should. Again, evidence of this view was expressed by faculty only, as exhibited here:

> *That is one of the rules of bureaucracies or administrations. They give you*
>
> *input, but then they do what they want. They make you feel better.*

Again, one faculty member speaks to the control of administration with regard to organizational decision making:

> *The administration [is the most influential in strategic policy], I think that*
>
> *largely we [the faculty] meet to rubber stamp the objectives of the*
>
> *administration. Not that I disagree, but that is what administrations do,*
>
> *they give people the feeling that they have a say, but they don't really.*

This sense, that the administration was in control of the decision making at Institution C, was coupled with a frustration with the perceived lack of understanding the administration had for the importance of faculty.

> *Who is really going to make decisions? To whom does the college belong?*
>
> *I said two years ago, God forbid a tornado comes through this area and*
>
> *takes no lives but takes all the buildings, we will still be there, all the*
>
> *faculty, there under tents and we will still be teaching and learning. The*
>
> *essence of the College is not the gym, it is not the cafeteria, it is the*
>
> *faculty.*

While the presence of tension faculty and administration was acknowledged by faculty, there was also an argument that faculty were mostly to blame for this strain:

There was a strong animosity, there still remains some, between [my

department] and the administration. Not saying, both have some

culpability, but from my observation it was the faculty that [caused it].

The administration did not deserve the reputation they were getting.

Influence of leadership on organizational identity

The influence of leadership, particularly the leadership of the college or university president, was a cross-case finding that resonated in all three cases. The influence of leadership served as the remedy for issues of identity at the institutions. Leadership was seen as an influence in how the members defined the organization's identity, whether issues of identity were addressed, and also how they were resolved.

All three institutions spoke of past presidents, and how the decisions of those individuals influenced the state of the current institution's identity and perceived success, both positively and negatively. Below are statements regarding these influences at each institution:

Case Institution A

There was an attitude [during the strategic planning process] among the

community that we weren't going in the right direction based upon the

perception of what the previous president had done. Not coincidentally we

had also started to overhaul the university's master plan as well, which

and a large stamp on it from the previous president. It was very ambitious

and focused on things that she held in high regard. The priorities had

changed, there was concern about the ambitious spending that had been

underway under the previous master plan.

Case Institution B

There was never an effort to bring the faculty on board and change the

mentality that we are a non-traditional school. Now, I think that is a result

of [the former President]. If you want to change something, it has to start

at the top. If you want to change a brand or identity, you have to start and

the top and the president say, 'ok this what we are going to do', and it

never happened. It was left on its own. It is a silo that was left alone to get

bigger.

Case Institution C

In the late 80s and early 90s we almost closed our doors. The [former]

president came in and said look we really need to focus on mission, so we

went through a long process to do that. The current president was on the

Board at that time when we went through that process and he believed in

that work, so no mission has not been an issue [for some time].

Here it is clear that the impact of previous president's actions, or inactions, are

perceived to have a continued impact on the strength of the identity at each case

institution.

The cross-case finding that leadership's influence on organizational identity

resolution then extended to a reflection on the current presidency at each institution.

Here, however, the impact seemed to be influencing case institution A and B differently

than it had influenced C. For institution A, the president and Board of Trustees' decision

to 'rush' the strategic planning process and take the oversight away from the organization members and put it in the hands of outside consultants was viewed as the primary reason identity issues were not resolved in the strategic planning process. This organizational experience was explained here by one administrator:

When the consultants came in there was a particular process that drove

the conversations. That is where the process started to degrade and the

Board was holding the President to a certain timeline, which was mistake

number one. There were steps skipped along the way.

This perspective was shared by faculty as well:

I think the way things were presented to the faculty in making that

strategic plan work was not the best thought out. The people that were

leading the strategic planning were not the best choice in many faculty

opinion because they had only done this for business previously. The

unfortunate effect of trying to push through the planning faster than I think

it should have been, was that it created a sense of urgency that tarnished

the trust factor.

Institution B, like A, also referenced the actions of the current president as influential in the process of identity resolution. Yet, unlike for institution A, these actions did not occur during the strategic planning process, which was overseen by the previous president, but within just a few months of the new president's appointment. Also, unlike the case for Institution A, the impact of the president's actions were seen as a positive force in resolving identity.

