Spring 4-12-2022

Communicating change during a college merger process: A grounded theory approach

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COMMUNICATING CHANGE DURING A COLLEGE MERGER PROCESS: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Minnesota State University Moorhead

Moorhead, MN

April 2022

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my fellow curious humans, who seek to learn more about the world around them. Change is fear-inducing and joy-inducing, but it is the only constant we can rely upon. That, and the power of kind people. Thank you to my husband, Jared, my family, my colleagues, my committee, and my many mentors who have supported me in this endeavor.

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NOMENCLATURE

FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GT	Grounded Theory
HCC	Hibbing Community College
HLC	Higher Learning Commission
IHE	Institute of Higher Education
ICC	Itasca Community College
LMX Theory	Leader-Member Exchange Theory
NHED	Northeast Higher Education District
MinnState	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
MMA	Middle Management Association
MRC	Mesabi Range College
SO	System Office
RRCC	Rainy River Community College
VCC	Vermilion Community College

ABSTRACT

Merger is rapidly becoming an approach to addressing the enrollment and financial challenges posed to higher education in the wake of recent demographic shifts and funding changes in the United States. This study focuses on a district of rural community colleges in a Midwest, unionized state college system that is in the process of merging into a single institution. The main locus of the study is on the communication perspectives of leaders during this merger and the changes that it engendered. Eight leaders were interviewed to examine the following questions: Q1) Which communication strategies do leaders at five different public institutions utilize in an attempt to create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation?; and Q2) How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic? A grounded theory approach was utilized to construct a process by which these leaders communicated through change. Ultimately, five themes arose as aspects of the communication approach during merger: 1) Coaching and Guiding, 2)Timeliness, 3) Tailored Messaging, 4) Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection, and 5) Trust in the Process to form the Theory of Dynamic Interactionism. The themes within the theory align with the need to balance a large-scale structural change with the other areas of Bolman and Deal's framework: human resource, political, and symbolic, with the emphasis on human resources and political frames of change. Although this work is focused on a single system, this process could be utilized to guide merger work in other fields, outside of education, as well as other college systems.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education funding and enrollment has been experiencing a steady decline over the last five to ten years. The decrease in financial resources in higher education is prompting many administrators to look at new ways to cut costs and utilize economies of scale to accomplish the same work in a single system, rather than as independent collegiate units. This has been explored extensively in K-12 education, but factors in higher education may be different, including program accreditations, research, student support systems, and flexibility to distance communication and learning. Distributed organizations, such as higher education institutions (HEIs), require different communication and consensus strategies than many other organizations that may operate in a more hierarchical structure (Buller, 2015). Distributed organizations share power amongst individuals and/or groups within the organization (shared governance and committees in higher education), versus hierarchical organizations which hold power from the top down, as in many companies. Further from this, decentralized organizations function as a total democracy. The distributed power structure of HEIs means that a change in structure may change power dynamics, leading to a sense of loss.

Successful merger transitions will be key in maintaining the operations of the processes listed above. Communication from leaders can set the tone for buy-in and can cue the involvement faculty and staff have in shaping the future of the organization. Kotter’s Eight Step Model for organizational change includes communicating for buy-in as a major step in any large-scale movement (Calegari, Sibley, & Turner, 2015). Beyond this, communication and the relationships between individuals, culture around ideas, and coalition building are all key ingredients to the success of any change movement (Krüger, 1996).

Due to the recent increase of college consolidations, researchers have been focused on ways that leaders can communicate change to their constituents in a merger process. Collaborative communication structures have been found to be more effective in eliciting smooth change (Valentine, 2018). While difficult in larger organizations, individuals have been found to trust and align with advice and information given from employers or colleagues that they feel personally connected to or could have rapport with (Siciliano, 2016). Because HEIs have distributive leadership, they operate much differently in change situations than hierarchical or top-down entities (Buller, 2015). Since policies and other internal mechanisms have likely been developed by the people that the change is being communicated to, the implications of change may start off on a negative trajectory. To combat this, collaborative decision making around change may mitigate some of these stumbling blocks (Lewis, 2007).

Beyond the need to elicit buy-in during the merger process, there can be additional complicating factors. There are various types of mergers--from voluntary to involuntary. Even the language around the term “merger” can be fraught with tensions around identity and job security (Harman & Meek, 2002). Trust-building and front-end work are found to span years leading to a successful merger. One central point from Harman and Meek (2002) focused on the need for time to “heal the wounds of a merger” and rebuild a single, cohesive identity from the previously individualized institutions. Because of this, the efficiencies promised by a merger may take a long time to become evidenced.

While collaborative decision making may elicit more broad-based buy-in, aside from creating a reasonable foundation from which to build relationships anew across campuses within an institutional reorganization, this work can also slow change and create complications in both lateral and hierarchical communication (Buller, 2015). Although this is elucidated in more detail in chapter 2, these types of complications may lead to a loss of control over the reorganization process and a lack of coordination if communication is not clear regarding the outcomes of the process.

Purpose

As more colleges are considering merging as a cost-saving measure, appropriate communication strategies from leaders looking to affect change and bring about this large-scale shift in structure will be key. Leaders need to know what the most effective communication strategies are, and they must create stakeholder buy-in during the consolidation process. The purpose of this study is to detail the process for how leaders at an HEI undergoing a reorganization leveraged multiple communication approaches to create buy-in and collective culture around the merger. The outcomes and information learned here will help leaders approach merger and consolidation in higher education in a more productive way, and the smooth transition will reduce impacts to student learning, cultivate positive responses to change, and prevent poor college-wide morale. Further discussion of the grounded theory methodology used in this research will follow in chapter three.

Research Question

The main issue addressed in this study is framing change in multiple ways, so that leaders can seek buy-in from all stakeholders, as well as predict potential roadblocks to success by addressing multiple lenses through which to view the institutional reorganization. The main question, therefore, is: *What communication strategies are utilized by leaders at different public institutions to create buy-in from stakeholders within a reorganization process that consolidates these colleges into one institution?* Additionally, a second question poses: *How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?*

Theoretical Framework

The Theoretical Framework for this study was the Four Frames of Leadership, which originates from research by Bolman and Deal (2017). The four frames of leadership are structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. With a large-scale *structural* change, such as a merger, we need to be certain that the other three frames are well-attended to. In particular, *political,* and *human resource* buy-in is influenced by communication strategies that elicit buy-in, group dynamic and rapport. Beyond that, *symbolic* leadership is crucial in creating a culture and common identity that brings individuals across the institution together under a common mission.

Other works, such as those by Buller (2015), focus on different "lenses" of examining an issue. For example, Buller shared the perspective of a convex lens, which would focus the examination of change in detail, versus the concave lens that allows one to see the big picture. Furthermore, a rose-colored lens would allow a change leader to see the positives in a best-case scenario, whereas a sunglass view would look through change dimly to see possible pitfalls and issues. However, Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames of Leadership model is a time-tested, well-rounded approach to examining change leadership, and this work is broadly applicable. This Theoretical Framework has been chosen for its usefulness in not only this study, but its applicability to all types of IHEs that are undergoing change.

Significance

This study is significant because mergers are increasingly frequent, large-scale disruptions to the structure of the higher education organization. Because of this, the opportunity to study this phenomenon in-situ is rare. However, due to the increased use of this approach as a cost-saving measure, the investment into understanding good facilitation of this process is prudent. Not considering communication at a critical juncture can permanently damage the culture of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Changes in school structure, whether they be physical, financial, administrative, or system-wide have a broad impact on student experience, which is outlined in more detail in chapter 2, as well as the impacts that are felt by faculty and staff. The literature thus far leaves much room to examine public higher education intuition consolidations, particularly at public two-year community and technical colleges. Adding to the complexity is the examination of colleges that are part of a state-wide system, such as in this study system noted in chapter 3. Consortia of colleges create a network of resources and stakeholders, but whether that aids consolidation efforts or creates additional complexities is unknown. Ultimately, understanding the impacts of communication from leadership on the process of consolidation on public, two-year higher education institutions' stakeholders, student body, faculty, and staff will better help leaders manage changes and make decisions around these efforts.

Research Ethics

To conduct this study, the researcher sought and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study was sought from the college(s) where the research project took place. Protection of human subjects participating in research was assured. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Consent (See Appendix A) that the researcher included in the email before the beginning of the study interview. Participants were made aware that this study was conducted as part of the researcher's Doctoral Degree Program and that it would benefit her educational practice. Informed consent means that the participants were informed of the aspects of the study that may interest or concern them, in a way that they can fully understand the implications of participating in the study (Frankel et al., 2019). Confidentiality was protected with pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined both verbally and in writing.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the sampling method. A purposive sample at institutions that are part of this consolidation during one merger may limit the applicability of the data. For example, these are all public higher education institutions. All these institutions are in the same district and undergoing a common merger process. Due to different constraints in access, using one system of merger will support collection of not only interview materials, but also artifacts that will support the discussion of communication methods. Another limitation was the examination of communication. Though communication is a dual-directional mode, the interviews and artifacts came from the perspective of the leaders, not the constituent groups. More details on the research methodology are outlined in chapter 3.

Timing was also a limitation. Some researchers have found that post-merger attitudes and impacts may be poignant within the first few years of merger, but then decrease in impact over several years proceeding (Harman & Meek, 2002). This may suggest that different timeframes of merger at each institution could skew the data in a negative direction if examination is within a recently merged institution. Furthermore, the groundwork must be laid for a merger several years prior to the process of reorganization. In completing this research, the participants were asked to reflect upon their role in the outset, planning, and implementation of the reorganization. Due to changes in leadership that naturally take place in higher education, the people involved at the outset may be different than those implementing the change. Lastly, because this merger is slated to be “complete” in fall 2022, there will be long-term impacts felt beyond the timeframe of this study. However, this opens the possibility to longitudinal studies beyond the work laid out here. The opportunity for continued research and data makes this research relevant three to five years into the future.

Definition of Terms

To define some frequently used terms in this research, the first area to address is the naming convention for the colleges within this study. This study is focused on the Northeast Higher Education District (NHED), comprised of five independently accredited colleges: Itasca Community College (ICC), Hibbing Community College (HCC), Mesabi Range College (MRC), Rainy River Community College (RRCC), and Vermilion Community College (VCC). These colleges are all part of a larger, state-wide system of colleges and universities called Minnesota State (MinnState), formerly known as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities "MnSCU" system. This network has a system office (SO) that houses centralized leadership, through a chancellor and series of vice-chancellors, as well as other functions, such as centralized Information Technology and the Office of General Council.

Funding for the operations of the colleges comes through a combination of tuition and state appropriation. For the NHED, funding comes through to the district as a single unit, then is distributed using a similar model to what is used to distribute funds from the state to the colleges in the MinnState system. Particularly, enrollment is a main driver of funding. This funding structure has been most challenging in recent years for rural colleges. The NHED covers a geographic range of communities that have been experiencing population decline (University of Minnesota Extension Office, 2021), thus funding has also decreased, driving the need for the economies of scale a merger would provide.

Historically, this reorganization process was brought about by revelations of increasing need to cooperate during strategic planning for the district of colleges in question (planning beginning in 2016). Once this became apparent, faculty and administrators from each college participated in a yearlong NHED regional academic planning committee that ultimately made the recommendation to explore the move from five independently accredited institutions to one, multi-campus college. This would bring the district from five of the smallest colleges in the Minnesota State system to the ninth-largest college. Once consolidation was chosen as a potential avenue for future success, work began to seek funding for this process, create a leadership and communication structure for the new college, and ultimately the Vision NE teams were created to carry out the work with broad buy-in from across the colleges (campuses, from here forward) and work units.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the urgency and importance of assessing change communication and how it can elicit buy-in from constituents was highlighted. The increasing exploration of merger as a solution to growing economic constraints in higher education drives the impetus for such research in large-scale change. Frames of leadership and communication were discussed, and in the next chapter, we delve into the literature review around merger as a financial strategy, the impacts of leadership frames on change, and the impacts of change on the mission of IHEs: student success outcomes. All of this will frame our methods to approach this study.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review first tackles the financial state of higher education, and then it outlines the merger process and economies of scale that can be realized during this process. Then a discussion of change management, as well as leadership styles and responsibilities during change processes, is put forth. Beyond these approaches, some case studies, quantitative research, and qualitative research around specific merger processes and impacts of merger, including failures of communication, are examined. Lastly, a review of the methods and the specific context of this study within the State of Minnesota concludes this section.

The strategy for aligning this review began with a basic search of the consolidation and reorganization processes within the United States, starting with a thorough exploration of literature in ERIC, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. This search revealed that these processes tended to be found in the K-12 system; however, increasingly, these are happening in real-time within the higher education realm. In Europe and other parts of the globe, reorganizations are more frequently studied in higher education, and specifically a move toward mergers within the late 1990s and early 2000s is apparent in the literature (Harman & Meek, 2002; Norgår & Skodvin, 2002).

The increasingly challenging financial model of public higher education institutions (HEIs) is being scrutinized across the United States. Due to declining enrollment, difficult state allocation models, and a currently booming economy, colleges are straining to support their bottom line while educating and training the next generation of workers. Institutions around the country are looking to various solutions to meet their financial goals, while still providing educational access and programming to students. One possible solution that has been explored is school consolidation. As stated by Beuchert, et al. (2018):

> In North America, Europe, and Scandinavia in particular, many policy makers are convinced that larger schools are less costly than smaller schools due to economies of scale. Further, it is often argued that larger schools are better than smaller schools when it comes to teacher specialization, qualifications and course quality. As a result, school consolidations (school closings, expansions, and mergers) are spreading and primary school size trends upwards. (p.31)

Consolidation and Finance

School consolidation is a model that is often utilized to save money in public K-12 institutions, and it has been met with varying success (Bard et al. 2006; Barter, 2014; Cox & Cox, 2010). Often, rural schools feel larger impacts due to the scarcity of resources, commute challenges, and differences in political capital (Bard et al. 2006; Warner et al., 2010). However, the consolidation of HEIs has been more incremental and less well-studied, with some of the most major changes taking place within the last five years (Russell, 2019).

It is important to examine the viability of consolidation in public, 2-year higher education. Without thorough examination of the cost-benefit analysis of college consolidation, schools run the risk of dismantling cornerstone institutions in their communities for little or no benefit. Students may suffer academically, communities may experience a decline in community resources and pride, and decreased morale of faculty and staff may impact school culture. Alternatively, the social and academic effects may be minimal or even positive, and the cost savings in consolidation may reestablish the financial security of the higher educational institution. The question remains: what is the impact of school consolidation on public, two-year higher education institutions, and how are students, faculty, and staff affected by the changes that consolidation engenders?

Much of the driving force around the financial strain HEIs have faced centers on fiscal policy post-recession. Work by Katsinas, et al. (2016) focused on funding year 2016, however, impacts and trends may be evidenced by practices seen today. The failure of state appropriations to cover inflationary costs and student aid needs that increase with the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI) means that students and public institutions are straining to provide and receive the same services that they were previous to the recession. Notably, rural community colleges are cited as receiving the least support. This is particularly important when researching equitable access and affordability in higher education for students. Medicaid, K-12 education, pensions, and transportation are all identified as “competitors” to higher education for funding at the state level. Unless states balance their budgets and appropriate the funding necessary to keep up with inflationary costs, institutions will be forced to raise tuition or cut programming and services.

Beyond this, the political landscape has changed in recent years, impacting state funding mechanisms (Modungo & Di Carlo, 2019). Neo-liberal policies have driven pressures to create efficiencies within public higher education systems. Funding mechanisms based on performance fall under the guise of accountability, but often carry financial punishments for underperforming institutions. Strategic planning focused on outputs is noted as facilitating changes in managerial styles, including budget management. Additionally, competition between institutions perpetuates the need to be efficient. Modungo and Di Carlo (2019) contended that accrual accounting may help support institutions looking to take stock of costs and revenues. Because public higher education is not fully autonomous in how money is allocated, strategies of internal management become more important. Although Modungo and Di Carlo (2019) focused specifically accounting and money management approaches as a tool to contend with lean times, this information is valuable in framing the current allocation situation within IHEs.

