WHAT'S THE STORY HERE? THE EFFECT OF VOLATILITY ON UNIVERSITY LEADER SENSEMAKING OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT ACCESS

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of volatility on sensemaking. While multiple studies have explored sensemaking in crisis situations, none have explicitly investigated the impact of volatility on organizational sensemaking. Interviews with 55 top leaders in U.S. Catholic universities reveal the effects of volatility on leader sensemaking of undocumented student access to their institutions. Under conditions of high volatility, leaders experienced a strong temptation to restrict communication, which is precisely the wrong thing to do since it reduces requisite variety.

With less requisite variety, people miss more cues, which can lead to constrained sensemaking and premature simplification. Based on these findings, we can better understand the impact of volatility on organizational sensemaking and resulting consequences as sensemakers engage volatile issues.

Key words: Organizational sensemaking; volatility; managing commitment.

Introduction

The effects of volatility on sensemaking are not well understood. This is unexpected, especially since much of the earliest work on sensemaking focused on "environmental jolts and organizational crises" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 71). In his seminal paper on the Mann Gulch wildfire, for instance, Weick (1993) illustrates the breakdown of roles on a team that is responding to an unexpectedly volatile remote wildfire. But he does not explicitly examine how volatility itself influences the sensemaking processes of Wag Dodge and his fellow smokejumpers. As noted by Schildt, Mantere, and Cornelissen (2019) research has tended to focus more on sensemaking outcomes than on the actual sensemaking process itself. As their recent work helps us understand the power dynamics in sensemaking, we would also benefit from better understanding volatility's role in theoretical models of organizational sensemaking.

A number of studies have analyzed sensemaking in volatile environments, especially those focused on high reliability organizations (HROs). Bigley and Roberts (2001) identified ways to maintain reliability even in the midst of large wildfires. Other studies of sensemaking in volatile environments include the Mann Gulch wildfire (Weick, 1993), the Bhopal plant disaster (Weick, 1988, 2010), climbing catastrophes on Mt. Everest (Kayes, 2004), and anti-terrorist policing (Cornelissen, Mantere, and Vaara, 2014). In these and other studies of volatile situations or environments, however, the focus tends to be on sensemaking in the midst of crisis or chaos, particularly with an eye to avoiding similar situations in the future.

To deepen our understanding of how environmental characteristics influence sensemaking itself, I examine how volatility affects leader sensemaking of access to Catholic colleges and universities for undocumented students, those who do not have legal immigration or citizenship status. Leader sensemaking in this study was especially volatile due to the unsettled nature and increasing politicization of access to higher education in the United States for undocumented students. As with numerous contemporary immigration issues in the U.S., access to higher education is uncertain—not only is there currently a paucity of national and local laws to provide guidance to university leaders, there often remains a palpable apprehension of even discussing the issue openly. Due to the numerous and diverse viewpoints on college access for the undocumented, and as potential consequences to leader decisions remain unknown, undocumented student access is currently in a volatile state.

A concrete example of the volatility of undocumented student access to higher education is President Obama's 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Applicants who were accepted into the program could receive a two year period in which they would not be deported and in which they could be eligible for a US work permit. Even a policy like DACA, however, which was intended to provide stability to undocumented students and their families, often had unintended and adverse consequences. Recipients of DACA status have reported negative health effects due to the uncertainty associated with

the program (Patler, Hamilton, Meagher, and Savinar, 2019) even as the program allowed recipients to pursue opportunities including medical school (Ramos, et al., 2019). Though many championed the announcement of DACA and believed it would provide important opportunities for undocumented youths, navigating their barriers to higher education has resulted in significant "academic, personal, and emotional implications" (Macias, 2018, p. 625) for DACA youths. The DACA program highlights the volatility of increasingly politicized immigration issues in the USA, including undocumented access to higher education.

For leaders in higher education who seek to carefully address undocumented student access to their institutions—indeed, for all people who engage difficult issues—volatility poses significant potential pitfalls for their sensemaking. To avoid negative organizational effects, and to increase organizational resilience, we need a better understanding of the impact of volatility on organizational sensemaking.

Theoretical Foundations

Organizational sensemaking

Organizational sensemaking is a framework for understanding how people move from a cacophony of perceived cues to some sort of plausible meaning. Weick (2008) claims, "To focus on sensemaking in organizational settings is to portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, 'What's the story?' (Para. 1). In organizations that are constantly changing and evolving, sensemakers extract social cues to construct plausible accounts of what is happening. Maitlis and Christenson (2014) describe sensemaking as "the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (p. 57).

An important characteristic of sensemaking is its focus on plausibility, rather than seeking objective truth. O'Leary and Chia (2007) describe it thus: "In sensemaking, the essential task is to create a coherent and plausible account of what is going on without ever really seeking a one true and final picture of how the world actually is" (p. 392-393). The focus on plausibility over objectivity is due to the bounded rationality of sensemakers (March and Heath, 1994; Simon, 1955) and the social construction of their environments. This conceptualization of the social construction of reality hearkens back to the work of Berger and Luckman (1967), who explain:

> The reality of everyday life is not only filled with objectivations; it is only possible because of them. I am constantly surrounded by objects that 'proclaim' the subjective intentions of my fellowmen, although I may sometimes have difficulty being quite sure just what it is that a particular object is 'proclaiming'. (p. 50)

In other words, our understanding of the world around us is bounded by our subjective interpretations of what we believe things to be. Sensemakers thus engage in a "process of social construction in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environments" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21).