We had a big faculty meeting right before the start of the fall semester,

and the new president spoke about this identity crisis between the

traditional program and the adult program. I think with the past

leadership there was this idea that we were one college and one institution

that nobody was really buying, but that was what he wanted it to be. So

the new president, in my personal opinion brought some new energy to

that conversation. I think he brought this issue to the table… that it needs

to be solved… like we need to just fix this and move on with our lives. I felt

very optimistic that something would get done. He seems more willing to

address what the issues are rather than pretend that they don't exist.

Finally, for institution C, where there was no initial identity struggle to resolve, the members still referenced the impact that the current president's leadership had on the strength of organization identity:

[The current president] has a great passion for [our College]. He is an

excellent leader. Very faithful, personable, young, lots of energy. He is not

afraid to take risks, but when we took over 10 years ago he was very

intentional about being true to our mission. So we embraced that and we

started growing. More than anything it gave everyone at the school a

clear vision, everyone was on the same page, and the synergy that

developed under this president was wonderful.

There were other mentions of leadership in the interviews I conducted. This went beyond the specific accounts of how current and past president's decisions affected the current state of identity, or process of identity resolution, at the institutions. Members also spoke to the importance of leadership moving forward in the competitive market that

these institutions find themselves. One administrator at Institution A details this view:

> *I think in order to have a clear focus you need to have strong leadership.*
>
> *Sometimes it is good when the president speaks up and says this is what*
>
> *we are doing, and you either better get on board or get off, I am fine with*
>
> *that, and we haven't had enough of that in my opinion.*

This is again expressed by an administrator at Institution B:

> *The primary importance is good leadership. Leadership that provides*
>
> *opportunity for success all levels. That is the key really.*

Finally, this view was also expressed by an administrative member of Institution C:

> *The key is leadership, and leadership means faculty and administration all*
>
> *working together.*

Conclusion

Three cross-case results emerged as members of these three institutions told their organizational identity stories. The first served as a source of organizational identity issues and most closely represented the theoretical conflict between notions of legitimacy and academic integrity versus strategic management for the goal of institutional survival. The two sides of this conflict was also split between the traditionally trained full time faculty and the administrators of institution A and institution B only. Not surprisingly, this conflict did not exist at Institution C where they had previously decided not to expand their mission to the adult learner and online delivery of curriculum.

The second cross-case result, tension between faculty and administrators, served as the nature of issues of identity at the institutions. The tension at Institution A and C was related to issues of shared governance. For Institution B, there were two causes of

tension, one regarding the perception of administrators that the faculty served as an impediment to success for the institution in the adult learner market, and the other that there was a reluctant, symbiotic relationship between the revenue producing adult learner division and the faculty who provided academic integrity to the online and accelerated curriculum.

The third and final cross-case finding, identified as the remedy to identity issues, was the influence of leadership on both the organization's strength of identity and the process of identity resolution. The influence, both positively and negatively, of past leadership was found to be relevant to each organization's identity. The decision making of current presidential leadership was also found to negatively affect Institution A's ability to resolve identity issues during the most recent strategic planning process. At Institution B, a change in presidential leadership was found to have a positive influence on the identity resolution process, even after having found that no such process occurred during most recent strategic planning process under the former president.

Chapter 8

Implications and Conclusions

In this chapter, I provide a summary of this study, implications for future policy and practice, implications for future study, and then final conclusion of my research. To begin, a summary of the research questions, methods, and findings are detailed. I then discuss the major conclusions reached across all three case institutions sites. Then, implications for both policy and future research are provided. Finally, an overall conclusion to this study is made.

Summary of Study

The overall purpose of this study was to understand better the organizational identity issues that three private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions face during times of strategic planning. We know that the strategic planning process is a context rich with questions of identity (Ellis, 2010; Lujan & Dolence, 1997; Mitzberg, 1994). Organizations will ask themselves questions such as who are we, who do we serve, and what do we value must more openly during a process of strategy making (Albert & Whetten, 1985; MacDonald, 2013). It was with this assumption in mind that I selected colleges and universities that have recently undergone a strategic planning process to serve as case institutions. To reiterate, the strategic planning process serves here as a context for studying questions of organizational identity; it is not a study of the strategic planning process itself.

Three research questions were asked in this study. First, how do members of these institutions define their organizational identity? Second, were issues of identity considered during the strategic planning process? If so, how were they addressed? Third,

if issues of identity were presented during the strategic planning process, how did the institution resolve these issues of identity?