Merger Process and Economies of Scale

Mergers in education are a global phenomenon. They occur on a scale internal to an institution (departmental merger, as described by Beard & Park, 2016), or they can encompass large university systems (University of Georgia, as described by Ribando & Evans, 2015). Harman and Meek (2002) outlined the motivations behind the use of merger to streamline higher education delivery. Interestingly, this research notes that mergers may be a way for governments to better control the overall direction of higher education, particularly local and regional objectives. Further, Harman and Meek (2002) introduced several case studies across the globe of both successful and difficult merger processes. Notably, these authors point to a 1994 study by Norgård's and Skodvin which focused on a merger in Norway that presented significant geographic, cultural, and structural barriers. Particularly, the academic programming was vastly different within each of the four merged colleges. While the structural differences were able to be addressed, Norgård & Skodvin (1994) found that the cultural and social differences were much more difficult to overcome.

A European study of institutional reorganizations outlined the possible rationales for use of merger to reduce public resource burden (Rocha et al., 2019). Centralized business services and resources can combine to make economies of scale that more efficiently address needs, reducing duplicative services. Notably, merger costs and resources are identified as being more expensive and costly that most intuitions realize, from the outset, though the goal of efficiency and increased ability to compete in a higher education market may outpace these costs. The research questions from Rocha, et al. (2019) focus on the trends and driving entities behind the mergers, the merger process, and funding motivations. The findings showed the economic and competitive gains, quality improvement, and increased efficiency through collaboration were the main reasons behind European mergers. Overall, voluntary mergers received positive feedback as compared to mandated ones, and shaping a new shared identity was identified as an important and difficult step in the process.

Contrary to these findings of increased gains during merger, Bard et al. (2006) focused on the impacts of rural K-12 school consolidation on communities through time. The researchers provided a history of the process of consolidation, starting in the 1800s. Discussions about international competitiveness, politics, and community disintegration and absenteeism frame the literature review at the outset of the article, with the authors arguing that community identity must be considered when planning consolidation efforts.

Studies on school district size indicate that 260-2,925 students is the ideal range for appropriate extra-curricular offerings and personalized education. Outliers from this range would likely miss out on services and opportunities. If going by strictly social and emotional data, it is suggested that schools should be no larger than 500 students. School achievement was then linked to school size, indicating that smaller schools yield greater achievement results.

Overall, Bard, Gardener, and Wieland (2006) posited that economies of scale that often push consolidations may be negligible in gains when assessing more intangible and holistic factors related to community health, student development, and overall student success. However, they suggested that each school is unique, and partnerships should be explored whenever possible, plausible, and viable. Finally, when considering the gap in knowledge that relates to equity in consolidation, a study proposal and series of questions by Eacott (2019) creates a framework for understanding. Two important research questions to model from Eacott (2019) include:

> *What is the relative impact of, and relations among, leadership and governance, staff, and student well-being, teaching and learning, curriculum pathways, and community satisfaction on newly formed regional consolidated secondary schools?*
>
> and
>
> *When and how should systemic interventions address equity and quality issues relating to the consolidation of schools, and what principles should guide these interventions?* (p. 680).

Managing Change during Reorganization of HEIs

Managing change successfully requires a thorough examination of the factors that influence buy-in and culture around a movement. Good leaders understand that multiple constituents play a role in the success of change movements in an organization. Considerations of faculty, staff, students, community, workforce, and government all play a role in the consolidation of rural community colleges. With growing economic pressure, student loan backlash, and decreasing enrollment, small community colleges are turning to collaborative solutions to maintain rural educational access in the face of these challenges. The researcher will outline some approaches to examine the impacts of consolidation, with a focus on how leadership styles and communication may play a role in engaging stakeholders in the process, particularly faculty and staff.

Models of Change Management

Krüger model.

The Krüger Model, known as the “iceberg model” of change theory posits most of the pitfalls and real work of change happens below the surface, much as the bulk of an iceberg may be invisible under the surface of the water (Buller, 2015). These are not superficial issues that can be easily addressed, rather it is personalities, relationships, power, and perception that all play a role on the bigger motions of change management. Like Bolman and Deal’s Four Frames (2017), the theoretical framework used for this overall dissertation research, Krüger encouraged change leaders to consider these deeper, comprehensive matters that may be rooted in culture, history, and politics.

The Krüger Model suggests a systems approach to change; leaders can understand the political and social dynamics of the change to better mobilize supporters, empower those that can see the change through, and address opponents. This also encourages a sensitivity to hidden opponents to the change, and by addressing the concerns of these individuals, change leaders can avoid sinking the whole project by not considering these insidious factors.

Kotter model.

Building off the Krüger Model, the Kotter Model of Change Management alludes to eight steps in approaching change. These steps address some of the unseen factors beyond the obvious cost, quality, and time that previous model describes as the tip of the iceberg. The following are the eight steps in the Kotter Model (Buller, 2015, pp. 7-11):

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create the guiding coalition
3. Develop a change vision
4. Communicate the vision for buy-in

5. Empower broad-based action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Never let up
8. Incorporate the change into the culture

Step four aligns with this research, which will focus on change communication. However, the building blocks to effectively hold these conversations depend on the true sense of a need for the change, as well as the team that is involved with the process and the vision that is developed to propel the work. Without that groundwork laid, the foundation of the communication will not hold.

Kübler-Ross model.

The Kübler-Ross Model of change outlines the process of change to be a rollercoaster of experience, much akin to the stages of grief that are commonly outlined when people experience loss or face a large personal challenge:

1. ***Denial***
2. ***Anger***
3. *Bargaining*
4. *Depression*
5. ***Acceptance***

Each of these stages account for the adjustment period that members of an organization undergoing change may encounter. Like grief, some individuals spend more time in one of these stages than the others, and some revisit earlier stages as they move through the change. The bolded stages above represent active stages of change, whereas the stages not bolded are passive responses. Leaders should be tuned into the ways that they can help assist members through their need for healing and acceptance of the change process, acknowledging the resistance that may be evidenced in the active stages, as well as the support that will be needed to boost members in the passive stages of this change (Buller, 2017).

Leadership Frameworks

Eddy's multidimensional model for leading change.

While the four-frames of leadership are helpful in creating a plan of engagement in change, this is not the only way to address constituents. Eddy (2002) analyzed how different community college presidents may share information regarding change initiatives. Eddy's work illustrates how three forces- presidential pressures, external pressures, and internal pressures- play a role in how relevant change information is shared. Using Morgan's frames of leadership, Visionary Framing and Operational Framing were made apparent in the case studies used in Eddy's report. The type of framing used must suit the issue at hand, but in terms of disseminating information about the issues, all four types of information sharing--Walking the Frame, Talking the Frame, Writing the Frame, and Symbolizing the Frame--are of equal value. Regardless of the use of Morgan's frames, or of other leadership lenses and frames, understanding the needs of the organization and effective communication will ascertain that all are engaged in the change process.

Other work by Eddy (2012), suggested that communication is part of sensemaking that takes place regarding change and uncertainty. Eddy divided this sensemaking into three themes: 1) the underlying schema, 2) feedback loops, and 3) framing the story. If this is to be applied to institutional merger, the underlying schema would include: the actions leading up to the merger, the background of the issues propelling the merger, the leaders and roles within the current schema, and the influences that exist within the process. The feedback loops would refer to: the communication between and among stakeholder groups; multiple, formal, informal, and varied communication methods, the interactions between players in the process, the social constructs within the factions coming into the merger, and the awareness of outsider perspective. Finally, framing of the story includes the messaging of possibilities borne forth due to merger, using the feedback loops to adjust the process of merger to suit needs, creation of new culture and reality within the new institution, building expectations within the new construct, and understanding the influence of experiences (Eddy, 2012, pp. 64-72).

One key area highlighted by Eddy (2012) is the approach to leadership and how that can influence communication. Transformational leaders tend to derive their actions from the reciprocal communications they receive from their constituent groups. Transactional leaders dole out rewards to gain support. Beyond this, how leaders frame change can influence the acceptance of this change within an organization. To effectively do this, leaders must understand the culture and histories at play within the institution.

Bolman and Deal's four frames of change leadership.

Like Eddy's work, Bolman and Deal (2017) focused on four perspectives, or frames, through which to view and manage change. These frames are 1) the *Structural Frame*, which focuses on the systems and hierarchies within the organization, 2) the *Human Resources Frame*, which centers on the relationships and interpersonal demands within an organization, 3) the *Political Frame*, which outlines the power-play of coalitions and groups, as well as the 4) *Symbolic Frame*, which focuses on the culture and history within an organization. Through these frames, leaders can address the multiple needs within an organization. Ideally, a balanced view that attends to all four frames helps to create a holistic approach to change. However, some areas may need to be attended to more deeply during a merger.

The Structural Frame is the most dominant frame during an institutional merger.

Ideas around the Structural Frame focus on the roles of individuals within the organization, the goals, strategies and policies of the company, and the technology and environment that these are found within. Leaders abiding by the structural frame will be attuned to the tasks and architecture of the organization. The allocation of responsibilities and work priories within a workplace is all part and parcel with the “factory-like” metaphor for the structural frame. Problems within this frame exist when the tasks and current needs do not align with the structure of the organization. In the case of IHE merger, restructuring may be needed in a changing technological, demographic, and societal landscape.

Bolman and Deal (2017) spend some time discussing issues with restructuring. They outlined several key stakeholder areas and their possible roles in the process. Bolman and Deal identify the top management as providing unified pressures and alignment. Middle managers tend to, according to Bolman and Deal (2017) “resist control from the top and tend to pull the organization toward balkanization” (p.85). Leaders should attend to these stakeholder groups to ensure communication and avoid protectionism within these units. The technostructure helps to analyze and support staff aims to collaborate. Acknowledging the pull of each of these layers of interest will help navigate restructuring processes.

People are at the core of an HEI. Human beings have a variety of needs, skills, and relationships within the workplace, making the Human Resources Frame a key component to address during times of change. The Human Resources Frame focuses on empowerment and aligning the needs of the organization to the needs of its people (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Particularly in small, rural colleges, the staff and faculty act as a family, knowing one another personally and professionally. Changes in the day-to-day team interactions and reporting structure may feel as real as a family rift or dissolution. As much hesitancy as a new stepparent may bring, so too is the hesitancy and adjustment that a merger can enact within the human resources plane.

The Political Frame also involves relationships, but these often center around the building of power and coalition groups. This often arises when there is competition for resources, conflict, and differing agendas. Metaphorically, the Political Frame presents as a “jungle” in which advocacy and political savviness are needed to navigate the complexities therein. In a reorganization process, individuals may seek to gain power during the shift of structure. Members may grasp at the ideals and stances that they have historically made, perceiving consilience as a loss of power and agency.

Lastly, any large-scale change, particularly one that brings together separate pre-existing cultures under one umbrella, will need to attend to the Symbolic Frame. The Symbolic Frame concerns histories, cultures, myth and meaning behind organizations. The Symbolic Frame gives inspiration and belief around a common cause. Metaphorically, Bolman and Deal (2017) refer to this frame as one of theater, a temple, or a carnival. It is where constituents celebrate their role and purpose as part of an entity and larger purpose. When combining multiple colleges with their own unique histories, challenges, programming, student groups, approaches, triumphs, and sports teams, Symbolic Framing will be necessary to carve out a new identity that honors each old identity. Particularly as many employees may have supported branding efforts, initiatives, and program development that led to these original histories and identities. As outlined in the Kübler-Ross Model, this would be cause for mourning of the entity that once was (Buller, 2015).

Leaders looking to manage change must create a structure where people are able to do their jobs with the resources needed. Employees must be able to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of others in the organization. Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities can eliminate the confusion, ambiguity, and mistrust that change can create (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.370). People must feel valued. Their perspectives and involvement must be encouraged so that they avoid anxiety and uncertainty. Conflict must be managed. Though natural within the political perspective, conflict can be reframed into a respectful place for all to land to reach agreement and move forward. Honoring the meaning that once existed in each entity prior to a merger and allowing a period of mourning will enable employees to move past the change and embrace the vision of the collective future.

When a college is in a transitional state, communication of the need for the change must take place in a way that all constituents can understand the importance of the change and accept it as a positive force. Bradbury et al. (2011) provided a few examples of use of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Organizational Leadership- structural, human resources, political, and symbolic--in addressing needs across educational institutions. The example of MSU Moorhead's changes in response to diminished resources in recent years is useful in understanding how to elicit buy-in for efforts in down-sizing and economizing functions on campus. This is useful when examining other efforts to respond to resource gaps in the Minnesota State system but also more broadly to other Midwestern colleges. Particularly, for the study system used in this research, diminished resources led to reorganization. The approach to garnering support for work at MSU Moorhead will also be important at NHED.

Leadership Styles During Times of Change

Leadership styles vary from more authoritarian, top-down structures to collaborative and highly communicative. Approaching change during a consolidation takes a collaborative and futuristic approach. Price et al. (2016) investigated college presidents' leadership styles during financially lean times to see what their managerial style was. Surveys were sent to 58 presidents at colleges in North Carolina, all under similar financial strain.

This study by Price et al. (2016) utilized the Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid, which is used to classify leadership approaches. Of the 58 presidents surveyed, 41 responded. The findings show high concerns for both production and people were key features of these presidents, all of whom were leading institutions in financially lean times. The success of this team management leadership style was related to the needs to these colleges: college presidents must take a collaborative approach to deal with financial challenges. Increasing pressure on presidents to focus on funding will lead to the need for relationship building with funding sources such as granting agencies, foundations, and donors. Because state appropriations are not keeping pace with inflation, community colleges are left to seek novel approaches to fiscal solvency. Team management style engages with stakeholders and focused on relationship aspects of the four-frames of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Communication is dual-directional, and leaders must also seek opportunities to listen, so they can adjust their leadership frames accordingly to what is needed at the institution. The LMX framework, which focuses on leader-member exchange, examines how leaders gauge what is needed by constituent groups (Marion & Gonzales, 2018). Beyond this, leaders must build in opportunities to have one-on-one conversations with those in the organization, particularly those that may influence the change process. In LMX Theory, there can be discomfort when there are unequal communications happening with each constituent group. The problem may arise when one college, work unit, or program receives more attention than other groups. This emphasis on the necessary didactic relationship between leader and wider stakeholder groups creates a challenge of space and time during consolidation.

Aside from the change leadership needed to illicit buy-in, college administrators also must attend to the growth and health of the organization well beyond the merger. Seeking early wins after the merger takes place and even during the process can allow others to see the potential in increased sharing and partnership of the newly interwoven structure. Weber (2016) outlined four assumptions that should guide leadership: developing engaged campuses, driving labor market success, supporting social development and civic responsibility, and engaging in strategic planning and practices that are future minded. With this, he also shared seven responsibilities that drive leadership work: planning, academic entrepreneurship, data-driven decision- making, revenue generation, pathways to professional growth, curriculum development, and business development and marketing. Weber suggested that administrators need to be focused on all these areas to successfully carry out the mission of their organization. These considerations are important when managing resource scarcity and prioritizing functions of a college in transition.

Finally, hope-building is a key principle in dealing with change in rural colleges during lean times (Raich, 2013). Rural colleges are burdened by economic stress created by reduced state funding and evolving student populations, not to mention general population decline and “brain drain” (Raich, 2013; University of Minnesota Extension, 2021). Through a grounded theory study of rural college presidents, Raich (2013) was able to demonstrate that astute leaders must be able to project a vision of future, held within the context of the area and challenges, that aligns with the advocacy needed by the organization and its people. Via interviews, Raich was able to determine multiple dimensions within this grounded theory by which to approach these challenges. From interviews, common themes emerged: 1) use data and mission as a strategic guide; 2) practice transparent communication; 3) feed the strong/eliminate the weak programs and services; 4) cut costs and generate revenue; and 5) prepare for a complex future. Nestled within these themes, not only is the need for communication highlighted, but also symbolic, political, human resources, and structural issues may all be evidenced.