Though we can see many elements of sensemaking in Weick's (1977) early chapter "Enactment Processes in Organizations," he made one of the original organizational applications of sensemaking in his analysis of the 1984 gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India (Weick, 1988), a catastrophe in which several thousand died and countless were injured. Though industry and state officials assessed blame to various parties, Weick identified the role of enactment in the breakdown of social processes that created an atmosphere of complacency, lax safety, and poor supervision in the plant, each of which contributed to one of the most devastating industrial accidents in history. Such tragedies as this provide an opportunity for exploring sensemaking in the hopes of avoiding similar catastrophes in the future.

High Reliability Organizing (HRO)

In recent years, much attention in the sensemaking literature has focused on high reliability organizing (HRO). In his seminal article examining the tragedy at Mann Gulch, Weick (1993) spends the bulk of his analysis "in the search for sources of resilience" (p. 638). This search for resilience has developed into a body of research known as high reliability organizing (Weick, 1987; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 1999). High reliability organizations (HROs) are characterized by several principles, including a "preoccupation with failure," a "reluctance to simplify," a "sensitivity to operations," a "commitment to resilience," and a "deference to expertise" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). High reliability organizing is not about avoiding organizational challenges or dilemmas, but retaining resilience even in the midst of difficulty. "HROs develop capabilities to detect, contain, and bounce back from those inevitable errors that are part of an indeterminate world. The hallmark of an HRO is not that it is error-free but that errors don't disable it" (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 14). HRO research has focused on environments that demand reliability and resilience, including aircraft carrier flight decks (Rochlin, La Porte, and Roberts, 1987), electrical grids (Schulman, Roe, Eeten, and Bruijne, 2004), and Navy SEAL teams (Fraher, Branicki, & Grint, 2017). As the modern world grows increasingly complex, however, we are learning that reliability should not be reserved for extreme cases, but should be a feature of every organization.

One of the key characteristics of HROs is a reluctance to simplify. Reluctance to simplify means preserving "sensitiv[ity] to variety and to descriptions and actions that pinpoint or hide that variety" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 62). Especially for leaders whose jobs require them to guide organizations through volatile situations, there may be a temptation to simplify

in order to more quickly move the organization to action. Simplification is an important tool for moving from equivocality to decisions and action, as it allows the sensemaker to move from "What's the story" to "How are we going to deal with it?" It is important to note, however, that as the complexity of the challenges facing an organization increase, the mechanisms for sensing and registering must also become more complex. We call this requisite variety, and it requires that "the potential variety within the organization [must] match the variety outside it" (Weick, 1979, p. 190). For leaders of organizations that prize reliability and resilience, they must avoid the temptation to simplify and ensure that the registering capabilities in their organizations match the complexity of the external environment. Failure to achieve either of these goals can lead to impoverished sensemaking. Reluctance to simplify is especially important in volatile situations that are constantly changing—premature simplification can lead to a cessation or restriction of the extraction of social cues that may not remain open to the continual changes posed by volatility.

Volatility

A framework scholars have applied to describe environmental unpredictability is VUCA, an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Originally formulated in a military context (Murphy, 1997), VUCA is a fourfold model "used to describe an environment which defies confident diagnosis" (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014, p. 311). The instability of VUCA environments can have significant consequences for organizational functioning, especially in settings where high reliability is sought.

The first component of VUCA is volatility, which describes environments characterized by instability or unpredictability, especially when there is the potential for sudden and adverse change. Volatility refers to "relatively unstable change; information is available and the situation is understandable, but change is frequent and sometimes unpredictable" (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014, p. 313). Brain scientists have shown that this sort of environmental uncertainty "poses a conflict between the opposing demands of gathering [or exploring] and exploiting information" (Daw, O'Doherty, Dayan, Seymour, & Dolan, 2006, p. 876), work echoed by organizational scholars (Jansen, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006). Bennett & Lemoine (2014) describe the other three facets of VUCA: uncertainty as "a lack of knowledge as to whether an event will have meaningful ramifications; cause and effect are understood, but it is unknown if an event will create significant change;" complexity as "many interconnected parts forming an elaborate network of information and procedures; often multiform and convoluted, but not necessarily involving change;" and ambiguity as "a lack of knowledge as to 'the basic rules of the game'; cause and effect are not understood and there is no precedent for making predictions as to what to expect" (p. 313).

Though any organization seeking to preserve resilience must address all four facets of VUCA, much of the research on HROs is focused on controlling environmental volatility—and thus controlling the conflicting demands of exploring and exploiting. Scholars have long struggled to measure environmental volatility (Snyder & Glueck, 1982), but there is evidence that as volatility increases, organizational systems tend to become increasingly unreliable (Bigley & Roberts, 2001). Volatility has been found to elicit more flexible strategic management structures in major oil companies (Grant, 2003), and to require the development of dynamic capabilities in entrepreneurial ventures (Zahra, Sapienza, & Davidsson, 2006). These and other studies, however, tend to focus on the effect of volatility on organizational functioning, and not explicitly on sensemaking itself. There is an opportunity, then, to better understand the explicit effects of volatility on organizational sensemaking.

While the issue of undocumented student access can be characterized by all four aspects of VUCA, its key characteristic for university leaders is volatility. The issue is charged with emotion and opinion and is in a state of unpredictable flux. Whether due to the political pressures from various stakeholders, or to the desire to steer clear of divisive issues as one manages one's career, leaders are confronted by the volatility of undocumented student access as they seek to understand this issue well and attempt to make sound decisions for their colleges and universities.