Case Institution A

The results of this case study found an inconsistent understanding of identity across organizational members. Members either defined the university's identity as something contingent on which type of student one was serving, as an accessible institution that serves the underserved, or was unable to define it at all, and instead reflected on the difficulty in defining the institution's identity. It is the conclusion of this study that Institution A is struggling with identity, and does not have a shared understanding of its beliefs and values.

The strategic planning process at this institution included lengthy conversations that focused on questions of identity. The process revealed these two perspectives: (1) that the institution must operate more like a firm in its effort to remain competitive in its highly saturated market; and (2) that messages, policy, and strategy that reflect a firm-like mentality are seen as a threat to the traditional, liberal arts identity of the organization, particularly for the faculty. These two perspectives were found to compete with one another in the eyes of the organization members. This is believed to be a significant factor in the institution's struggles with finding a set of shared beliefs and values that define the organization's identity.

This study found that while Institution A did undergo an evaluation of organizational identity issues during the strategic planning process, there was no evidence that a resolution of issues took place. In addition, it was an unanticipated result of this case study that the reason the identity issues were not resolved during the strategic

planning process, and still remain, is because of the decision to halt internal process of

dealing with those issues. This finding lends support to the argument for an internally

driven process of identity resolution, and that the management of this process is found to

be most successful when driven internally rather than from an external constituent group

(Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998; Jackson & Ward, 2004; Clayton & Ash, 2005).

Case Institution B

This college did not exhibit a consistent organizational identity. Definitions of

identity were categorized as the following: (1) the college is a non-traditional college first

and foremost, with a small residential aspect serving as a secondary identity; (2) the

college identifies itself as a full-time traditional liberal arts school first, with an adult

learner aspect serving as a secondary identity; (3) the college has a 'split' identity and is

equally a traditional, full time residential, and a non-traditional school; and (4) the

college's identity cannot currently be defined.

While institution B exhibited a crisis of identity, these issues did not surface

during the strategic planning process. It is concluded that the highly structured and

formulaic strategic planning process of this college prohibited the members from

addressing the issues of identity that should naturally surface.

Despite these consequences of a rigid strategic planning process, the members of

the college with whom I spoke clearly articulated the following two competing

perspectives underlying the organization's identity struggles: (1) the institution must

operate more like a firm in its effort to remain competitive in its highly saturated market

and full time, and traditional faculty are an impediment to this effort; and (2) the adult

learner aspect of the organization is not a desirable part of the faculty's work or

institutional identity and serves as a threat to the liberal arts identity of the organization. These perspectives were held exclusively by both administrators and faculty. In addition, the reason the identity issues were only beginning to be addressed was due to the role of the new president in openly addressing these issues for the first time; this was an unanticipated result of this case study.

Case Institution C

This college's faith identity was clear and consistent across the institution. In addition, there were no struggles or conflict during the strategic planning process with regard to identity, and it did inform the plan. Members acknowledged that the community and faith aspect of the institution's identity was strong, but an institutionalized commitment to scholarship was needed. This college had a strong identity entering the strategic planning process, but they were also highly cognizant of that identity, and therefore hyper aware of any uncoupling between ideology and action, as was the case with academic strength.

This case study also found that there was no resolution of identity during the strategic planning process because there was no struggle or crisis to resolve. However, two additional findings were present at this case institution. The first was the understanding of why the identity had become such a strength of the college. This clear and consistent identity formation was attributed to presidential vision coupled with an unwillingness to enter an adult learner market for fear of a threat to organizational identity and institutional mission drift. The second additional finding was that there were concerns that the institution had become too faith based, too concerned with this niche as an effort to increase enrollment, and this all at the expense of academic quality.

Cross-case Results

Three cross-case results emerged in this study. The first, the source of identity issues at the institutions, was the difference in perspective between the faculty and the administration on whether or not the institution should reflect a business-like strategy and environment. These differences in perspective reflected the differences between notions of legitimacy and academic integrity versus strategic management for the goal of institutional survival. This conflict existed at Institution A and B, but did not exist at Institution C.