Lessons Learned: Studies Regarding the Outcomes of Merger

Researching change strategies and communication processes and approaches is only the beginning of the exploration within this study. Seeking outcomes from previous school reorganizations can help prevent leaders from making mistakes that have already been made. Assessing the broad-scale outcomes and impacts of changes brought about by merger can also help frame up areas of concern. Like a STEEPLED analysis (Cadle et al. 2010), this examination of the drivers of change and the stakeholders involved can help diagnose issues that could arise and allow for leaders to take preventative measures to avoid these problems.

Change Impacts and Communication

Failed consolidation efforts can also provide lessons that can guide communication. A *University Business* article (2015) surveyed several consolidations and noted the reasons for failure, which centered on public political will, disruption to students, and lack of resources in underserved areas. Public political will and knowing which resources will be needed can be influenced by communication strategies, particularly by two-way communication. Having input from outside stakeholders can help navigate these pitfalls, and faculty and staff are often ambassadors of communication to the public. Without their support and buy-in student impacts and public political will can be significantly damaged. Additionally, Eacott (2019) suggests that internal groups that buy-in to a change sooner may impact the success of the change.

Interestingly, in a grounded theory case study of a consolidation of two universities, Kamarudin et al. found that while leaders felt that the communication had gone quite well, the staff felt that the communication was “poor…insufficient and lacks quality” (2014, p. 499). In fact, a lack of information and two-way dialogue was cited as a significant reason for distress on the part of faculty and staff.

Hilton and Jacobson (2012) present a cautionary article of a college president bringing about change in their institution in response to financial pressures and current markets, but without campus buy-in. Regardless of previous accomplishments, the leader lost her role due to a lack of consideration about the relationships that were needed to craft change. Hilton and Jacobson (2012) present a timeline for the events that transpired and offer the suggestion that time to understand and adjust to change was not given to employees at the organization. This information will be important to consider when examining change initiatives.

Interestingly, this has also been studied in K-12 districts, as well, and with much more frequency. Beuchert et al. (2018) examined school consolidations across Denmark in 2010 and 2011 and the impacts of these consolidations on student learning outcomes. These years were chosen due to the closure of 312 schools out of 1500 in Denmark. They then compared school standardized testing scores four years after consolidation to scores one year prior to the change. The researchers found that student scores decreased by 5.9% after the change.

Overall, the authors found that a negative impact on student outcomes was experienced after a consolidation, particularly for students coming from smaller schools. Over time, the effect is minimized. This is likely due to the change itself, and the resulting disorganization and chaos that the disruption imparts.

This study considered several characteristics of the student body in each school, including parental preference, school past performance, parental employment, and school location (urban, rural, suburban). The main modeling was reflected in a DID (difference in difference) estimate. The results showed that the overall effect of consolidation is negative, but insignificant. Interestingly, students with ADHD and other behavior and mental disorders were positively impacted by mergers, indicating that the support resources are likely better in larger systems.

This study is useful in that it shows that not all consolidation impacts are negative, nor are they everlasting. This makes a case for the power of disruption itself and presents a cautionary tale for those looking to make change- the impacts may be negative in the short term- regardless of long-term benefits. The authors also make a case for targeting specific resources during a consolidation to reap the greatest benefits in the long-term.

To underscore the statement that “the impacts of consolidation are personal”, Surface (2011) proposes that school consolidation can drive changes in social capital within a community, and school consolidation has impacts on the children and communities within the consolidation relationship. While Surface’s qualitative study generally found that parents were satisfied with the expanded options their children had under the new school structure, there was a loss in community vitality. Though this study is in the K-12 system, the social and community impacts may be similar in investigations of consolidation in the post-secondary system. Micropolitical changes can have implications that are wide felt in the community (Warner et al., 2010).

As alluded to in the Four Frames of change leadership, human resources impacts post-merger can be felt deeply. A study by Barter (2014) outlined the impacts of consolidation on rural schools beyond the financial recuperation associated with school closings. Barter focused on the social and cultural impacts of school consolidation, particularly for teachers. Barter argued against the often-touted gains of choice and greater resources associated with fewer, larger schools and instead argues that there should be as many small schools as possible, with closure as a last resort. In this study, a distance university course was used for data sourcing the effects of school consolidation on teachers. Using the class participants, 75% of whom were rural educators, the study used three discussion questions: (a) what are the current issues in rural education; (b) how are these issues reflected in the literature; and (c) what do support agencies need to do to advance rural education?

Qualitative data was drawn from these discussions after the students had received a grade for the course, and students were aware that they were participating. A third party was also available for students to voice concerns about the research. Sixty student and instructor comments were used as the raw material for the qualitative coding within a constructivist framework. The findings of this study indicated that teachers did not feel that their experiences with students were part of the calculation in addressing problems that take place during consolidation. Likewise, specific rural issues, such as less political pull, create a target for rural school closure. Small schools may also not be seen as vehicles of change and are then examined as possible areas of improvement. Potential layoffs and increased distance without increased communication also were seen as negative outcomes of consolidation, as well as increased transportation time and strain on students, which may well impact student learning outcomes.

Overall, this study contended that consolidation puts teachers and student learning at risk, and teacher experience is not taken into full account when considering the long-ranging impacts of consolidation during the planning process. This is supported by a literature review done by Barter (2014), in which the consolidation model is seen as a for-profit business strategy, but not a sound educational strategy. The suggestion is that supporting agencies do as much as possible to avoid consolidations, or at least examine the impacts that the change in structure has on students and staff. Increased parental engagement and support is also suggested as an avenue for representation.

This study helps to model what is taking place in rural elementary and high schools, rather than colleges. It does not have a large sample size, and the comments and feedback from the teachers are encompassing one aspect of consolidation: teacher perception.

Faculty survey data shows impacts of merger.

A robust study completed by Ribando and Evans (2015) looked more specifically at quantitative analysis of the impacts of consolidation. Specifically, they focused on the initial changes that two consolidating institutions' faculty experience on the job. Little quantitative work on sociocultural change in faculty workplace has been investigated during mergers, particularly in higher education and across different types of parent institutions. The authors surveyed faculty from one research university and one liberal arts college that consolidated in 2013 due to decreased state appropriations in higher education post-2008 recession. The status differences at the two institutions (high-status Medical research and low-status Summerville liberal arts education) were used as vehicles for examining person-organization (PO) fit and job stress associated with the merger.

By administering a survey to 1,177 faculty from both parent colleges, organizational culture was assessed, as well as PO fit, stress level, organizational commitment, and faculty turnover. The hypotheses in this study were that: a) Summerville Campus faculty will identify their organizational culture as "collegial," b) Medical Campus faculty will identify their organizational culture as "corporate", c) Summerville Campus faculty will expect that 5 years in the future the consolidated university will have a “corporate” culture, d) Levels of PO fit will be significantly lower after consolidation than before consolidation, e) Summerville Campus faculty will have significantly higher levels of job-related stress than Medical Campus faculty, f) Levels of affective commitment to the organization will be significantly lower after consolidation than before consolidation, g) Levels of continuance commitment to the organization will be significantly higher after consolidation than before consolidation, and h) Levels of turnover intention will be significantly higher after consolidation than before consolidation.

Using Likert-scaled questions in the 258 returned surveys, 140 Medical faculty and 118 Summerville faculty responded. Low response rate was attributed to late-semester survey distribution timing. Overall, the high-status organizational culture (Corporate Culture) prevailed, which aligned with the expectations of the authors. Commitment to the organization increased, counter to hypothesized outcome, likely due to increased faculty buy-in during the process and pride in home-institution. Increased stress during the merger also confirmed the author’s hypothesis.

Overall, the quantitative survey modeled many useful aspects of faculty response to merger, and many of these are key in employee performance and satisfaction. This many play a role in the success and productive output post-merger. Though data points were minimal, this survey could be used across many campuses and institutional mergers to examine potential faculty turnover.

In a follow-up study to Ribando and Evans (2015), Ribando et al. (2017) assessed the longer-term impacts of consolidation on sociocultural aspects of education, with a focus on faculty retention. They used a baseline-data set from two years prior, then examined the changes that took place over the two years. The consolidation that was considered took place between a research university and a comprehensive liberal arts college in 2013. Faculty perception of culture, employee-organization fit, job stress, commitment to the institution, and turnover were all examined.

The authors invited 1661 faculty to take part in their online survey which addressed each of the above items and was nearly identical to the survey handed out two years prior. Of this sample, 375 usable surveys were returned, and question answers were mainly delivered via Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha was used for reliability testing of the data. Controls used included years of service, satisfaction with pay, academic rank, and tenure. Coding for different culture types was established (managerial, collegial, bureaucratic, entrepreneurial), as well.

The study found that managerial culture is now the dominant culture within the institution, which was the culture of the dominant organization to begin with. The less dominant institution's faculty felt less commitment to the new organization and more stress on the job. The authors suggest that collegial culture should be cultivated in a merger to better engage and equalize faculty across merging institutions. This aligns with the frames of leadership that are addressed in human resources and political frames (Bolman & Deal, 2019).

The impact of consolidation on student success metrics.

Russell (2017) focused on the Georgia University System consolidations, which are some of the best examples of large-scale post-secondary consolidation efforts in the United States. This effort affected over 10,000 first-time students. This study focused on educational quality and consistency across the system. The overall findings of this study indicate that students in consolidated systems had better retention and time-to-graduation rates than students in an unconsolidated system.

Russell used a differences in differences empirical approach from data from consolidated and unconsolidated colleges in 2007-2015. Student graduation rate and time was comparable to the impact of increasing student aid by $1000, but less impactful than college coaching programs. Difference in difference estimates were made on one-year retention, and high school GPA and SAT scores were used to standardize the data sets.

University spending per FTE before and after consolidation was also considered. Areas of instruction, academic support, student services, and total expenditures were examined, and an increase in spending was not found. However, the disruptive impacts of consolidation were managed by increasing support by academic services, and this was likely impactful on student achievement.

Russell contended that the positive impacts of the consolidation are likely due to increased advising and support services that were made available and affordable by the sharing efforts. In an era when state appropriations to higher education have been steadily dwindling, this paper argues for the benefits of consolidation. It may be useful to pair such studies with faculty and staff impact surveys, which would shed light on whether their buy-in and attitudes around the change played a significant role in mitigating the change and providing for high levels of student support. Furthermore, this supports the need to study the human resources impacts of consolidation, and seeking how that frame, in tandem with the structural frame, can mitigate student impacts by baking into the process some significant investment in student support services.

Recent Literature on Merger and Multidimensional Leadership at Multi-campus Institutions

Some recent dissertation studies have also examined the fabric of change movements in multi-campus models of higher education leadership. Two notable studies are from Valentine (2018) and Johnson (2015). Valentine's dissertation work centered on consolidation impacts within the University of Georgia system. The mixed-methods approach did utilize data on student outcomes, but also completed a qualitative examination of the process of consolidation, and the use of collaboration to bring about change. Specifically, Valentine found that collaboration among organizations participating in a restructuring process was impacted by perceptions of one institution by the others. Particularly, threats to the status quo and concerns over resources where important for leaders to be aware of and attend to during the merger. This is like concerns outlined in the political and structural frameworks for Bolman and Deal (2017). One notable finding from Valentine's study included the perception, echoed in work previously outlined above by Russell (2017) was that impacts of consolidation may not be felt until ten years from the initial events. Assessment of the relative success and the resources needed to complete the merger would not be fruitful to examine before then, due to the ripple effects of the change itself and resources needed to facilitate that change.

Valentine (2018), shared that, "Profound organizational change is differentiated in that it shifts the frame of an organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996) in a process which disturbs the roles, identities, and interests of organizational subgroups that had been stable over extended periods of time" (p. 103). Valentine also emphasized the need to acknowledge that job security is even more valued in public sector and public service work, even more so than private sector work. Jobs and role in the newly merged entity will especially need to be addressed with the framing used in communication by change leaders in higher education administration.

Interestingly, Valentine highlights work from Voet et. al (2015), which posits that though most studies of change leadership focus on the highest levels of administration, attitudes and communication from middle-management and other leaders that have more frequent and direct contacts with employees may be even more influential in the change process. This is, perhaps, a perspective missing from the current literature.

Johnson's (2015) research further aligns with the study system examined in this research body. Johnson's work focused on a multi-campus two-year higher education system in Texas, with anticipatory leadership as the case study subject. In the discussion, Johnson suggests areas for further research that align college administrator's responses to deep change in a challenging environment, both internally and externally. In this work, Johnson found that anticipatory leadership was ultimately an effective way to lead organizations through change and challenges. Following the American Association of Community College's Competencies for Community College Leaders (2013, p. 35), administrators at community colleges must embrace change, demonstrate courage, and maintain a "looking-forward philosophy".

Finally, beyond these two studies, work by Kamarudin et al. (2014) addressed the perceptions of how effective communication during change was, from the perspective of top leadership and administrators and the staff perspective. These authors used a grounded theory to good effect, utilizing interviews with twenty employees and leaders within the institution. Cited earlier in this review, this study is seminal in that it examined the interpretations of each party. Interestingly, the communication was found to be too superficial, and meetings used as opportunities to communicate were not seen as effective from the staff perspective. Perhaps a closer examination through the lenses of Bolman and Deal (2017), would have supported better communication.

Synthesis of the Literature and Gap Analysis of Knowledge Base

As demonstrated in the literature review above, many researchers have examined the impacts on merger within education, specifically within k-12 and global contexts. However, higher education mergers in the United States are less-well studied. Of the research that has been completed, the studies have been primarily quantitative survey studies on larger mergers, such as within the University of Georgia system, but less well known is the impact of merger on rural higher education institutions.

There also exists a great deal of knowledge around change processes, change communication, and leadership during restructuring. Much of these studies are within the realm of business, but also encompass education. However, there is less known about the influences and thought process around communication from multiple levels of leadership (i.e. middle management *and* upper management). Anticipatory leadership and communication regarding change that is driven by internal and external factors, as well as lean financial prospects, may need to be focused through a multi-perspective lens to ensure that there is hope purpose-built into the process, such that stakeholder buy-in is not only possible, but probable.

While there is a solid body of knowledge around stakeholder impacts within faculty and staff, as well as student outcome impacts, there exists less knowledge around the experience of stakeholder communication to and from other parties (community, foundations, and state-wide systems). Beyond this, the approach of leadership within this merger process has been studied, but various approaches to building forms of communication from leaders out to constituents has not been deeply examined. By approaching this merger in-situ and in real-time, communication perspectives can be sought directly from those crafting these messages, experiencing leadership embedded within this changes, and key questions can be addressed to see how framing is used to approach each set of stakeholders.

Literature Review of Research Methods

Research Epistemology, Ontology, and Paradigm

Complex processes within educational systems involve both the construct of the group or entity, as well as how those within the system perceive their role within this group. Our ideas about the epistemological knowledge must be informed by the ontology, or how we perceive *being* (Morrison, 2012). This is doubly true for the process of communication and the process of change. There will be actors within a changing system that perceive and interpret the actions of leaders, and leaders that interpret their own behavior and communication, in different ways, depending on their own frame of reference. Through this ontology, the researcher, as instrument in the process of qualitative study, reports these perspectives as themes begin to emerge in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Our epistemological assumptions, or paradigms, can span broadly across the field of educational leadership. Particularly, positivism/empiricism, phenomenology, critical theory, and postmodernism are most frequently utilized (Morrison, 2012). Interpretivism, or symbolic interactionism, allows for social actors to interpret the world around them. As Morrison states, "… reality is not 'out there' as an amalgam of external phenomena waiting to be uncovered as 'facts', but a construct in which people understand reality in different ways." (2012, excerpted from Briggs et al., p. 20). The true task for researchers, in this sense, is to explore the meaning of what occurs in the field (in this case, higher education merger) from the perspective of the participants.