Methods

This paper draws on 55 semi-structured interviews with top leaders in 12 Catholic colleges and universities. The sample was restricted to Catholic institutions for several reasons. First, as noted in a report from the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (Burkhardt, et al., 2011), the diversity of federal and state policies for access for undocumented students creates challenges for institutions. As private universities usually have more flexibility in setting policies to determine admissions and award financial aid, restricting the sample to private institutions controls for some of these confounding policy effects.

Second, in addition to the various secular voices on access for undocumented students, there are numerous religious and spiritual perspectives on the issue. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB; 2003), for instance, issues teachings on a wide range of issues, including national immigration policy—any Roman Catholic institution is expected to have some familiarity with the perspectives of its local bishop and the USCCB, especially as those perspectives are related to the institution's functioning. Germane to undocumented students, the bishops wrote, "We stand in solidarity with you, our migrant brothers and sisters, and we will continue to advocate on your behalf for just and fair migration policies" (para. 106). It is reasonable to expect that the Catholic character of the universities in this study will have some bearing on decisions related to the issue of access for undocumented students.

To provide some control for regional differences, I grouped the 12 institutions into three geographical areas (four universities in each region.) According to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU; "Complete List of Catholic Colleges and Universities," 2012) in 2012 there were 251 Catholic institutions that grant degrees in the United States.

I first focused my analysis of the list on geographic regions that had higher concentrations of undocumented populations. The Pew Hispanic Center (Passel & Cohn, 2011, p. 23) lists California (2.55 million) and Texas (1.65 million) as the states with the largest number of unauthorized immigrants, while Illinois ranks sixth (525,000). While Florida (825,000), New York (625,000), and New Jersey (550,000) have more undocumented students than Illinois, my access to universities in and near Illinois led me to select it over those three states. California, Texas, and Illinois are also home to numerous Catholic colleges and universities, making them fitting regions for this research.

Initially, I hoped to identify institutions with a diversity of perspectives and experiences regarding undocumented student access. However, I was unable to identify even one institution that was opposed to access. The reasons for this are not immediately clear. As I selected institutions from regions with relatively high immigrant populations, these possibly are generally more open to serving immigrants, including undocumented students. Though I was unable to recruit universities opposed to access, the issue of access for undocumented students remains volatile and unsettled even for proponents of access and thus is fitting for the study of leader sensemaking.

My sample includes a diversity of institutional types and sizes; listed here by Carnegie Classification ("Carnegie Classifications," 2012): Master's - Larger Programs (7), Doctoral/Research Universities (4), and Research Universities/Very High Research Activity (1). The distribution of enrollments in the sample is: 2,000-4,000 students (4), 5,000-8,000 students (4), and more than 8,000 students (4).

In each of the institutions I identified six top leaders to be interviewed: presidents, provosts, vice-presidents for mission and enrollment management (if the institution had such positions), and directors of admissions and financial aid. These leaders are among those most responsible for setting and enacting institutional policies, especially regarding admissions. Of the 71 leaders I invited to sit for interviews, 55 agreed to be interviewed, for a response rate of 77%.

Gender	This Study	IPEDS Catholic Institutions	Chronicle All Presidents	Chronicle All Chief Academic Officers	Chronicle All Other Top Administrators
Female	**51.0% (28/55)**	51.0%	22.3%	39.9%	43.3%
Male	**49.0% (27/55)**	49.0%	77.7%	60.1%	56.7%
Ethnicity					
White	**80.0% (44/55)**	73.0%	88.1%	93.0%	86.3%
Hispanic	**12.7% (7/55)**	4.0%	3.1%	0.9%	2.6%
Black	**7.3% (4/55)**	6.0%	6.4%	3.9%	7.9%

Adapted from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System ("Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System," 2014) and Almanac of Higher Education 2013 ("Almanac of Higher Education," 2013).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants

My decision to restrict my sample to Catholic colleges and universities significantly affected the demographics of my sample. Whereas 22.3% of presidents nationwide are female ("Almanac of Higher Education," 2013), three of the 10 in my study were female (see Table 1). My overall sample was 51% female (28/55), which matches the IPEDS gender breakdown for Catholic institutions, and is notably higher than the percentage of female administrators nationwide as reported by the Chronicle (43.3%). My sample included a slightly greater percentage of white respondents than the Catholic average (80% vs. 73%, respectively), which is simultaneously a lower percentage than the average at all institutions, including both Catholic and non-Catholic. While my sample included roughly the expected number of black leaders (7.3%), it included a significantly higher percentage of Hispanic leaders (12.7%).

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted 55 open-ended, semistructured interviews in person, in private, usually in the respondent's office (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol). With each participant's written consent, I recorded the interviews, which were later transcribed. Mean interview length was 43 minutes. Data analysis consisted of iterative rounds of coding, beginning with Atlas.ti. In addition to the interview transcripts, I also dictated and transcribed fieldnotes immediately after each interview, which allowed me to be attentive to even the smallest details and nuances in interviews and to identify emerging trends across interviews. Though I used a constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 2009)—beginning analysis before data collection was complete—I did not alter my collection methods or interview protocol at any point in the study, to ensure consistency across the entire sample.

Results

Loss of Requisite Variety

In situations characterized by high volatility, it is important for sensemakers to remain flexible to situational unpredictability by extracting numerous social cues. This allows them to remain agile in response to environments in which "change is frequent and sometimes unpredictable" (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014, p. 313). The extraction of social cues—itself an ongoing task in all sensemaking—is especially consequential when we are first encountering issues or situations and asking ourselves "What's the story?" Respondents in my study unexpectedly reported the opposite—a restriction of communication that led to the loss of requisite variety. Notably, in many cases leaders were conscious of their choice to restrict their communication in order to avoid other potential organizational pitfalls, even if they were unaware of the full range of outcomes that would follow the loss of requisite variety. Among the reported ways volatility restricted communication in universities were: worry over upsetting stakeholders that resulted in the reduction of available tools for sensemaking, a breakdown in communication in universities, the creation of informal support structures, and a heightened awareness of the impact of the leader's own identity on sensemaking. To provide some context for responses, I include respondents' ethnicity and sex alongside the quotations I present below.