The second cross-case result, the nature of the identity issues at the institutions, was tension between faculty and administrators. Issues with shared governance was viewed as the cause of tension at Institution A and C. For Institution B, there were two causes of tension, one was the view by administrators in the adult learner programs that the faculty were an obstacle to business success for the institution, and the other was the presence of a symbiotic, yet contentious, relationship between the revenue producing adult learner division and the faculty who provided academic integrity to the online and accelerated curriculum.

The third and final cross-case finding, identified as the remedy to identity issues, was the influence of leadership on organizational identity. The influence of past leadership was found to be impactful to each organization's identity. Institution A's current president and Board of Trustees were blamed for the organization's inability to resolve identity issues during the most recent strategic planning process. For Institution B, a newly appointed president's actions was viewed as the remedy to identity struggles at the college.

Implications for Future Policy and Practice

There is much to be learned from this study with regard to future policy and

practice for all institutions that find themselves in a highly competitive market. The

findings of this study suggest that there is indeed a theoretical conflict that exists between

the forces of institutional theory and strategic management. However, this conflict

transcends from a theoretical discussion to practical implications in these three cases.

While the practical implications were not a source of conflict at Institution C, due to the

decisions that limited these completing forces to exist at the college, they were certainly

so at Institutions A and B. The conflict between concerns for academic tradition and

legitimacy and the business-like behaviors of the institution that found itself in a highly

competitive were evident at both institutions. These competing perspectives laid a

foundation for issues of identity at both schools.

Administrators, Board of Trustee members, and presidents of colleges and

universities, like those studied here, do not only need to be mindful of how differences in

perspective between faculty and administrators might affect organizational identity, but

also need to implement strategies to mitigate such conflicts. While accrediting agencies

do require the involvement of full time faculty in the curriculum development and

oversight of accelerated adult and online programs, college and universities might

consider hiring tenure track faculty who are solely responsible for these functions. While

the standard expectation is to have fulltime, tenured faculty as a source of legitimizing

the non-traditional delivery of curriculum, why must it be the same full-time faculty that

also shares governance duties and carry full teaching loads in the traditional face-to-face

setting? The conflict that has been shown to occur by the findings of Case Institution A

and B could be alleviated when the traditional fulltime faculty in the liberal arts college

setting are left to focus on their areas of expertise in the face-to-face environment, while

other fulltime faculty can specialize in adult learner curriculum development and

delivery.

Another key policy consideration for private, tuition driven, small liberal arts

institutions that are financially reliant on the adult learner and online market, but find

themselves with identity issues because of it, would be to separate further the two

operations of the organization beyond the work and responsibilities of faculty. This

implication was already being considered by Institution B as I ended my interviews with

the organization members. They referenced large research universities, such as the

University of Maryland, which have forged ahead with such a strategy and were

considering this as a solution to their self-described identity crisis. Adult learner and

online program administrators resented the institutionalized approach of faculty to

delivering curriculum and faculty resented the business-like methods of the adult learner

and online program administrators. This resentment and conflict was leading to an

organizational identity crisis that had become prohibitive to progress; thus, why not

separate the two? The financial and governance implications of this strategy are complex,

but the approach begs consideration when institutional identity issues significantly

impede the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.

Finally, it is imperative to understand the impact that leadership has shown to

have on the strength of identity at the college or university. Both the negative and

positive perceived influence at all three of these case institutions was significant,

particularly the influence of the president. When board members are filling leadership

roles, especially at private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions that have financial

dependence on the adult learner and online programs, it would be imperative to explore

the priorities and views of the incoming candidates to determine perspectives on these

issues. Board of Trustee members are being held to a higher standard of responsibility as

vulnerable institutions threaten to close their doors.

Implications for Future Research

When a relatively unexplored area of research is first addressed, a qualitative case

study can be an important initial step in determining what the key issues might be. This

study explores the long studied concept of organizational identity, but for the first time

applies it to the private, tuition driven liberal arts college or university. While there are

limitations to a qualitative case study that focuses just on three institutions, it can serve as

an entry into further study and greater understanding of how increased competition for

this type of institution, and the strategic decisions made to face that pressure to survive,

influences organizational identity.