The interpretivist paradigm fits the experiential nature of the perspectives of people going through a merger process (Dimmock & Lam, 2012). As quoted from Blumer (1969) in Dimmock and Lam (2012), "this perspective is aligned to symbolic interactionism, which holds that human beings act on the basis of the meaning of a phenomenon, which they define and re-define thought interaction with others in social situations” (p.190). In this, research undertaken in this arena is best suited to qualitative study. This is due to the detailed account of the environment of participants, the emphasis on words and experiences rather than numbers, and the rich, deep, and detailed accounts of the context in which the subjects find themselves (Morrison, 2012).

Axiologically, as researchers are part of the instrumentation of this study, so too must they acknowledge their own values and biases within the research process and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers position themselves within the research for qualitative methods. The methodology is shaped by the researchers’ observations, experiences, and interpretations while collecting the data and going through an analysis process. Often, this process may be iterative and new ideas may emerge and be realized as the questions continue to be developed from the information that is garnered. “We are all influenced by our history and cultural context, which, in turn, shape our view of the world, the forces of creation, and the meaning of truth” (Mills et al., 2006). Therefore, a constructivist approach is often useful when researchers are positioned in the context of a study.

Qualitative Study

While selecting a methodology for the examination of leadership communication during rural college merger processes, the researcher debated the utility of the quantitative methods versus qualitative methods, or even a mixed methodology. The benefits of a qualitative study align with ideas by Hoepfl (1997), where she shares that, “qualitative methods are appropriate in situations where one needs to first identify the variables that might later be tested quantitatively, or where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation.” While quantitative survey methods could certainly reach the same audience within leadership, the nuance of the experience, in addition to the emergent properties that qualitative research allows for, cannot be overlooked. While quantitative survey would be ideal for reaching a broad audience of the stakeholders within the merger, rather than the leaders seeking to communicate change, this would also limit the perspective of the response to the creativity of the researcher.

Mixed methods approach may be the most well-rounded research approach to study communication, as it is a two-way phenomenon. Indeed, a quantitative survey of faculty, staff and students receiving communication could bolster or counter the perspectives and findings of a qualitative study of leaders creating the communications. However, limitations of resources and time may impact survey projects. Ideally, a pre-and post-assessment of communication could take place within the study system. Unfortunately, with the process occurring concurrent to the research, it may be difficult to appropriately time broad survey data.

Because this process of merger is unique to the programming, perspectives, geography, local culture, rural setting, interplay with local stakeholders, and deep investment from long-tenured faculty and engaged staff, the stories here will be best brought forth via qualitative methods: narrative, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, or ethnographic research. Of these, grounded theory and case study are the most likely to be conducive to the research questions at hand.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory research is an appealing approach due to the combination of inductive and deductive methods, which allows flexibility within the study (Dimmock & Lam, 2012). Grounded theory (GT) is a useful approach to studies of educational leadership, as complex, situational processes may be evidenced. Beyond this, large amounts of data can be neatly categorized via coding, leading to development of a new theory where one may not previously exist. GT allows for an examination of how subjects are thinking about a problem, what their feelings are regarding an issue, and what motivates them to act upon certain ideas. Thus, for an examination of communication approaches from leadership, particularly during a novel and large-scale process, such as merger, this is an ideal approach to delve deeply into the findings, which is indeed the theory itself (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Grounded theory embodies a "constant comparative" method, whereas information flows between the researcher, the data, and the theory to build categories that can be remade, discarded, and retrofitted to suit the emergent ideas from the study (Fraenkel et al., 2019). This iterative process, whereby data are collected, analysis takes place, then further theory, and revision whereby more data is collected to solidify the theory is at the heart of this work. In fact, data analysis begins as soon as the first data is collected (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), the main features of grounded theory are:

1. Data Collection and Analysis are Interrelated Processes
2. Concepts Are the Basic Units of Analysis
3. Categories Must Be Developed and Related
4. Sampling in Grounded Theory Proceeds on Theoretical Grounds
5. Analysis Makes Use of Constant Comparisons
6. Patterns and Variations Must Be Accounted For
7. Process Must Be Built Into the Theory
8. Writing Theoretical Memos Is an Integral Part of Doing Grounded Theory
9. Hypotheses About Relationships among Categories Should Be Developed and Verified as Much as Possible during the Research Process

10. A Grounded Theorist Need Not Work Alone
11. Broader Structural Conditions Must Be Analyzed, However Microscopic the Research (pp. 6-12).

The process of data collection and analysis creates patterns that can be interpreted, utilizing comparative methods, which lead to the theory developed from this data. Memoing and communicating with research subjects will help align the experiences and themes that arise from the coding, and this allows the researcher to examine the complex challenges and coping mechanisms that leaders employ during stressful and changing times.

The possible approaches of GT design may include systematic design, emerging design, and constructivist design. Systematic design (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) focuses on a much more structured approach, with the open, axial, and selective coding processes that are formalized and help to funnel themes within the data to form the theoretical construct. Emerging design, a la Glaser (1992), advocates for a development of research questions as the research occurs, without preconstructed frameworks. Finally, the constructivist approach championed by Charmaz (2006) utilizes less stringent structures than Corbin and Strauss (1990), but still seeks theoretical sampling. The researcher plays a more intimate role in the research, aiming to co-construct the theory alongside the participants (Dimmock & Lam, 2012).

More specifically, constructivist grounded theory, in the way of Charmaz (2006), can allow for the amalgamation of implicit meanings that arise from the data, and the analysis of this data can avoid a single core category. Rather, the focus of the theory can rely upon the researcher’s view, and active coding categories can be formed using the researcher’s decision process. The researcher is an active member within the data gathering and analysis process

(Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case study

Case study research is useful when approaching an isolated entity, or a “singularity”, within local scope and a specified timeframe (Bassey, 2012). This research highlights the intriguing or interesting occurrences within a study area or site. The work of case study research happens within its normal or natural context, which is helpful when examining a particular occurrence, such as a specific merger in a specific educational system. The outcomes of a case study project can inform practitioners and policy makers, which is helpful when garnering grant support, accreditation, or legislation that impacts the ease or difficulty of merger processes in higher education. Case study can present in a narrative format, a descriptive account, a theory-seeking study, or an evaluative study.

In the case of this research project and set of research questions, an evaluative approach would likely be most applicable. Evaluative case study aims to explore a project or an endeavor for its meaningfulness and merit. In the case of an institutional reorganization, the case study would present a formative or summative account of the outcomes of the process. Specifically, since the focus of this research is on communication approaches, this becomes slightly more difficult with case study. Because merit and meaningfulness are assigned in the evaluative case study, this presents a level of conflict and difficulty with working within ethical guidelines, due to the damage the conclusions of the research could place on the subjects (Bassey, 2012).

Selection and Justification of Methodology

Grounded theory will be selected for this research application. Specifically, an approach that aligns with a school of thought led by Charmaz (2014) will best serve the purposes of this research (see more in chapter 3). The building of the theory neither assigns superlatives nor rejects approaches that individual subjects within the study employ within their communication approach. Rather, by utilizing a theoretical framework of the Bolman and Deal Four Frames (2017), the theory and approach can be developed to serve as a map of the interplay between the social experiences of the leaders within the system, the need to communicate the merger process clearly and effectively to stakeholders, and the Frames that are most often utilized by the subjects. Due to the abstraction of grounded theory, by which the theory can be developed and applied more broadly, the utility of the outcomes of the study will better benefit the knowledge base of merger processes, which are becoming more frequent (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Russell, 2017).

Beyond this, approaches previously outlined by Morrison (2012), Raich (2013), Kamarudin et al. (2014), and Creswell and Poth (2018), highlight how grounded theory can allow for examination of trends that emerge, which will be highly valuable in an evolving study system moving rapidly through the merger process.

Merger in Minnesota: How NHED is a Laboratory for Change

In the 1990s, a Minnesota Governor's task force released a report called "A Course for the Future: Higher Education and Economic Development," which recommended less duplication in courses and programs within higher education (Manzo, 1997). This work was an attempt at streamlining higher education and making the offerings to students more efficient. Under Governor Carlson, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, as well as the University of Minnesota System, were examined for appropriate support of economic needs.

This article was released two years after the various community, technical, and 4-year colleges across the state consolidated into the MNSCU system. In this round of examination, the University of Minnesota system was examined for ways to pare down. The MNSCU system was also targeted for increased consolidation, however, the chancellor for the MNSCU system was adamant that the campuses across the state were central to the vitality of the local communities and their economic health.

This article was written in 1997; however, the rationale is similar to the reasoning behind exploration of current consolidations, and it is specific to Minnesota colleges. The impacts of these conversations led to consolidations elsewhere in the MNSCU system (specifically MinnWest and M State). Likewise, the same arguments made by chancellor Eaton (1997) may also be applicable for current institutions. This information is useful in setting a history and context for examining consolidation efforts in the Northeast Higher Education District (NHED) within the Minnesota State (formerly MNSCU) system.

The Northeaster Higher Education District (NHED), a district of five colleges with six campuses in northern Minnesota, is facing a need to consolidate into one accredited institution with multiple campuses. Currently, students at each college must enroll at separately accredited institutions if they desire to take advantage of different course offerings at each school. This necessitates the use of multiple databases, tuition bills, online course management and email logins, and complex advising to accomplish a single associate degree or round out a suite of transfer credits. Although students can complete their degree on their home campus, many students are seeking the flexibility of the various online offerings and liberal arts areas each individual college has to offer.

To streamline the student experience, eliminate redundant costs, and deal with mounting financial pressures that small, rural institutions face, NHED sought to explore the implementation of a consolidated system. Though keeping campuses open was a goal, the aim of consolidation will be to offer broad programming across the entire northeastern region of Minnesota. Leaning on the technical, liberal arts, and specialized wilderness programming that each college possesses, a unique mixture of campus cultures, and potential program growth, the goals of this reorganization are a realization of economies of scale, removal of systems of competition amongst campuses, and more powerful enrollment and marketing draw. When discussing the plans for the NHED consolidation in the context of the Hibbing Campus's Higher Learning Commission site visit, Minnesota State Trustee Cirillo remarked that the NHED is a "laboratory for change" (personal communication, September 19. 2019)

Conclusion

In a time of lean financial prospects, higher education institutions must be nimble and creative to carry out needed structural change. Leaders at these organizations must focus on ways that they can meet student needs and remain financially solvent. Regardless, the eliciting of change cannot take place without proper faculty and staff buy-in, community support, and good communication. Administrators at colleges need to regard change through all possible leadership frames and with all responsibilities in mind. Data gathered at institutions that are undergoing a merger may shed light on successful ways to create a movement around structural change within an institution. Without buy-in and collaborative communication, change will be perceived as a negative, and the benefits of shared resources in consolidation will not be achieved or may take years to realize. In the next chapter, the researcher will outline the methods of assessing the communication from leaders at a merging two-year institution (NHED). The researcher will seek to determine the framing used in this communication (structural, human resources, political, and/or symbolic), following the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Introduction

This study focuses on the ways that rural community college leadership approached communication during a larger-scale change, in this case, structural reorganization. Large-scale changes require leadership that can effectively and positively communicate and engage with all stakeholders, but especially employees likely to be impacted by the decisions to merge. With financial constraints forcing higher education institutions to consider economies of scale, effectively navigating merger and consolidation is more important than ever. Our understanding of this process may alleviate negative impacts to students, increase staff and faculty morale, and allow needs that may be overlooked to ascend to the top of considerations at the time of merger. This study was conducted via a qualitative approach. Because perspectives are so important within this research, crafting a process by which leaders can approach this problem via a grounded theory approach will suit the nature of this novel event of merger within the Northeast Higher Education District (NHED).

Purpose of the Study

As outlined in chapter 1, increasing frequency of school merger events necessitates further study of change management, particularly in higher education. Rural community colleges are under a unique set of pressures, due to resource limitations and rural brain drain that has been occurring since the early 2010s. Although large university mergers, as well as K-12 consolidations and European mergers, have been well-studied, less is known about rural community-college reorganizations, particularly those that fall within a state-wide system of colleges.

Particularly, studies outlined in chapter 2 acknowledge the need to address the change process through clear communication and multiple lenses or frameworks, to seek buy-in and alleviate uncertainty during the reorganization process. Bolman and Deal (2017) outlined four frames that should be considered in any organizational change: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. Although change communication has been widely studied, it is often from the top that these ideas are communicated. The purpose of this study is to detail the process for how leaders at an HEI undergoing a reorganization leveraged multiple communication approaches to create buy-in and collective culture around the merger, not only using the perspectives of top administrators, but middle managers, as well. Often, these individuals retain more direct contact with their work teams (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Voet et. al, 2015).

Qualitative interview of leaders who are currently in a merger situation or have been in one previously may shed light on the thought processes around their approach. Qualitative examination of communication artifacts, such as emails, publications, and other communications from these leaders may also shed light on communication styles around change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology used to investigate this process was a grounded theory. The use of this methodology will outline the strategic processes that leaders use to communicate change, create buy-in, and meet the needs of stakeholders during institutional merger (Patel, 2015).

The researcher's selection of grounded theory as a methodology is attributed to the process-like nature of the investigation. Because an interpretivist approach is used, it is a process, so grounded theory best suits the investigation. Grounded theory seeks to build patterns and themes through an iterative process, using inductive reasoning to seek alignment across multiple data sets and detect concepts through coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows: Q1) Which communication strategies do leaders at five different public institutions utilize in an attempt to create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation? Q2) How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?

Research Design

The research questions of this study are both in alignment with the "four C's" of research questions, being clear, concise, centered, and complex. They also add to the field of knowledge in a specific and non-preconceived manner (Mattick et al., 2018). Because these research questions deal with the process by which communication takes place and how buy-in from stakeholders in addressed, this aligns with an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm. Since constructivism is concerned with questions that have no single reality or truth, we need to interpret the way leaders experience this change communication (Patel, 2015). The paradigm used here is a constructivist approach to addressing what the interpreted reality of the individuals involved may be (Patel, 2015). By utilizing an approach more aligned with the ideas of Charmaz (2006, 2014), in which an imposed framework is avoided as much as possible, grounded theory will be employed to construct themes and ideas from research participants.

The qualitative interview method of research garnered widespread data on perceptions and approaches taken by leaders and address this complex communication process (Dimmock & Lam, 2012). The researcher conducted in-person or Zoom visits with each leader/administrator using an initial set of interview questions to pave the way for detection of patterning in the responses. The interview was semi-structured, to allow for development of the grounded theory based on the nature of the responses (see Appendix B: Interview Protocol).

The researcher also planned to collect artifacts of communication from each participant. Each participant was asked to share two artifacts of communication (emails, videos, presentations) that can be used for examination in this grounded theory research. The researcher also sought four or five publicly available communications that may have required the editing and composition from more than one leader within the system. These were also analyzed to see if the four frames are evident in the grounded theory coding. This coding followed the Charmaz (2014) school of thought, outlined further in the Data Analysis section below. By adding a selection of publicly available communications, this removed some of the directionality of the communication that may otherwise be crafted toward specific stakeholders, which would likely be evident in the self-selected communication artifacts.

Setting

This study took place within the Northeast Higher Education District in the state of Minnesota, within the United States. These five, two-year public community colleges will merge into one accredited institution on May 23, 2022, with implementation of the first full academic year beginning fall 2022. The total credit enrollment of the district is approximately 6,000 with 841 part-time and full-time employees (NHED, 2020). The colleges host certificate programs, diplomas, AAS programming, and even some 2+2 programming in collaboration with other Minnesota State colleges, such as an engineering partnership with Minnesota State University Mankato.