Worry over upsetting stakeholders. One of the most widely reported effects of volatility on the sensemakers in this study was concern for upsetting stakeholders. Leaders repeatedly expressed sensitivity to the possibility of alienating donors or alumni by taking too firm a stance - either for or against access. For universities with a history of serving poor or first generation students, for instance, leaders described the risk of alienating supporters by *not* taking an advocacy position on the issue. According to participants, the general sense is that the majority of major donors to Catholic higher education seem to be more conservative, however, meaning that advocacy for the undocumented tends to be the riskier position. The prospects of marginalizing alumni and donors did not necessarily keep leaders from advocating for undocumented students, but it made them more careful and strategic in how they addressed the issue.

Respondents repeatedly described the potential negative fallout from alienating institutional stakeholders. A white male president explained, "I think the risks of taking any public position on an issue is that you're going to alienate a percentage of your alumni, that's the main risk." A white male director of financial aid described some negative feedback: "But I had [an] equal [number of] alums who said, this is the worst thing that's ever happened here. How can we be providing access to students like this? We don't need to be doing this." For boundary-spanning leaders whose institutional responsibilities include the cultivation of relationships with both internal and external stakeholders, the fear of alienating those

stakeholders is a constant companion, particularly surrounding volatile issues on which people have deeply held convictions.

Leaders also spoke about the risk of antagonizing faculty and staff. From the surprised vocal tone and body language of the respondents who described this concern, they had not anticipated the risk. A white female vice-president for enrollment management explained, "Our African American faculty and staff feel that we pay too much attention to the Latino effort . . . and that if we were using these resources [differently] we could have a stronger African American population."

Another vice-president of enrollment management, a white male, expressed the same concern, "There's a lot of advocacy around—in racial ethnic subgroups—when you start crafting enrollment strategy."

He continued to explain that, though undocumented students tend to be economically poor, first generation students, efforts to welcome them and fund their education could often be interpreted as a, "Shift in strategies that we might have around the umbrella of diversity access."

The initial pride these leaders felt about their university's efforts to reach out to a typically economically impoverished demographic turned to caution, for fear of alienating and upsetting their own faculty and staff, especially members of other underrepresented minority groups.

One way for us to frame leader sensemaking in the midst of these various pressures is to examine the concept of commitment. According to Salancik (1977), "Three characteristics bind an individual to his acts and hence commit him. They are the visibility, the irrevocability, and the volitionality of the behavior" (p. 64). The more committed people are to their decisions the more they personally identify with those decisions and the harder they work to build meaning around them. When facing difficult decisions or contentious issues, therefore, leaders may be reticent to take public, irrevocable, and volitional positions that may bind them in the future. This can lead to a variety of different behaviors on the part of leaders who seek to insulate themselves from potential reproach.

To mitigate some of the potential fallout from reaching out to undocumented students, respondents in the study described several strategies for managing their commitment to a pro-access position. The primary tactic for avoiding the alienation of those opposed to access for undocumented students was to restrict conversations about the issue to private settings. The less public their commitment, the less leaders felt personally bound to the issue, especially in the broader public's mind. Leaders at several universities described exercising discretion when deciding with whom to discuss the issue openly. Many were reluctant to discuss the issue openly even with their own board members; presidents spoke repeatedly of avoiding the topic with trustees and other stakeholders who would likely

struggle with the university's access position. There was a similar unwillingness to openly raise the topic inside of universities—in several cases even important internal leaders such as directors of financial aid or admissions were left out of policy decisions, when their experience and perspective were arguably the most pertinent among top leaders (because universities do not collect student data regarding immigration status, often the only way to determine the number of undocumented students in an institution is through personal relationships with them or by triangulating admissions and financial aid data).

Another method for lessening commitment is to address the irrevocability of the decision. Leaders in several institutions explained that their universities officially had no policy regarding undocumented students. In the absence of a formal policy, leaders have found various ways to identify and serve the students. Some have devised ways to informally identify students from missing information on financial aid forms, while others have created generic scholarships that are awarded at the discretion of the financial aid director. Such tactics provide a measure of plausible deniability to leaders who may seek to avoid directly addressing the topic with those opposed to it, while still allowing the leaders flexibility to reach out to and support undocumented students.

A third tactic for managing commitment is to lessen the impact of choice. Leaders described various efforts to provide cover for their decisions to admit undocumented students by aligning the decisions with religious values or church teachings. A white male president explained, "I will say, it gives me cover from the right-wing. It's hard to attack us if the bishops are so strong on this."

By drawing clear parallels between deeply held mission values within the university, or by citing the support of Catholic bishops for reaching out to immigrants, leaders can lessen the perception that the admission decision is simply a free-will act informed by personal values. Of course, aligning support for the undocumented with mission values also has the paradoxical effect of deepening commitment - if there is a clear relationship between Catholic institutional values and admitting undocumented students then leaders are also strengthening their institutional commitment by citing that relationship. For the leaders themselves, however, drawing parallels like these can also serve to manage their personal commitment to the decision. By exercising these and other tactics to lessen commitment, leaders were able to introduce some strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) into their leadership surrounding the issue. This provides the flexibility to pursue a variety of policies and procedures while simultaneously providing some measure of political protection for leaders in their interactions with various stakeholders.