Again, this study is limited to just the understanding of three institutions, and

while they are similar to so many like them with regard to environmental pressures, they

do have unique qualities that limit the applicability of the findings specific to each. For

this reason, there needs to be more case study work to determine if the impact between

institutionalized notions of academia and the firm-like strategic management tendencies

of administration affect organizational identity at other institutions. Furthermore, the

effect of tension between faculty and administration, as well as the impact of leadership,

on organizational identity are areas quite suitable for future study. The decisions and

approach of leadership at these three institutions had an impact on the strength of identity

and the potential resolution of identity, yet there were limits to fully understanding these influences. Further study of just the relationship between presidential leadership and organizational identity would be useful and needed to gain greater insight into these aspects of this study's findings. Finally, one must ask what significance the faith-based component have on their strength of identity and subsequent success. This research was limited to just one case institution that has experienced success after making the strategic decision to resist entering the adult learner market and focus on a strong faith-based and residential community. Would this result also occur for those that do not have a faith component to drive its mission? These are all potential areas for further study.

In addition, there are still questions to be answered with regard to the struggles shared at other institutions around the country that may have made similar strategic decisions as Institutions A and B. Has the identity struggle occurred at large state schools, or research institutions that have entered the adult learner realm as well? If so, to what degree and if not, why not? Again, seeking answers to these questions will address the limits that this study had with regard to applicability of findings to other colleges and universities.

As with many qualitative studies, the implications for future research also lie in potential for quantitative approaches. A large number of private colleges and universities with liberal arts missions exist in this country, many of which have decided either to enter the adult degree completion market strategically and many more that have consciously decided not to do so. Faculty and administrative surveys as well as enrollment data analysis are methods to provide potentially useful understandings of organizational identity struggles and possible resolutions.

Finally, the interviews were conducted at each school over the course of the spring and summer of 2014. A practical requirement of my data collection made it necessary that I end the interviews by the start of the fall 2014 term. However, it was also during this time that exciting organizational changes were beginning to occur at case institutions A and B. The current president at case A was replaced by an interim president in late summer of 2014. This interim president, who incidentally came to the university with a business and not an academic background, began to clarify some institutional values and goals that had potential ramifications for organizational identity. The impact that this leader's perspective and decisions has had on the institution would be interesting and helpful to understand for that case.

At case B, when my interviews were ending, the president had just assigned a task force to face and resolve a dual identity crisis he had openly identified in his first three months in office. While there were some predictions and insights into future organizational decision-making in the final interviews I conducted, it was still a shame that time did not allow me to follow that decision-making process for the course of the 2014-2015 academic year. This might be an exceptional area for a future case study on the actual process of identity resolution that a college or university in crisis might experience, which was an original intention of this study.

Conclusion

Some might argue that higher education is at a crossroads. A college education, which was once affordable and widely accepted as a desirable first step onto the social economic ladder, has now become more commonly criticized for its student success outcomes (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Carey, 2015). Student enrollments have become more

unstable, operating funds more threatened, and competition more intense (Carey, 2015; Childers, 2015; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). Declining public belief in the positive outcomes of a college education coupled with fiscal challenges and a variety of other societal changes have led to an increased pressure on colleges and universities to make strategic decisions that often call the very purpose, goals, and identity of the university into question (Davis, Ruhe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2006). In managing these decisions, universities have now had to ask themselves the question "who are we" to a degree and depth unlike any other time in history (Childers, 2012).

Cohen and March (1972) argued that universities are rigid systems of academic tradition; however, this understanding has slowly evolved due to empirical findings, but also due to an observable change in the public's expectations for higher education. In general, many universities, such as those found in this study, have found themselves in a real competitive market that has forced a businesslike, strategic mentality that has created feelings of dissonance and discomfort with regard to organizational identity. The strained relationship between maintaining a sense of academic legitimacy and setting oneself apart as a competitive force in the market provides a compelling framework for studying how a university or college might experience issues of identity. The findings of this study lend support to the notion that identity issues will arise when traditionally established, private, tuition driven, liberal arts institutions operate in more business-like ways, particularly as they enter the adult learner and online curriculum market. Full time, traditional trained, faculty exhibit concerns with business-like organizational behaviors that threaten academic legitimacy. This issue is compounded as administrators responsible for the financial livelihood of these institutions view these faculty concerns as

impediments to organizational success. While the source of these identity issues is found

to be the difference in perspective between faculty and administrators, the nature of these

issues are manifest in tension and general discontent amongst the members of the

university and college. The remedy to these issues of identity is found to be the influence

of leadership, specifically the willingness of leadership to either make decisions that

support a clear and consistent identity, or to face such present issues head on with open

communication and a resolution strategy.

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