Leadership at these institutions varies. All the colleges within the district are served by one President, as well as one human resources team lead by a Vice President of Human Resources and one Vice-President of Finance. Prior to merger, a Provost also led each campus, and in some cases, supported by either an Academic Dean or a Dean of Student Services. During the merger process, some of these positions shifted as retirements and other reorganizations took place. An interim structure was designated due to some of these changes, and this created some additional subjects that may take part in the study. The final leadership structure is now determined, and encompasses a tiered structure, with the President and the President's Cabinet (including a VP of Finance and Facilities, VP of Human Resources, VP of Academic and Student Affairs, and a VP of Institutional Effectiveness), followed by a series of Academic Deans and Student Affairs leaders.

Participant Selection

The researcher selected participants through purposive sampling within the administrative ranks at each of the five institutions, as well as within the district office leadership. An invitation was also made to Minnesota State leadership regarding this merger communication, though this did not come to fruition, likely due to the state-wide system office's more remote involvement with the merger process and constraints on time. This research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a busy time in education. For grounded theory, theoretical saturation is used to determine the final sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, there are limitations by nature of the scope of this study; there were a finite number of leaders within this merger system.

A sample size of eight leaders was used as a baseline for this study, with interviews transcripts associated with each. Although appropriate interview numbers vary by research methodology, the more flexible approach of Charmaz (2006) allowed for the adaptation of this grounded theory sampling to suit the study site outlined above.

For the inclusion criteria regarding the interview, participants were invited to participate in the study if they had been part of leadership during the merger process, and responsible for carrying out tasks within the merger.

Procedures

The researcher compiled all administrators, directors, and middle management leaders into a research pool, and data was taken from each college's organizational chart. The researcher sent an email with a link to a Doodle poll with potential interview dates and times. This email outlined the purpose of the study, the methods of investigation (interview, artifact analysis), and the possible benefits and impacts. Participants were asked to respond to the Doodle poll with their availability if they were interested in participating in the study. The researcher also provided an attached notice of consent (Appendix A). The interviews were scheduled within a mid-fall timeframe. This allowed for avoidance of holidays, start and end dates for semesters, as well as busy times within the academic year. The researcher sent the inquiry email three times, at two-week intervals, in an attempt to elicit the most opportunity for feedback.

After this, the interviews were scheduled via Zoom or in-person, depending on whether the participant was comfortable with this mode, as the pandemic allowed. Interviews in person took place at the home-campus of the individuals, within a comfortable conference or office space setting. The researcher sent interview questions in advance, allowing the participant to preview the discussion. Icebreaker conversation took place prior to the interview (see more in data collection and instrumentation sections).

Participant Selection

All participants in the study were full-time administrators or managers at NHED public institutions. These leaders were employed during the consolidation. Questions in the initial conversation prior to interview questioning regarding duration of employment at the institution helped the researcher assess the presence of the employee at the institution during the merger, as well as length of time involved with the process prior to the merger.

A sample of eight administrators and other colleges leaders from five colleges within the Minnesota State system, specifically the Northeast Higher Education District, which are undergoing a consolidation were the focus of this study. The researcher selected colleges involved in the merger process through purposeful sampling. These colleges include Itasca Community College, Hibbing Community College, Mesabi Range College, Rainy River Community College, and Vermilion Community College. The interview invitation was also sent to all former (but still employed within the merger timeframe) and current administrators at the institution, with the aim of maximizing responses.

Protection of Participants

As stated in chapter 2, use of other research methods, such as the evaluative case study, could create damage to individuals due to the merits assigned to possible approaches utilized by research subjects/participants (Bassey, 2012). Use of grounded theory aids in building an approach to communication, rather than assigning a valuation to this approach. While investigating the use of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames (2017), there is not a single frame that may be more appropriate, thereby alleviating any negative outcomes to the participants based on the examination of their interview and artifacts.

Beyond this, the participants involved were all in leadership positions and are either in lateral roles to the researcher, or they were in more elevated levels of administration than the researcher. Therefore, there is no power dynamic of supervision from the researcher to any of the participants. The researcher has kept data from the interviews secure and de-identified. See more under the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter.

Data Collection

Participants elected to join the study via email, responding to the Doodle poll for interview times. Once the Doodle poll was filled, the researcher emailed or spoke in person to the participant to request the date and time, as well as interview mode (in person versus Zoom). If participants selected in-person interview, this took place at the home institution of the participant.

The researcher recorded interviews via a recording application on a Galaxy Note8 cellular device, as well as via a dictate function in Microsoft Word, simultaneously. Zoom interviews were also recorded and hosted on Kaltura. After each interview, a dictation of the recording was made to Microsoft Word. This was piloted to good success in two practice interviews. This eliminated the need to transcribe the interview manually. Some editing was necessary, as the audio files are not always automatically captioned correctly in the dictation software. The researcher listened to the recordings as she reviewed the transcription, editing where necessary. Zoom transcription is also available in Kaltura, for those recorded Zoom interviews, as a backup.

Once these files were transcribed, the researcher saved these files both on a password-protected cloud account, as well as on a hard-drive, kept in a locked desk at the researcher's home. These files will be destroyed after three years, in spring of 2025. These files also contain the digital copies of the communication artifacts, alongside the interview videos, files, and transcripts. Each participant was given an identification number, which was linked and coded in a separate document, stored on the hard drive. The files were named by interview, date, and code (i.e.: Dissertation interview_1.20.2021_Participant 5).

Data Analysis

Once the transcriptions were finalized, the researcher memoed the transcripts. Member checking took place via email return of the transcript to the participant. This is in congruence with Fraenkel et al. (2019). NVivo software was used for the coding, memoing, and organization of the data (See Figure 1. for process). NVivo allows for managing of the data, data query, and data modelling, which is necessary in complex and deep data bodies (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). NVivo also allows for both inductive and deductive coding. In the approach of this grounded theory process, the researcher focused on inductive coding only, due to the nature of the undetermined hypothesis in grounded theory research. Inductive research is more concerned with generation of new theories that form from the data itself (Gabriel, 2013).

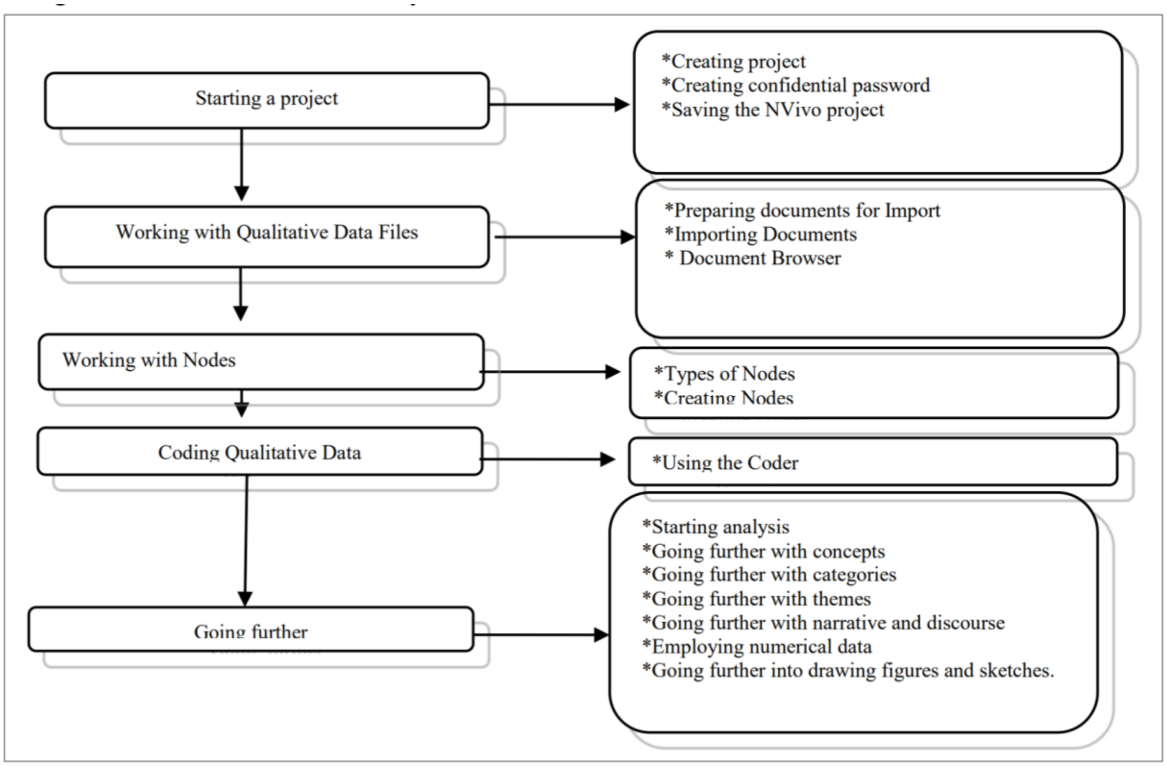

Figure 1. Process of coding and analysis for qualitative research within the NVivo software. Adapted from Bazeley (2007).

The approach in this research analysis followed along the lines of Charmaz (2006). Of the three schools of thought in grounded theory, Charmaz's approach is best suited to this study of constructivist grounded theory because, according to Creswell & Poth (2018), it is:

> …less structured than traditional approaches to grounded theory. The constructivist approach incorporates the researcher's views, uncovers experiences with embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships; and makes visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity. (p. 316)

The three schools of grounded theory study are those by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Glaser (1992), and Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory (GT) was first developed by both Strauss and Glaser in the 1960s (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and their initial construction of the theory centered around the "grounding" of the theory in the data that was found in the field. Over time, the two researchers separated, and Strauss published a more prescriptive approach to the grounded theory study in the 1990s with Corbin. Glaser (1992) responded to this unfavorably, stating that this approach was too structured. Glaser posited that everything is data that can be analyzed by GT, including both quantitative and qualitative data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The classic GT, begun by Glaser and Strauss and refined further by Glaser "is a method of analysis that prescribed no rigor or rules regarding data collection procedures", according to Timonen et al. (2018, p. 2). Glaser follows a more traditional, positivist GT approach, whereas Strauss and Corbin favor an evolved, structured GT methodology, and Charmaz presents a constructivist approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

In the way of Strauss and Corbin, open, axial, and selective coding are utilized. Open coding is used to "develop categories of information", whereas axial coding "interconnects the categories", and selective coding "builds a story that connects those categories" (Creswell

& Poth, 2018, p. 203). During open coding, the text is reviewed for instances that represent an emerging category, constantly comparing data. Once these categories form, one is chosen as the “central phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 203).

In contrast, Charmaz stresses the avoidance of “posing a forced framework” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 203). Charmaz (in an interview with Gibbs, 2015) focuses on gerunds for her initial coding. According to Charmaz (Gibbs, 2015), “the world consists of changes rather than structure.” To her, the action of change is denoted in the gerunds-- what is happening, what are the study participants doing—to demonstrate active change.

In this study, coding took place line-by-line in a process called open-coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is a descriptive process which is then followed by a focused coding, as in Charmaz (2006, Chun Tie et al., 2019, see Table 1). This is slightly different than the axial coding process outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Strauss and Corbin’s axial examinations may include causal condition, context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Strauss and Corbin’s approach leads to categories of content, which develops the story of the theory. The researcher instead utilized theoretical coding (Table 1) which specified relationships between categories based on pre-determined coding families, in the way of Charmaz (2006). This is slightly more structured than Glaser, but much more adaptable than Strauss and Corbin (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018, see Table 1). After review of these categories, the researcher tabulated the codes and categories. As these codes intersect and create categories; this is known as selective coding. Selective coding allows for theory generation from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is possible that multiple meanings may arise within the process, which will develop and be constructed in accordance with the data collection.

Throughout the process, memoing was employed to record the "constant comparative" process of coding. As explained by Charmaz (2015) and outlined here by

1) Codes are defined by essential empirical properties in order to treat them analytically.
2) Researchers inquire as to the conditions of these properties.
3) Codes are tentatively treated as categories.
4) Memo writing helps to grasp the relationship between codes and categories.
5) Researchers examine their own assumptions and implicit meanings through their memos.
6) Memos sharpen and narrow down the analysis, as well as helping the researcher to correct problems, such as making sweeping generalizations and leaving his/her assertions "unchecked".

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—which evaluate the worth of a study. *Credibility* refers to the confidence of the truthfulness in the findings, *transferability* ensures that the findings can be suitable in other contexts, *dependability* refers to results that could be replicated and are consistent, and finally *confirmability* relates to the degree that the results are free from biases. In particular, the biases of the researcher, along with any motivations or predetermined aims, must be removed to the degree that it is possible. Credibility can be established by a number of processes, outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking. In this study, the researcher focused on member checking of the transcribed interview, as well as triangulation of more than one data type: in this case, semi-structured interview and content analysis.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), outlining transferability can be done through “thick description”, which refers to the detailed description of the data, which can lead to external validity. By providing enough information in the descriptions of the phenomena, there can be a determination of the transferability of this information to other settings. Beyond this, outside audit can help determine dependability. This may have some drawbacks, which may include the ideation of a certain, specified truth. This is incongruent with the interpretivist perspective, where there is no one truth and thus, this outside audit will not be utilized in this study. Triangulation also is useful in determining confirmability, along with the processes of audit trail, reflexivity, and confirmability audit. This study also relied on reflexivity to ensure confirmability. According to Malterud (2001):

> A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions (pp. 483-484).

By taking a reflexive approach, the researcher reexamined her biases and position regularly throughout the process of the study. While one way to approach this is through multiple investigators, this was not feasible for this study. Instead, the researcher reported positions and shared values and beliefs in published works. See the Researcher Biases and Perspectives for more on this (below).

As stated above, the researcher also utilized member checking to ensure data is truthful from the source. Member checking allows for interviewees to review the transcripts and check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It may also allow for the further co-construction of the theory, as outlined by Charmaz (2006). The researcher triangulated the data from the source material in interviews and artifacts to determine congruency.

Instrumentation

The instruments that were used for data collection in this study included semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and artifacts. The primary method of collecting data was via the semi-structured interview. The researcher developed the interview protocol for the study following work by Creswell (2014), The interview protocol was developed with the key attributes of the interviewee (name, location, role), the site (name, date, time), the interviewer (in this case, the primary researcher), and introduction to the research, as well as a small ice-breaking exercise (Appendix B. Interview Protocol). From the possible research questions, the researcher selected five broad questions, with possible follow-up questions outlined in the protocol. Lastly, a thank you, concluding statement, and a document collection appendix were all utilized. All interviewees were given the basic interview questions in advance, so that they could consider their responses beforehand. The following are the basic set of questions:

1) *How do you see your role as a leader during this merger?*
2) *Tell me about the message that you are aiming to communicate regarding the merger process and outcomes.*
3) *What types of messages have been easier or simpler to communicate during this change?*
4) *Tell me about the frequency of your communication during this process? With whom do you communicate most and least frequently?*
5) *Describe any insights that you have learned in this process.*

6) *If you were to advise another leader about this process, what would you tell them?*

The follow up questions may be like any of the following, depending on the responses from the initial set of questions:

1) *Tell me about any challenges you have experienced in communicating this change.*
2) *How has managing this process impacted you?*
3) *How do you prioritize messages that you share regarding this change?*
4) *Who are your stakeholders?*
5) *Is there any other information you would like to share at this time?*

Beyond the interview instrument, the researcher also utilized artifact collection and document analysis. Document analysis allows for the limits of time and space to be removed, as the researcher can gain perspective they may not have had previously due to location and opportunity. (Fraenkel et al., 2019). The researcher collected five publicly shared communications from the President's office and NHED website for the analysis of communication—a purposive sampling of representative communication artifacts regarding the merger. It was also intended that interviewees would each select two artifacts to be submitted for review, as well. These documents were coded in a way similar to the semi-structured interview, following the design and approach of Charmaz (2006). These items were to be reviewed line-by-line (or transcribed and reviewed, if the artifact be a video/audio recording) for initial coding, then follow all of the same procedures as outlined for the interview data analysis. Both manifest content (surface-level, obvious content), as well as latent content (deeper interpretations of the underlying meaning) were analyzed and coded (Fraenkel et al., 2019). NVivo software was also utilized for the document analysis portion of the coding. Unfortunately, the two artifacts per interviewee were not possible to obtain, as noted in the results and discussion chapters. However, document analysis of public and widely distributed internal communications was completed.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, personal biases and perspective will greatly influence the interpretation of the results of a study (Fraenkel et. al, 2019). Charmaz's interpretive/constructivist approach (2006), which relies on reflexivity and some measure of flexibility in the design of the research process, was utilized to construct meaning and interpretation from the data. According to Timonen et al. (2018):

> Where classical GT asserts that theory emerges from data and is drawn out by the researcher in her role as a detached, yet reflexive scientific observer, CGT [Constructivist Grounded Theory] fully implicates the researcher in generating data and theory (p. 3).