Though leaders tended to be sensitive to the potential alienation of stakeholders, many also showed considerable resolve to not be limited in doing what they believe is right. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, some leaders sought to be proactive in reaching out to important constituents who might not share a belief in access for undocumented students. A

white male vice-president for mission explained his efforts to educate university supporters on the topic, "Ultimately, it will be [the donors'] decision whether they want to stay engaged or not, but yeah, we try very hard to educate and help people to understand why we're doing what we're doing."

For all of the fear of upsetting stakeholders by adopting an access policy, leaders also realized that silence on the issue upsets people too. A white male president reflected, "but on this one, to be frank, I think we alienate people as much by not doing something as by doing it." The issue of undocumented student access is thus an example of the complex diversity of a university community; the word university comes from the Latin *universitas*, meaning 'the whole,' (University, 2014) and included in the whole are a vast array of different perspectives. Leaders thus face risks both by speaking out on access for undocumented students and by remaining silent.

Communication breakdown. Directors of financial aid and admissions repeatedly explained that they had not been included in any substantial way in the discussions leading to institutional policies or procedures for undocumented students. In some cases they had been completely left out of the conversations and the eventual procedure and policy decisions were simply handed down to them; in other cases they had been consulted only cursorily. A white female director of financial aid explained her frustration with not being directly involved:

> Along the way, I don't get to talk to any of the decision makers. I say, so I got this [dilemma], now what are we going to do with this? And all of my communications go up through a chain and then it comes down through a chain.

When I asked why they had not spoken up and shared their wisdom and perspective, various directors expressed concern for the potential backlash that could have resulted. If they had not been invited to participate in the conversation in the first place, they reasoned, their perspective had been purposefully excluded and they were unwilling to challenge that decision.

With the exception of several leaders whose long tenure at their institutions provided sufficient political capital to shield them from potential repercussions, the average director of financial aid or admissions was more reticent to engage top leaders in conversation about undocumented students. In my study the issue of undocumented student access was characterized by very sensitive political norms that only the intrepid would dare breach, even when more critical thinking and open conversation might improve the situation for the undocumented students and the universities.

Informal support structures. For undocumented students, gaining admission to a university is just one of the challenges to pursuing higher education. These typically low-income, first generation students experience a range of potential barriers to success, each compounded by the students' lack of legal standing in this country. Aside from funding strategies, none of the universities in which I interviewed, however, provided any formal programs to explicitly support undocumented students after their admission. In the absence of formal support networks, numerous interviewees described the emergence of informal support networks led by top university leaders. A white female director of financial aid explained, "Very honestly, a number of us gave up waiting for the administration to do something and we've started grassroots efforts, so we are just creating our own structure."

A Hispanic female vice-president for mission described the lengths she has gone to:

> I have never done anything illegal or against policy and procedure in the vein of
> supporting those who are undocumented. But I have lived the spirit of the law
> at times. I have been creative and resourceful - or ghetto - in my approach.

The most common leader in my sample to reach out to undocumented students after they arrived on campus was the financial aid director. A white male director of financial aid explained, "I'm probably the one person here who knows who all the undocumented students are, just because of my role here." In addition, whereas directors of admissions stop working with students after they are admitted, financial aid directors serve students every year until their graduation. Financial aid directors described a wide range of informal support practices, including personal and academic counseling, interventions with families, and even the storage of personal effects during summer breaks when students left their universities for several months. In addition to the directors, several vice-presidents of mission reported their involvement in informal support activities, generally owing to their personal relationships with undocumented students.

Heightened awareness of identity. Respondents described a number of ways that their roles and identities influenced their sensemaking. Numerous leaders expressed an awareness that their personal beliefs must always be tempered by their professional identities. They acknowledged that their words and actions were symbolic because of the positions they hold within the university. A black female provost explained:

> People feel that what you say has the potential for consequences and so what you
> say or support becomes more important …. You're actually going to make some
> decisions - even if it's at just the level of your own institution - but they are
> decisions that then send a message. They send a message to your own students.
> They send a message to your faculty. They send a message to the outer world.

This symbolic aspect of their leadership need not necessarily be construed as a limitation - throughout history leaders in higher education have used their positional power to further causes both inside and outside of the academy.   On an issue such as access for undocumented students, however, many leaders remain wary of taking too resolute a position - for or against access - for fear of putting their school or its stakeholders at risk.

This sensitivity to potential conflicts between personal and professional identities highlights another facet of the role of sensemaker identity, namely, multiplicity.   Each person has multiple identities and different identities operate at different times.   A black male provost described the tension between roles:

> And we had people, faculty, that step out in front of political issues one way or the other and it does come back, it does affect the university.   But as a provost, I don't think it's my position to do that. If I ever become a "private citizen" you would probably hear a lot [from me about undocumented students] but otherwise, no.

Numerous leaders described a similar tension between how they personally feel about undocumented students and what they believe is an appropriate public response from someone in their position in the university.   Given the volatility of the issue, all leaders in the study were very attentive to the demands of their professional roles in their universities

Discussion

This study helps us better understand the impact of volatility on organizational sensemaking. In response to the continually changing and unpredictable issue of undocumented student access to their institutions, leaders in U.S. Catholic colleges and universities altered their sensemaking in ways that led to detrimental effect.   Their primary response to high volatility was the instinct to manage their commitment, restrict communication, and reduce the extraction of social cues - which is precisely the wrong impulse when people are facing novel circumstances for the first time.   Instead of working to ensure rich communication and ongoing openness to a wide range of social cues, leaders tended to shroud their sensemaking in privacy and exclude key institutional decision makers.   These efforts also led to isomorphic tendencies as leaders tried to cover for their actions by mimicking leaders at other institutions.

Loss of Requisite Variety

A key characteristic of high reliability organizations is the reluctance to simplify.   Reluctance to simplify means preserving "sensitiv[ity] to variety and to descriptions and actions that pinpoint or hide that variety" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 62).   At some point in most decision making processes people simplify so that they can move on from the more intensive process of extracting cues and gathering information about the situation at hand and move to

decisions and actions. Simplification is a response to our bounded rationality (March & Heath, 1994; Simon, 1955); there is simply more information in the world than anyone could ever sense or understand, so we tend to simplify by restricting our gathering of cues, for the purpose of moving to decisions. In such situations, the restriction of communication is intended to reduce any potential confusion caused by an abundance of cues.

The problem, however, comes in the reduction of requisite variety that results from the resticted communication. Especially when sensemakers are engaging an issue that is complex or varied, it is important to retain sufficient, or requisite, variety to register information about the issue that is as complex or varied as the issue itself. By restricting communication and excluding important institutional leaders from participation in decision making processes, leaders in this study effectively reduced their requisite variety. They were thus sensing inputs that were less complex and varied—by virtue of their reduced number—than the issue they were encountering. As a result, they tended to move to simplification before they had gathered sufficient information about exactly what kind of thing they were facing.

It is important to note that it was not the case that the reduction of requisite variety for top leaders means that no cues were being extracted. Instead, respondents throughout the study reported the extraction of numerous and varied cues as they were making sense of the issue. The breakdown, however, occurred as top leaders restricted communication, thus reducing their access to the broader range of extracted cues in their organizations. Sensemakers rely on social cues to reduce *equivocality*, which can be understood as "the extent to which data are unclear and suggest multiple interpretations about the environment" (Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 291). Undocumented student access is currently characterized by significant equivocality. In universities that support access - either officially or often more privately - there remain stakeholders who oppose access, sometimes vehemently. In universities that lack a position on access - for or against - leaders may be unsure of how to serve undocumented students and they may be wary of potential consequences for broaching the issue at all.

The experiences reported by directors of financial aid and admissions - especially the experiences regarding informal service of undocumented students - resonates with Balogun and Johnson's (2004) study of strategic change in a privatized utility. They found that "it is crucial to understand change recipients' reactions to change and the way they shape change in the absence of senior management" (p. 523). In addition, the authors found that "especially in geographically dispersed organizations, senior managers became 'ghosts' in the sensemaking of middle managers, rather than being active directors of change" (p. 524). In other words, though senior managers may play a large role in initiating strategic change, it is the work of middle managers to mediate that vision into actionable strategies. Balogun and Johnson describe this work of middle managers as "negotiating processes" (p. 540) by which they bridge the gap between institutional policy and the particularities of daily life in the

organization. Though universities are typically not geographically dispersed organizations, they are loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) and thus share some of the same characteristics. The reports of leaders in my study illustrate this obfuscation between levels of the university hierarchy and highlight the significance of informal efforts by directors and vice-presidents to reach out to undocumented students.

Though simplification is usually a necessary step in decision making processes, high reliability organizations resist the temptation to simplify, to retain the richest possible ongoing extraction of social cues. This preserves resiliency and ensures they are not failing to observe cues that may require a response. The simplification observed in this study was not directly a response to sensemakers' bounded rationality, nor was it intended to help decision makers reduce the equivocality that results from the oversupply of possible meanings from which to choose (Daft & Weick, 1984). Rather, the simplification was more a result of top leaders' sensitivity to environmental risks, especially the risk of offending stakeholders. This suggests that environmental uncertainty—here due to the volatility of a fraught issue—can lead sensemakers to move to simplification even when it is not in their best interests to do so. Again, universities are not high reliability organizations, and they do not usually seek to resist the temptation to simplify in order to preserve resilience. Insofar as undocumented student access is a volatile issue for them, however, especially when they are first engaging it, sensemakers can preserve the extraction of rich cues by monitoring their response to the volatility.

Requisite Variety and Enactment

Enactment refers to the ways "organizations are more active in constructing the environments that impinge on them than is commonly recognized" (Weick, 1977, p. 267). Reality does not exist as a wholly objective entity that can be experienced by people. Rather, it is a socially constructed phenomenon (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) that changes in response to human activity and even human perception. Not only does the volatility of an issue like undocumented student access result in unpredictable and ongoing change, the presence and actions of people trying to make sense of it add an additional layer of complexity as they enact further change.

This study highlights an interesting dual effect of enactment: a sincere interest in understanding what is happening and what should be done to serve undocumented students, and a simultaneous fear of drawing attention to the undocumented students or to universities in the midst of the process of sensemaking. This reminds us of Weick's (1995) basic formula for sensemaking, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 18). In terms of enactment, we can reframe that formula into, "I create the object to be seen and inspected when I say or do something" (p. 61). Both of these formulas illustrate that sensemakers impact the environments and realities they are trying to understand.

What is especially interesting in this study, in terms of enactment, is the ways that leaders' efforts to manage their commitment to undocumented student access resulted in arguably increased equivocality. A commonly reported practice among all universities in the sample was the careful management of university personnel involved in exploring undocumented student access and discerning potential courses of policy and action. At numerous universities top leaders (usually presidents and provosts) made the decision to exclude even the institutional "elites" (Selznick, 1957) primarily responsible for enacting university missions, namely, directors of admissions and financial aid. Because universities do not collect data on immigration status, the primary way to identify undocumented students is by triangulation of data from personal encounters, admissions applications, and financial aid forms. Directors of admissions and financial aid, then, become valuable sources of information about this volatile issue. Excluding them from organizational sensemaking efforts results in less accurate information and increased ambiguity, precisely at a time when leaders should be seeking rich and authentic data.