Charmaz has placed the researcher role as co-constructor of the meaning found in the data, and in the interpretation, the researcher must "add … a description of the situation, the interaction, the person's affect and [their] perception of how the interview went" (Mills et al., 2006).

To maintain the trustworthiness of the study, reflexivity and member checking were employed. Specifically within the process of reflexivity, the researcher examines their own role in change leadership, her positionality within the organization, and her biases and perspective, setting these aside as much as possible to be open to the theory that arises from the data.

Researcher Biases and Perspective

The researcher's perspective in this study is one of an embedded nature. The researcher was working in-situ within this reorganization process. As the researcher wrote this page, the search committee had just finished interviews for the permanent President role in the new college, and the college had just received the approval from the Board of Trustees to adopt the college's new name: Minnesota North College. The researcher was serving as an interim academic dean at two of the five campuses at the time of this study, and she also served on the advisory council for the process of change; this process has been named "Vision NE".

Vision NE utilized "Innovation Teams" to bring forth discussion, decisions, and proposals to the leadership Cabinet (comprising of the President, Vice-Presidents, and Provosts) for final decision. These Innovation Teams included the following: Advising, Counseling, and Retention; Enrollment Management; Distance Learning; Equity and Inclusion, Academic Affairs and Standards, Faculty Leadership Workgroup, Athletics, Institutional Research, and Business Office/ Financial Affairs. The researcher was taking part in two of these teams, as well as serving on a policy committee.

Before Vision NE, there was a two-year long regional academic planning process, the outcomes of which propelled the merger of the five colleges into one accredited institution. Before this, district-wide strategic planning began opening the possibilities of merger. The researcher has served on both committees/planning groups. She has also undergone Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accreditation reaffirmation and site visit at one campus and underwent a mid-cycle report and visit at the other campus. Thus, she has taken part in explaining this process to stakeholders at the national level (HLC), within Minnesota State, and locally. To avoid some of her own biases, the researcher utilized broad interview questions, to allow for novel and unpredicted patterns to emerge from the participants..

Researcher Qualifications

Although her experience with qualitative research methods is limited, the researcher has taken graduate level coursework that has allowed her to develop skills in building interview questions and coding qualitative data. Through study and field testing of interview questions in the year prior to deploying the interview method, the researcher gained necessary insight to broaden the research questions to allow appropriate levels of structure within the interview, as well as enough latitude to allow the participants to respond in a way that may illuminate unpredicted patterns. As stated by Charmaz (2014), the researcher is a key part of the process for developing qualitative grounded theory. As a leader within this merging system, the researcher had knowledge of the history, motivation, terminology, and change planning that allowed her to build relevant questions, suitable follow-up questions, and seek appropriate participants for the study. The researcher was also able to protect the confidentiality of the participants, as she had in-depth knowledge of information that could identify participants, even within responses.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted via interview method and artifact collection, so pseudonyms were linked to specific participants, ensuring confidentiality. The organizations themselves may gain information about the process of merger and consolidation progress. As the data will be shared with the institutions and participants, it may be possible that gaps in communication or frames of leadership will be identified. This may open an opportunity to explore the ways that these institutions can address remaining issues and develop and grow as organizations through their internal communication. To preserve anonymity for the administrators that were involved in the communication process and protect them from harm, the data was not disaggregated by college/campus, but will remain at the larger, merged institutional level.

None of the participants were part of a vulnerable group or entity. The questions asked in the semi-structured interviews did not touch upon sensitive topics or matters beyond professional experiences. The researcher has and will continue to protect the data, as outlined in the data collection procedures, to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The researcher did not retain any undue influence over the research participants. Finally, IRB approval was sought and obtained for this work, and site approval and a letter of consent was also obtained from the institution.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the researcher identified and developed the qualitative instrument to assess the research question regarding the process of communicating changes during an HEI merger, utilizing the Bolman & Deal Four Frames of Leadership (2017). A grounded theory was developed based on patterns and themes within the interview responses from leadership within the institution, which is discussed in chapter 4. The interview protocol and questions were developed with this in mind, and the interviews were administered to a purposive sample population that have experienced the consolidation event as leaders. This was supplemented by artifacts of communication crafted and relayed by each participant. These communication artifacts were collected for analysis, and these were also examined for thematic elements. Results were collected and analyzed in NVivo. The next chapter will address this analysis and report the findings of the coded interviews and artifacts.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to examine communication during a college merger and seek the approach and style of communication that leaders used in an attempt to elicit buy-in for the change, as well as to see if/how the Bolman and Deal Four Frames of Leadership were utilized in that approach. The theoretical framework for the study was the Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames of Leadership: Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. The first three chapters of this study 1) provided an introduction to leadership communication, merger, and the theoretical framework; 2) covered an in-depth literature review of the topics, the research design approach, and the grounded theory framework selected; and 3) outlined the methods used in this study, the position of the researcher, and the data set sampled. Chapter Four summarizes the results of the study and the data set used. The data and analysis are presented, utilizing the Charmaz grounded theory method of study. Finally, a theory is developed from the thematic elements emergent from the analysis.

Data analysis in the Grounded Theory Methodology

A hallmark of grounded theory study is the feedback loop of codes in the constant comparative method (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Charmaz, 2014). Particular to the constructivist approach of Charmaz (2006), the initial codes are made, then focused coding leads to theoretical coding (Table 1.; Chun Tie et al., 2019). Roughly approximating a data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018), a constructivist grounded theory approach gathers data and compares each new data set to previous information. As the theory becomes coalescent, the co-constructed nature of the theory emerges, and is strengthened by subsequent data until data saturation occurs.

Table 1. Comparison of coding terminology in traditional, evolved and constructivist grounded theory (from Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Grounded theory genre	**Coding terminology**		
	Initial	**Intermediate**	**Advanced**
Traditional	Open coding	Selective coding	Theoretical coding
Evolved	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Constructivist	Initial coding	Focused coding	Theoretical coding

Adapted from Birks and Mills.[6]

Interview transcripts from the eight participants in this study were reviewed for accuracy from the Zoom transcript or Microsoft Word dictate function, and they were compared to the audio file for each transcript. Once the transcripts were polished, they were sent for member checking via email to each participant. The transcripts were also loaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software tool, for coding and memoing. Each transcript was read through initially, with an open mind (Charmaz, 2014). Afterward, the coding process began on the next read-through, in a line-by-line process. Categories were developed within the initial transcript and were added to each subsequent transcript, using the constant comparative process noted by Charmaz (2006). After categories emerged, these were organized into thematic groupings. From roughly seventy singly spaced pages of interview transcripts, twenty initial coding areas were formed, then five key themes emerged (Figures 2-4; Appendix C). These themes represent the theory developed in answer to the main question one of the research: *Which communication strategies do leaders at five different public institutions utilize in an attempt to create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation?* To address question two, *How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?* , each of these themes was assessed for the main lenses of change management noted by Bolman and Deal (2017): structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

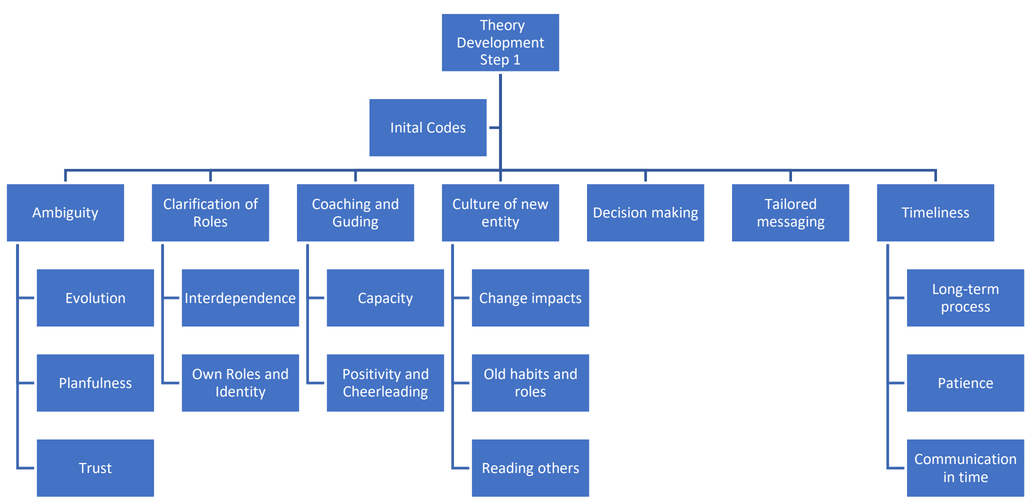

Figure 2. Initial code development. Parent codes are noded at initial row, child codes are stacked underneath.

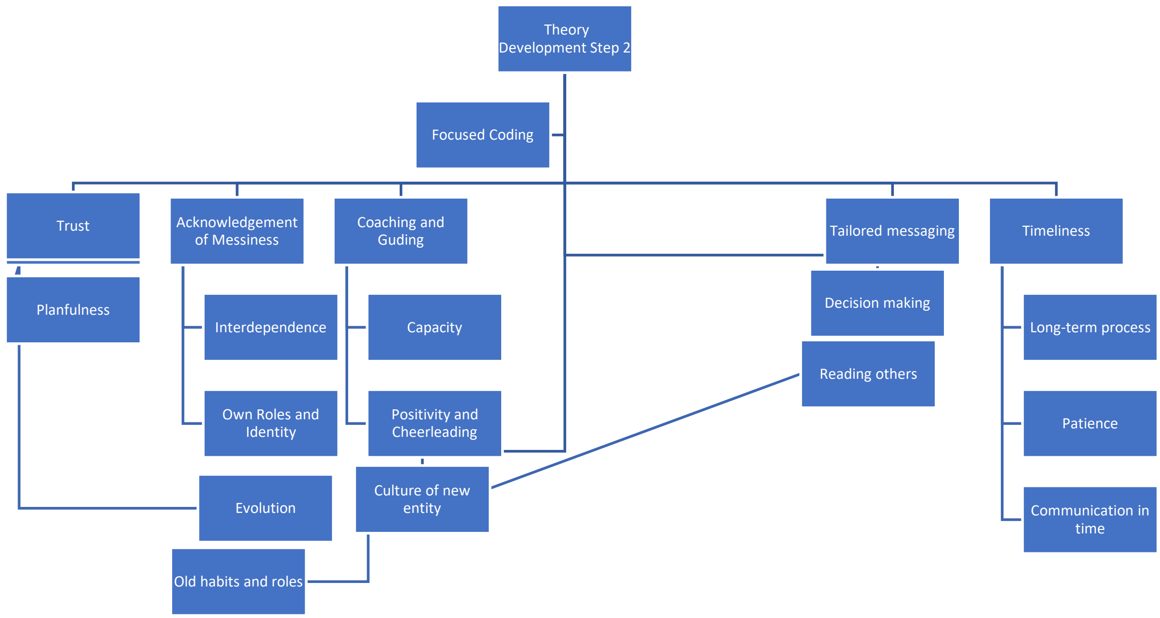

Figure 3. Focused coding leads to new parent categories, elimination of some child codes, and consolidation of thematic areas.

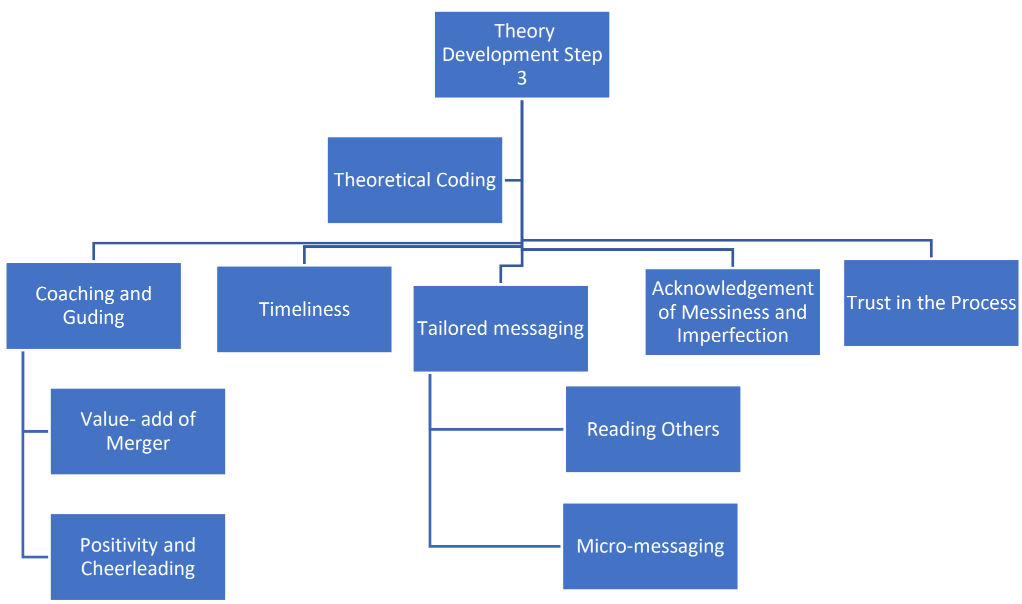

Figure 4. Final theoretical coding leads to further consolidation of themes to develop the final grounded theory.

Document analysis took place for the five public and/or broadly shared documents for the merger process. The same coding and analysis process took place within these documents, and they were uploaded into NVivo for coding, grouping, and memoing. An example of the coding process, using transcripts from the interviews, is listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding example from interview transcript qualitative data. Line-by-line coding is completed first, as initial codes are formed. Then focused coding leads to theoretical coding. Transcripts are examined for both thematic elements and Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames of Leadership. This example is modeled after an example of coding process elucidated by Charmaz (2012).