In their efforts to protect themselves from the volatility surrounding undocumented student access numerous leaders limited their sensemaking, potentially exposing themselves to additional negative outcomes. Undocumented student access is not only a volatile issue, it is also complex, with legal, human rights, immigration, education, and other implications. When leaders restricted communication in their institutions during initial sensemaking of the issue, they ended up triggering suboptimal situations on their campuses. Leaders reported having initiated numerous methods of informal support for undocumented students, efforts that were not only outside of any official university policies or guidelines, but of which top leaders were not even aware. Perhaps the most vivid example of informal support was a white male financial aid director storing boxes of personal effects for undocumented students during the summer months. If the issue is so volatile that presidents and provosts exclude financial aid directors from university sensemaking efforts that take place behind closed doors, we might imagine that storing personal effects in an off campus house would likewise be problematic.

Another way to understand the communication breakdown between university leaders is to return to the concept of commitment. Weick (1995) explains that, "as commitment develops around specific actions, these diverse cognitions become organized into those that support the action, those that oppose it, and those that are irrelevant to it" (p. 159). Before a group has committed to a position or direction, it is open to a much broader range of sensemaking inputs as it gathers information. Once it has committed to a plan of action, however, the group prioritizes information that confirms the commitment and helps the group take steps to enact the decision. In this study we can identify such an organization of cognitions, indicated by the apprehension that some financial aid and admissions directors feel for voicing the challenges they recognize in admitting and graduating undocumented students. Once top leaders have made the decision to admit undocumented students, they

seem less willing to hear voices that oppose access or offer challenging critiques to the institutional policy.

If we accept Weick's (1995) description of commitment as a process of moving from broad openness to sensemaking inputs to a more restricted and focused process of selecting inputs that will help people enact their decisions, we might question why top decision makers in universities were not more open to input in the initial stages of sensemaking on undocumented student access. Why were directors of financial aid and admissions not consulted more regularly during the information gathering phase when leaders were rigorously asking, "What's the story here?"

The answer to that question is quite simple: leaders tended to be very concerned about potential risks associated with admitting these students. These concerns included not wanting "to jeopardize our tax exemption status" (Hispanic male vice-president for mission), "a risk that some of your donors would be unhappy with it and would stop giving" (white male provost), and "alienating and antagonizing the faculty and staff" (white male president). In short, leaders were so unsure of how immigration issues in the United States might play out that they were often unwilling to take public positions that could put their institutions in danger of any sort. As a result, they tended to carefully control the process of information gathering and sensemaking so that they could protect their universities. One of the results of this conscientiousness, however, was a general cessation of sensemaking in some universities at the decision to admit students, to the detriment of policies and procedures that could help the students be more successful once they arrived on campus.

Isomorphic Tendencies

In the absence of similar action on undocumented student access from their peers, leaders were generally reticent to take any action that might be considered bold or public. They were concerned about possible pushback if they and their institutions took stances that went beyond what others were doing. This resonates with Gonzales' (2013) study in which faculty members sought legitimacy in a time of strategic change in their institution by seeking to mimic the practices of aspirational peers, a process known as mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The only leaders in this study who described a relative lack of concern for pushback were those with significant tenure in their positions and a generally high degree of support for outreach to the undocumented throughout their universities. The great majority of leaders, however, expressed reservations for reaching out too boldly to the undocumented, for fear of drawing negative attention to themselves, their universities, and the undocumented students themselves.

This tendency towards isomorphism is not uncommon in higher education, in the crafting of mission statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006) and in presidential communications (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019). It can be problematic, however, especially in the early

stages of encountering an issue, especially one that is contentious or volatile. Though leaders appreciate the legitimacy that results in aligning one's actions with noted authorities—as in the case of the white male president who reported "cover from the right-wing" by citing statements from Catholic bishops that support his institution's position on undocumented students—premature alignment with peers may lead, again, to impoverished sensemaking of the issue and suboptimal decisions. Given the increasingly polarized and politicized atmosphere in the United States, especially surrounding a variety of immigration issues, it is understandable that presidents and other top university leaders report sensitivity to alienating stakeholders. This suggests, however, that leaders should also be especially sensitive to which external authorities and allies they cite for legitimizing their decisions.

Institutional characteristics play an important role here, too. Whereas we see mimetic isomorphism more regularly as colleges and universities seek to align themselves with aspirational peer institutions (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Morphew & Hartley, 2006), best practices regarding undocumented student populations can vary widely between institutional types. Highly selective universities, for instance, may have a very small pool of undocumented students who are eligible for admission; universities that are less selective in their admissions may have a much larger pool of eligible undocumented students. These institutions of lower academic profile may find the issue of undocumented student access to be of much higher stakes. Whereas a highly selective institution's stated policy on undocumented students might only impact a few potential admissions and financial aid decisions, a less selective institution's policy will likely affect far more potential students. This is important to consider, as undocumented students typically come from low income backgrounds and require significant financial aid if they are to enroll in higher education. Leaders, then, must balance any isomorphic tendencies with careful consideration of how any potential policy decisions affect their institutions.