Coding Level	**Transcript excerpt**	**Emergent Themes**	**Framing**
Initial coding	"I don't know if this is accurate, but I feel that I have a decent read on group dynamics. And when I feel the anxiety, frustration, hesitation, whatever it may be at that moment, I attempt to address it as soon as I can. Most of the time it's reassuring [them] of the process."	Self-reflecting Interpreting Reading a situation Empathizing Sensing Reassuring Owning the response	*Human Resources:* Family dynamics Group consilience Roles in the "family" Political: Engendering coalition by acknowledging fear
Focused coding	"I don't know if this is accurate, but I feel that I have a decent read on group dynamics. And when I feel the anxiety, frustration, hesitation, whatever it may be at that moment, I attempt to address it as soon as I can. Most of the time it's reassuring [them] of the process."	*Reading others*: relates to other gerunds above due to empathy and intuition. Response is appropriate to reaction of constituents. Message of reassurance.	*Human Resources*: Family dynamics Keeping the peace

Theoretical Coding	"I don't know if this is accurate, but I feel that I have a decent read on group dynamics. And when I feel the anxiety, frustration, hesitation, whatever it may be at that moment, I attempt to address it as soon as I can. Most of the time it's reassuring [them] of the process."	Reading others, tied to messaging that is individualized. Main Theme: **Tailored Messaging** Sub Theme: ***Reading Others***	***Human Resources***

Description of the Sample

The participants in this study were all current administrators from the Northeast Higher Education District. The sample did not include all administrators, but represented a cross-section of newer administrators, those that had served many years in higher education, as well as members of each level of administrative leadership stratification (Table 3). Three participants were female, five participants were male; all participants were white. Although leaders who had taken part in the merger process who had retired were also eligible for participation, each member in this study was currently practicing at the time of their interview. Participants' ages ranged from early thirties to into their sixties. The participants served at four of the five colleges that were merging into the one college, along with representatives from the district at-large (Table 3). The participants were interviewed in early-mid fall of 2021. This was just during or slightly after a Higher Learning Commission team site visit to report upon and review the changes occurring during the merger, as well as complete a fact-finding conversation with stakeholders after the change of control documents had been submitted to the Higher Learning Commission that summer 2021. This information is shared to contextualize the point-in-time process that the merger participants were operating within. Beyond this, as this manuscript is being written, the Higher Learning Commission will make its determination on the merger in February, and the start of the new college, Minnesota North College, will take place on May 23, 2022, pending this approval. It is worth noting that this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the discussion of communicating change through distance emerged in the conversation with many of the research participants.

Table 3. Demographics of Study Participants

Characteristic	Number
Gender	
Female	3
Male	5
Age Range	Early thirties-early sixties
Highest Degree Attained	
Bachelor’s Degree	
Master’s Degree	5
Professional Degree	
Doctorate / Terminal Degree	3
Years in Administration/Leadership	
Less than one year	1
One-three years	2
Four-ten years	4
More than ten years	1
Ethnicity	
White	8
Black or African American	
American Indian or Alaska Native	
Asian	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	
Other	
Campuses/branches represented	Hibbing, Itasca, Mesabi Range, Rainy River, District-at-large

Data Review and Analysis of Results

The following results are based on the interview transcripts and coding and memoing that took place following the constant-comparative process. The narrative of this grounded theory was co-constructed with participants, as noted by Charmaz (2014). Participants played an active role in navigating and propelling the semi-structured interviews, and interesting and relevant insights were followed to completion of the thought, as these were a key part of the theory development. Categories emerged fairly quickly from the data, and the researcher kept reflexivity in mind, as that was a key understanding to ensure that the data were relevant. This reflection took place throughout the collection of data, the coding, memoing, and final theory construction.

Research Questions

The main issue addressed in this study will be framing change in multiple ways, so that leaders can seek buy-in from all stakeholders, as well as predict potential roadblocks to success by addressing multiple lenses through which to view the institutional reorganization. The main questions of this research are:

Q1) Which communication strategies do leaders at five different public institutions utilize in an attempt to create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation?

Q2) How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?

In outlining each emergent theme below, each research question (Q1 and Q2) was addressed within theme, to create a multi-dimensional approach to constructing the theory. The ultimate theory that emerged will be summarized at the end of the chapter, after an exploration of the themes that are pillars of the theory.

Theme 1. Positivity: Coaching and Guiding

The most common code that appeared in the analysis centered on the positive messaging of change, the merger, and the opportunities that structurally coming together would provide the students, community, and college. This was noted as being a point of pride in communication, and an easier message to communicate than others. The symbolic unification of the separate campuses and the value-add for streamlining the college processes that impact students, the community, and access to academic programming were all noted as areas that the participants found to be the core of their messages and communication. Coaching and guiding came up in a variety of approaches and applications, but most commonly there were two subthemes that the conversations fell into: 1) cheerleading the merger process and 2) promoting the value-add of the merger.

Participant 1 phrased the naming of this theme, sharing that their communication was framed in such a way as it was,

> *"...so much more important to really help guide and coach and facilitate people through this merger process. So that our nursing program, [in example], is well-equipped, you know, they've got good processes that they can follow they can make good decisions 'cause I really put a lot of value in the autonomy and the self-determination piece."*

More than one participant shared that the ability of people impacted by the merger to have a stake and "a say" in the process was key, but that the coaching and guiding of conversations helped to create unity during process development and to bring disparate ideas into one productive space.

As this theme emerged, it became apparent that the participants felt a sense of collegiality in the culture that was built among the stakeholders, particularly those internal to the organization, during this change. This was evidenced in the communication that they had with the faculty and staff. Participant 2 noted that,

> *"It's impacted me in a way that I have greater faith than I ever have in people and [their] work ethic, and their willingness to trust and willingness to try things and willingness to get excited. So that's impacted me just in seeing the good in people."*

Gratitude for all of the hard work that had taken place thus far in the process was expressed by multiple participants, and they noted sharing that gratitude widely with others. There was a positive response from participants when discussing the conversations that they had with colleagues regarding this process, even if some were skeptical about the outcome initially. The sense from participants was that there was generally good support for merging from stakeholders, and the change itself as a process was the more difficult piece to overcome.

Subtheme 1: Cheerleading the Process

Many participants used the word "cheerleading" to describe how they approached their communication of the merger process and outcomes. Those that did, noted that this was an area that was easier for them to communicate, based on their beliefs that overall the outcomes of the merger would be positive for all involved. Participant 4 shared that

> *"The easier ones[messages] are, again, things I have more of a core belief in. Right? Like this is a good thing. This is why this is a good thing. These are the efficiencies we're going to gain. Look at all these great things that are going to happen."*

Likewise, Participant 3 noted,

> "*But, two, I think I've tried to-- also as much as I can-- be a cheerleader for the work as well to try to… I don't think I've ever cast the merger in negative light, at least I*

have tried not to. And I think I've been very deliberate about that, to try to build some kind of sense of optimism or anticipation for the work."

This deliberate approach of positivity is engrained in the roles that leaders feel are assigned to them, or that they assign to themselves. Many felt that this was a part of their leadership role. Participant 4 shared that quite frankly,

"[One part of my role,] it is kind of a champion or a ra-ra! kind of person for the merger."

Despite this, the path of cheerleading the process is not always easy, according to the participants. Participant 3 shared that,

"I'm just trying to keep conveying a message of, we're doing this for a reason it's necessary work, there are so many positives that are going to come out of this. A lot of strengths for coming together, and even the ability to point toward what some of those wins have already been. I think the curriculum merger that's happened had been an enormous home run. I think that's been something we can point to as, yes, this has been difficult. There have been battles but look what we've already done."

More about the acceptance of the complexities of merger is shared in a future theme, regarding the **Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection,** but in this present theme, the focus is on the positives that exist in spite of that messiness.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 1, Subtheme 1: Cheerleading the Process

Political lenses from Bolman and Deal were noted in this theme of **Coaching and Guiding, *Subtheme: Cheerleading the Process***. Political framing was apparent with a focus on the outcomes through the eyes of stakeholders and understanding the need to frame the change through a positive light to those parties. Participant 2 stated that the folks who needed to be involved were,

> *"Obviously, business and industry partners, our K-12 partners, our employees, our legislators, because they advocate for us at the funding level and support levels, so we do well, they have a good message to sell."*

This participant also felt as though the student voice could advise the process, and the messaging to them would be one of positivity as,

> *"You can get a lot of good input from them [the students], have them advise on the process to the sense of which way they think things could go based on how they are experiencing their education, and so I think it's a little different message, although at the end of the day they're the ones that will reap the benefits, and they're why we are doing this."*

Participant 6 also shared some capacity-building and examining the <u>political</u> value-add of the merger, noting that,

> *"We have all this capacity, and in the past, we didn't have this capacity. I'm always thinking of my constituencies with that kind of lens. How can we, I don't want to [say] use, but how can we use these different constituencies to our advantage?"*

There was a sense from participants that using political leverage of the larger, merged entity would bring several of the smallest institutions in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System into a space with more leverage and regional coalition building power. This was a big part of the next subtheme of **Coaching and Guiding: *Value-Add of Merger***.

Subtheme 2: Value-Add of Merger

Many participants noted that in their communication, they focused on the efficiencies gained during the merger process. In this time, much of the value shared was in the removal of competition between campuses and the efficiencies of cost. Participant 6 noted,

> "*We've had five campuses that have been in competition with one another, whether real or made up or imagined. But going from five to one and being able to have one common vision and one common direction, it really lends itself the efficiency sort of conversation…".*

Participant 6 was not the only person that noted the common vision and direction that this merger process would build (See Appendix C for full quoted text, theme, and frame).

Beyond the benefits to the community, students, and overall efficiencies, some noted the growth within the leadership team would be something that could be celebrated. Many noted how difficult the leadership role was on them during this time of change and communication, but the outcomes were worth it. Participant 2 shared that they were boosted by the idea of growth from within:

> *"That team of not only administrative leaders, but directors and faculty leaders, anybody that has benefited from this process both personally and professionally: that excites me."*

This enthusiasm around growth was shared by others, who felt that they wanted to remind people of how far the institutions and the folks that work within them have already come. Participant 2 shared that,

> *"The fact that there's been such-- I think at each campus-- a certain amount of pride in the work that's been done, and what's been built. But also, I think there was a measure of honesty and acknowledgment at here's what we've done really well, but here are maybe some elements that we could improve upon. And really a willingness to truly learn from one another to build the best possible final outcomes."*

Participant 3 also acknowledged the duality of response to merger from others, as not everyone is always excited about the change. They noted that their approach to counter this was with a positive attitude:

> "*I try to with employees, with students and people that community, try to paint it in a very positive sense. Even sometimes the questions come from a more negative tone: "Why are you doing that anyway, what's the point?" So try to really lay out the case as succinctly as I can and try to build some enthusiasm, anticipation for it."*

This capacity-building within the merger was recognized as being part of a strategy that may not fully be realized for many years. It also was noted as having its germination many years prior, as Participant 7 related,

> "*Okay, community and technical colleges and universities are merged back in the late nineties. Regionalization of college campuses was supposed to happen, as well. And that's how NHED had gotten formed originally in 1999."*

This relates to the next theme, **Timeliness**, as Participant 2 so eloquently noted, they intentionally speak to the upsides that will be realized years forward:

> *"…with an emphasis on what this can mean for our region in access and opportunity for students and expansion of programming. That's really been, I would say, the forefront of the message. But I've also pointed to elements that I've either personally learned, or that various departments or colleagues have, learned from others as well. I've tried to point to wins during the process itself, but I don't think that's been my default. I think I naturally shift to what this will mean, you know, two, three, five years down the road, ten years down the road for our students in our region."*

Participant 3 noted that because of the scale of the change, the long-ranging implications, and the possible gains, they have seen a lot of interest in the process.

> *"I think I've really quite frankly and truly enjoyed speaking with people about the merger. People that are interested in what's happening… on a more informal level, to be able to speak with people about this, I find that not only simpler but, in a way, enjoyable. I think they can sense truly my enthusiasm for what's happening."*

Perhaps Participant 8 summarized this value-add transition in a succinct statement on how far each campus had come, and what capacity was yet to be realized:

> *"Truly, this is a place we've been heading all along and with already so many shared services under our belt. And plus all of our experience, our individual experience …. Getting past that competition and that past experience to seeing the possibilities of what's new and what can be better with a merged institution."*

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that the process thus-far had been one of learning and growth, with a sense that there was more growth and potential to realize in the years to come.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 1, Subtheme 2: Value-Add of the Merger

Much discussion around symbolic and mission-based change was noted in alignment with the value-add conversation. In terms of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership, the Symbolic frame loomed large in the discussion of value-add of the merger. There was conversation regarding the identity of the newly merged entity. As Symbolic framing has a lot to do with mission and identity, the conversations around value-add and the positive gains of the merger that will allow the newly formed college to better serve students was discussed by participants. Initially, this was coded as "Culture of New Entity" (see Figure 2.); however, this was subsumed into new categories of the ***Value-Add of Merger*** and the overall theme of

Coaching and Guiding, based on the gerunds that were present in the initial coding (i.e.: growing, experiencing, building, leading, coaching).

Other Bolman and Deal frames present include Human Resources and Political (See Appendix C for full breakdown of themes). Even though a focus on mission was present in value-add discussion of the merger, there was always an attention to the stakeholder response, whether internal or external. Participants talked about how they "shared their enthusiasm" with others in hope of gaining positive response to the change, attending to the new culture of the "family" of the newly formed college. Others felt it was important to note the positive changes in the value-add that would lead to regional prosperity, and they mentioned using these conversations with stakeholders to leverage the positive coalition-building around the change. Finally, participants noted that the timing of conversations with stakeholders had to be on-point, in order for them to form a positive value-add impression of the change.

Theme 2.Timeliness

Many participants discussed how the change was a "long-game", and the impacts of the change could be felt for years to come. This also was discussed in terms of a long on-ramp to the merger itself and the long-term communication around that. Notably, change had to overcome the inertia of higher education systems. Participant 6 noted:

> "*I think this is a negative thing with us in large-scale systems like this, though. I feel like sometimes large-scale systems-- to actually change---they need somebody to come in and just tip over the whole table. So I think there's two ways of doing it. I observed this Vision Northeast thing to be this 20-year process. So it's not just now, [current president] is tasked with doing that now, but this has been something in the works for a long, long time. It takes a long runway*".

Participant 2 reflected that the process, while having a long-on ramp, would be felt for many years to come and would evolve through that time, noting that,

> *"… ultimately, the message for the end of the process, which really isn't the end, but the beginning, too, I guess, [as] we become Minnesota North, is that the effects may not be immediate. It will take time to fully recognize the value of consolidation and merger, and so that people need to be patient, and understand that patience will be a virtue here, but some of the benefits may not even be seen by some of us as we may retire before you know three ,four, five years into Minnesota North."*

Others noted a level of impatience with the pace of change, particularly in the processes that needed to be worked through, such as: hiring to new, reorganized divisions within the new entity, carrying out the processes that needed to be complete for the old colleges to be able to transition, and simply pushing out documents and policies. Participant 1 also mentioned this idea of impatience with the process and how to cope with that when people want answers:

> "*I think that's been a real challenge with the scale, the movement, and really the time elapse that took place between the start of the structure to… we're still not done. That time delay, it's been important to have [not only] this macro [messaging], but yet really kind of have more that micro messaging."*

This participant felt that by communicating with individuals as they needed reassurance in the process, that helped to "micro-message" the change in a way that addressed their individual, immediate needs.

This was an idea that was reflected by many others in this sample: just-in-time messaging. This was noted as a key part in building **Trust in the Process,** another key theme precipitated by the conversations with interview participants. As Participant 1 noted,

> *"I think vision and communication was important to that. [It] helped to build trust in the process. Being visible. Going and doing listening sessions multiple times so people left and felt like their voice was getting heard. As much as I could, in that process, knowing that we've got all these other activities with innovation teams and people working on mission and vision."*

This participant also mentioned that more keyed-in messaging was taking place throughout the process, not just at coordinated points:

> *"here's kind of a micro messaging… I mean the moment you know that something needs to be attended to. And to be honest right now, I've tried to be very responsive and attentive to seeing those kind of… maybe [focusing on] more of the micro messaging and not waiting for something formal. I'm not saying I'm doing it better or worse, but I've just seen where I don't think some people paid attention to the micro messaging in the moment and waited too long to communicate. And that's caused either frustrations or having to back up."*

This relates to a following theme of **Tailored Messaging**. Participant 4 relied on just-in-time messaging as issues and concerns arose, where:

> *"… primarily, for me, it's driven on the situational timeliness and then situational 'cause that's how it's coming at me, the groups that I'm working with, the stakeholders I'm working with, a lot of it is coming at me situationally rather than in a planned manner, I guess."*

In spite of best efforts, there was an acknowledgment of times where communication could have been more clear or swift in terms of **Timeliness** as noted by several members of the study:

1. Participant 1 felt that although much of the process went well, they had wished for more timely communication:

   "I would really look back at the steps that we've taken and realize there's been a lot of good stuff. There's things that you wish would have gone a little bit more smoothly, and there could have been just some better timing on communication."