Volatile situations may thus highlight the paradox of isomorphic tendencies. Alignment with peers (or aspirational peers) with reputational capital may provide legitimacy for one's actions and decisions. Such mimicry, however, can also have the effect of short circuiting one's sensemaking of the issue at hand, possibly leading to suboptimal policies or decisions. This suggests that when a situation is judged to be volatile—characterized by instability or unpredictability—those responsible for making sense of it might exercise additional caution and avoid the temptation to mimic the actions of others, even others with significant reputational capital. If they can avoid the temptation to isomorphism, leaders may be able to hedge against the situational volatility and maintain the needed flexibility, openness, and requisite variety that will allow them to fully understand what they are facing.

Limitations

This study includes a number of limitations. First, the sample was restricted to Catholic colleges and universities. While Catholic institutions experience some freedom from legal requirements that their public peers do not, their Catholic character influences leader thinking on undocumented student access. Second, the primary research question for this study was, "How are leaders in Catholic universities making sense of undocumented student access?" One of the primary findings was the ways that volatility affects their sensemaking; however, the study was not designed to explicitly explore volatility and its effects. A study designed to more directly explore volatility and sensemaking might result in richer data. Finally, the fact that all institutions in my study had a relatively welcoming stance towards undocumented students also limits the findings. Had I been able to identify one or more institutions that were not welcoming to undocumented students, responses may have been more diverse.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Future Research

This study has a number of implications for theory, practice, and future research. Due to the lack of consensus about access for the undocumented in the U.S.—among other, broader immigration issues that are also currently in flux—I had the unusual opportunity to observe sensemaking as it was beginning to occur for university leaders. This provided a window into the very early stages of sensemaking and highlighted the volatility that influenced how leaders encountered the issue. In the absence of normative guidance for making sense of access for undocumented students, university leaders were aware of the vulnerability of any conclusions they might reach in their thinking. This allowed me to witness leader sensemaking in a particularly raw and unsettled form.

This study enriches our understanding of sensemaking by exploring sensemaker response to perceived environmental volatility. In a sense, we are witnessing sensemaking of this access issue just after the "big bang" of its occurrence, which provides us with a unique window into the impact of volatility on sensemaking of the issue. Leaders described tightly controlling their processes of information gathering and decision-making, in order to provide for strategic ambiguity and to enable them to manage their commitment to the issue. Leaders described their frustration that they do not feel free to more openly advocate for students with real promise, and they reported the lack of support services for the undocumented even at campuses where their application and admission are welcomed. Their concern for upsetting university stakeholders caused leaders to respond defensively and restrict the perspectives they included in their decision-making processes, effectively resulting in a loss of requisite variety.

The loss of requisite variety in the enactment process of organizational sensemaking affected all subsequent processes. This highlights an important, yet paradoxical, point for

sensemakers experiencing environmental volatility: how to preserve requisite variety, especially in the early stages of sensemaking, while simultaneously protecting themselves from potential fallout from openly engaging in sensemaking. Though this study did not explore potential solutions to managing the effects of volatility on one's sensemaking, we can nevertheless identify some principles to hold in tension while addressing the matter. First, perceived volatility should trigger not only defensive tendencies for sensemakers—such as carefully managing one's commitment to an issue—but should also signal the importance of coming to a rich and complex understanding of the issue. Sensemakers should thus take steps to preserve requisite variety, even if they discern the need for precautionary measures to manage their commitment to the issue. Generally speaking, the more volatile an issue, the greater the need to ensure sound sensemaking.

Second, efforts to manage one's commitment to an issue should be carefully monitored. Leaders managed the irrevocability of their commitment in this study by creating discretionary scholarships that they could award to undocumented students based on criteria other than the students' legal status and by creating subtle methods for identifying the students without officially labeling them as undocumented. While unofficial tactics such as these manage the irrevocability of leader decisions to admit undocumented students, the tactics also suffer from being informal. If admissions and funding policies are not formal and official, how are students to know about them? If admissions directors are not able to openly broach the topic of undocumented student access, how will they reach out to students whom their universities would welcome? Unofficial policies and practices can thus lead to unintended constraints on admitting and supporting undocumented students, even while they provide leaders with strategic ambiguity in addressing the issue.

The tendency to exclude organizational elites—directors of financial aid and admissions— effectively removed their important perspectives from the early sensemaking of the issue. While the intent was to protect top leaders by carefully controlling the scope of the conversation surrounding undocumented student access on their campuses, this decision prevented those who know the most about the organization's engagement of the issue from having a voice in decision making processes. Leaders should carefully weigh any potential loss of requisite variety due to such restricted perspectives against the potential risk from including a larger set of voices on any issue. They may find that the potential risk is mitigated by the richness the broader perspectives offer them in their sensemaking, thus justifying the inclusion of more viewpoints.

This study illustrates that while strategies for managing commitment can provide security and anonymity to leaders who are making sense of controversial issues, they do not come without a cost. If leaders are sensitive to their exposure on an issue, they should likewise be aware of the ways that managing their commitment may restrict their ability to take action.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What was your experience the first time you heard about undocumented student access?

    a. What was your intuitive response to it?

    b. Whom did you consult to gain perspective on the issue?

    c. What data or information did you gather about the issue?

    d. Has your thinking on this issue changed since you first encountered it?

2. What voices or perspectives are you hearing that speak to this issue?

    a. What are the most compelling arguments to you?

    b. What pressures do you feel to take a position on the issue?

    c. How are you dealing with those pressures?

    d. What risks do you face in taking a position?

3. How does the Catholic character of your institution relate to the issue?

    a. How does Catholic social teaching speak to the issue?

    b. How do Catholic organizations - such as the USCCB or the ACCU - impact your understanding of this issue?

    c. How does American Catholic higher education's historic commitment to serving immigrants relate to undocumented students?