2. Participant 3 felt strongly that job duties were an important area to address in light of the uncertainty people carried over their roles in the new college:

   "Yeah, you probably sensed I defaulted right away to jobs and positions. I think those are…the communication around that I think has been among the most important. Both where maybe perhaps we've gotten it right and certainly when we've gotten it wrong. That's where I think I felt the most agitated by a misstep in communication."

3. Participant 6 felt that regardless of the efforts to endeavor to communicate, the effect may not be adequate for those that want more:

   "So is that enough? Or is there more? Are there more informal conversations that can happen? There's just not enough. You can never have too much [communication]."

4. Participant 8 simply shared:

> *"I do want to say one of the pieces that I felt was missing in this process was a communication plan, somewhere early on. And maybe that was just understood because we had representatives from all the colleges and people just probably understood that they were supposed to be communicating."*

Despite this, there were instances where communication was held back for purposeful reasons. This may have had to do with particular stakeholder roles within a state-wide system and the hierarchical structure therein, as well as the phenomenon of shared governance. Timing is important for those particular considerations, as Participant 2 shared,

> *"It's probably of all questions related communication, not the most difficult question, but the most difficult thing to do is prioritization of who to communicate with. Because people want information all the time. And people may not accept or believe this, but there are times where it's better that you're not putting out information when it's not ready to be put out, even though people want information."*

Knowing how to navigate that line was difficult for some, as Participant 8 noted, each person wants a little bit different information.

> *"I guess probably the most important message has been where we are in the process. Because people who aren't necessarily part of these teams or part of the information circle, they're wondering, you know, where are you in the process? Are you making decisions? What kinds of decisions are you making? Will I be part of approving that decision or how will that impact me?*"

Knowing that the pitfalls of ill-timed or poor communication could be devastating, Participant 2 opined,

> *"It's better to be slow and methodical with the communication and have some people occasionally upset because they haven't heard anything in a while. It's better to have that than it is to miscommunicate, because we live in a unionized environment with shared governance, with a system, with legislators, stakeholders, administrators, leadership cabinet and there's a method to the madness."*

This was in contrast to many of the participants, who focused mainly on the need for more and more communication. Even such, some felt that they were unsure of the timing or appropriateness of their specific role in translating out messages to others. Participant 3 shared,

> *"As an example, I put out a letter to students this fall. It had a lot of information about COVID, a lot of information welcoming them to the semester; said nothing about the merger. That would have been a great opportunity to say something about Minnesota North, and yet…I could ask the question, but I wasn't sure about the appropriateness. And even if it were appropriate, what degree of messaging I should share that would be consistent?"*

This participant noted later that they,

> *"… tend to be a little more gun-shy with it just because I don't want to step out of turn."*

Regardless of uncertainty around the level of communication and appropriateness in each situation, every participant noted the importance of communication. This was impacted by the longevity of participants to their current roles. Those that had been part of the process since the inception of the merger idea felt more assured in their messaging, but those that were more recent hires or more nascent in their leadership roles indicated that they may have less comfort or confidence in their timing or messaging. Participant 4 stressed that:

> "*Yeah, the space and time that we are living in, the timeliness of it is indeed where the priority comes in. That's not to say if I had been here at the beginning, right at the very beginning of this work, this conversation, I would be in a different place with my ability to prioritize that and the timeliness of it. I feel like there's probably a timeline in which certain things need to be communicated in a specific way, and I entered into the middle of that timeline, and so it's a little bit loose for me."*

In spite of this, they felt that there had been a lot of learning along the way. In giving advice to anyone else attempting to communicate through a large-scale change process, Participant 4 also shared that,

> *"I would tell them to communicate early and often. And be as transparent as you can be. There are some things that obviously you can't share, you know, personnel related decisions, those sorts of things. But communicating as often and as transparently as you can."*

Different modes of communication were also shared as either helping or hindering the process, which took place across some geographic, local cultural, and management differences (both union leaders and administration). Participant 5 discussed some of the in-person opportunities that they were looking forward to, in light of the prolonged distance communication borne by the COVID-19 pandemic and the auspices of geography.

> *"We recently connected during our listening sessions about a month ago and then we connected again during Duty Day. And now we'll connect again with our upcoming*

> *faculty visit days to all of the different colleges, too, so that will provide us another opportunity to connect in person*."

Leaders were thinking about the avenues that they were communicating across, whether they be in-person, via text, telephone, email, or broad public messaging.. Participant 5 mentioned that it was important to them that they were,

> "*Being thoughtful in our communication style, for example, they're presenting the rebranding process, being very inclusive of everybody."*

More than message-avenue, the thoughtfulness behind the messaging was taken into consideration.

Planfulness was part of this strategy (planfulness was also an initial code, see Figure 2.), as this participant foreshadowed that,

> *"Once we get more of the staffing model in place, I would like to create some type of, if not bi-weekly, monthly check-ins with [the participant's division] as a group. So that would definitely be a goal."*

This encompassed internal, as well as external, stakeholders. Participant 6 noted that,

> *"I was just with the [local] chamber, and I gave an update about Vision Northeast. And what did I say? Here's what we're doing. We have Higher Learning Commission that's coming to visit. We have these timestamps: February sort of decision times that are going to happen. We have a brand that we rolled out internally, but once we get official approval, then we'll make some sort of splash about it. Just to kind of keep people updated and generate buy-in and advocacy for our work."*

Some of these stakeholders, such as those mentioned above, needed less frequent communication, but they needed to be apprised of the change, regardless. Amount of communication and differences in stakeholder groups—internal and external-- were noted by Participant 7, who shared,

> *"Well, with each group, there's a different amount of information that they need, I feel. Staff and faculty probably need the most real-time information. Students, probably next. Then I probably would follow that up with the Foundation or the community. Alumni come to you for information versus us going to alumni most often. Not that it should be that way, but that's the way it is. And then I'll always, the perspective student is always in the back your mind, too. How somebody is reading this, how somebody is interpreting what's going on, views this in a positive light, that kind of thing."*

Timeliness as it related to stakeholder involvement was a key feature in prioritization of communication. Interestingly, these priorities aligned with the areas of focus of each leader; for example, those that worked in student affairs felt that gathering those stakeholders was most important, versus those leaders that had more external-facing interactions who may prioritize system office or chamber of commerce stakeholders. This interpretation even had underpinnings and repercussions for accreditation through the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), according to Participant 8, who noted,

> *"…HLC is interested in how the new organization will function. Certainly, they want to see our organization, our organizational structure. But that's only the framework for: how does it function? How do the currents of communication flow through that organization structure so that data and experience are used to*

inform decisions and that priorities are determined through the functionality of that structure?"

The currents of communication are driven by the prioritization and timeliness of messaging to communication receivers. The functionality of the structure of communication and the time it will take to bear this structure out, both short-term and past the merger date were key focuses of the **Timeliness** theme.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 2: Timeliness

In this instance, the Human Resources frame is well-attended to, as the building of "family" and family concerns are addressed. In terms of thematic representation, the Human Resources frame is noted sixteen times over the course of the coding within **Timeliness** (see Table 4). Attending to the concerns of internal stakeholders of faculty and staff, mainly, was the focus of the **Timeliness** theme. Giving people time to process the change, grieve the previous state of their roles and identities, and attending to their new relationships was a focus here.

Second to Human Resources was the Political framework. Political focuses were mainly on ensuring coalition-building around the process in a timely manner. Stakeholders were brought into conversation and informed of changes as they needed to be. Participants noted meetings with chamber groups, state leaders, and political champions as areas where they wanted to engage for buy-in. The accrediting agency for the college was even noted as a stakeholder that needed to be engaged with and persuaded that this merger was the correct route to follow for stability and better resource usage within the college.

Table 4. Interview references to each Bolman and Deal leadership frame within the thematic structures of the theory. Most frequently referenced frames are noted with an asterisk.

	Frame			
Theme	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
1: Coaching and Guiding	2	4	2	9*
2: Timeliness	5	16*	11	2
3:Tailored Messaging	0	14*	8	2
4: Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection	2	2	2	3*
5: Trust in the Process	2	8*	4	0

Theme 3. Tailored Messaging

The next theme, **Tailored Messaging**, evidenced itself in two parts. First, leaders emphasized the need to read others, then to respond accordingly and message their communications in a way that addressed the needs of their constituents. This was highlighted broadly across the participants, regardless of years of service, location, gender, or other distinguishing factor. Participant 4 felt as though that was one lesson that they would pass on to other leaders in similar situations:

> *"Making sure that you're tailoring your message-- not changing the core of the message-- but tailoring how you communicate that message. I guess that would be the general advice I would give someone going through this process."*

This **Tailored Messaging** was accomplished through the subthemes of 1) ***Reading Others*** and 2) ***Micro-Messaging*** to engage with the specific, timely needs that those stakeholders presented.

Reading others

Leaders in this system felt particularly in tune with the needs of their constituents. Participant 2 shared that this was a characteristic of good leaders, being able to read what others need or are feeling.

> *"Part of it is intuition, and people have different levels of emotional intelligence and have a sense of what to do. Part of it is having longevity in an organization and understanding how people react."*

Participant 7 stated that they had a sense out for when reassurances were needed in the process:

> *"I don't know if this is accurate, but I feel that I have a decent read on group dynamics. And when I feel the anxiety, frustration, hesitation, whatever it may be at that moment, I attempt to address it as soon as I can. Most of the time it's reassuring [them] of the process."*

Participant 4 echoed this, noting the helpfulness of in-person meetings when attempting to read others, versus the difficulty of reading people in a digital format:

> *"And I can see people's faces and read them a little bit, read the room a little bit. Can't do that in a Zoom presentation where you only see yourself. I'm interacting with myself basically, at that point, then that just starts to feel weird, so I think in person certainly is a little bit easier."*

Digital communication and the complexities of that were an interesting finding of this research that stood out in a few areas. This will be explored in Further Implications in Chapter 5.

Participant 4 also noted the need to address fear to create trust, which is tied to a following theme, **Trust in the Process**, but they clarified that in order to address this fear, it has to be recognized first. This is not always obvious, so keen observation of faculty and staff is necessary:

> *"I would only say I think that changes is…I think it's important in the change management is to gauge the level of fear that people have around it. And the uncertainty that they feel that exists and make sure – and that's a part of tailoring the message…"*

Participant 5 noted the need to develop relationships on a personal level, without the barrier of technology. This was a route to develop the open opportunity to read others and engage with them. This was particularly important as lines of supervision changed:

> *" So the message-- specifically to my team: we conducted listening sessions so I could initially make that face-to-face connection with people that I will most likely eventually be supervising."*

They felt as though making the effort to travel and seek feedback was part and parcel with creating the impression that feedback they received from staff and faculty was important. This individual noted that even communication from supervisors was difficult in the digital space, due to the nuances of learning communication preferences and communication inferences:

> *" I guess understanding how to manage those relationships and building them from a distance is a bit challenging because you can really get to know people more in-person when you're face-to-face with them."*

Alternatively, some felt that technology was a bridge in the relationship-building between geographically isolated campuses, and they were opposed to the idea that technology was a barrier. Instead they believed it allowed for a better on-ramp to the relationship-building process. Participant 7 said,

> *"Because of the pandemic a little bit and Zoom, our staff had an opportunity to ease into their relationships with their future colleagues. When they get opportunities to actually meet people face to face, it's like they've already met them when in fact they haven't. And so it's like seeing a cousin that I haven't seen in a long time but yet you've never seen them. And so it was kind of nice. So I think if it was just a "feeling-out" process where if we were to gather all in one spot… had to do that in a more formal setting I think it would have taken longer. It would have been harder, but I think this has allowed us to maybe make that a little easier and maybe build a little bit more trust within a more comfortable format than the face-to-face might have been."*

Participant 8 noted their approach of being mindful with the information they were sharing out via multi-modal communication and different team and stakeholder groups. They had a lot of care around the clarification and unification of messaging:

> *"How can I show them that we've done that and what evidence do I have to back up what I'm saying and writing? Whenever I have done any presentations for the leadership group, it's all about how can we conceptualize this? So we're all working from the same image, whether it's a roadmap or building a structure that has phases to it. How can we all have the same understanding of what we're building so that we can build it together."*

Participant 2 addressed the subtleties of the signals that one may need to decipher from others, including those on one's team. People may not always want to speak up when their feedback may be perceived as negative,

> *"So you kinda have to pick this stuff up sometimes from watching people and intuition and repeated messages from one or more people. You know, they keep kind of hinting at the same thing, you know it's time. And so, baked into that is, really try to encourage your people to be dissenters, respectfully, obviously, and they would be, to ideas that don't seem to line up…Keep an eye on your team in the sense that you gotta watch for those nuances of their reaction, actions, because of that hesitancy."*

The sense of a team and community was strong, but it may impede dissent when people are cautious of the feelings of others. Likewise, one's own feelings and intuition could cause complications.

Participant 2 cautioned that

> *"just because you're intuitive to people's feelings or emotions doesn't mean that you can overly rely on that as a gauge. Just be aware of it. Recognize it. Do what you can with it to keep those people feeling good and involved."*

This leader felt that others could potentially become frozen in fear of making decisions, because of hesitancy to share news that may not always be the most welcome.

> *"So you have to watch the ramifications of being an overly intuitive person or focusing too much on intuition. There's not one perfect way to do things or to approach things. That's another good lesson for leaders and as they're communicating things, don't over-rely on intuition alone."*

Fortunately, much of the information gained by the intuition of leaders interviewed here allowed them to work on communicating out in a way that addressed the individualized needs of faculty, staff, and stakeholders. This formed the next sub-theme: ***Micro-Messaging***.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 3, Subtheme 1: Reading Others

Reading Others thematic elements focus on the Human Resources framework of Bolman and Deal (Table 4). Notably, gauging fear and the place that people are seeking within the newly formed institution are key in reading others. As written by Bowman and Deal, “the fit between the individual and the larger system is a central human resources concern” (2017, p.170). Although title and position are Structural frame concerns, true dynamic satisfaction and interpersonal interactions when building a new team are specific to Human Resources framing. For Participants 4 and 5, their newness to their roles drove some of the comments that they made around setting communication expectations and how they experienced the need to read others. Again, as before, Political framing was a close second to Human Resources framing in terms of frequency of use, but the focus was on the role of the individuals to be read within the larger context, rather than reading the political coalition groups.

Micro-messaging

A large component of the communication was not only reading others, but also responding to individual concerns, whether they were personal, or if someone was deviating from the shared decision of the group. As Participant 1 noted, those conversations could be more difficult.

> *“It's just like, yeah, but you know, the decision was made here. It was made jointly with this direction. You're really not in a spot to decide to go over in a different direction unless the rest of the group agrees and in that because people see different*

> *parts fitting in different spots. Those are private and more challenging conversations that are more individual, that communication."*

Aligned with the **Timeliness** concept, this individual also felt that the small conversations had in the moment helped to smooth over areas that could have become more complicated if they were left unattended to:

> *"There's kind of a micro messaging, I can say, I mean the moment you know that something needs to be attended to. And to be honest right now, I've tried to be very responsive and attentive to seeing those kind of… maybe [focusing on] more of the micro messaging and not waiting for something formal. I'm not saying I'm doing it better or worse, but I've just seen where I don't think some people paid attention to the micro messaging in the moment and waited too long to communicate. And that's caused either frustrations or having to back up*."

Participant 4 concurred with this idea of attending to matters on and in-time, individual-level, sharing that,

> *"I think it comes down to what the person you're talking to needs, or the group you're talking to needs, and tailoring that message as long as it fits in with the overall message… tailoring it to that group. But generally, my overarching message to whoever I'm talking to is that this is a good thing."*

This individual also noted that people in different roles may perceive something differently that people that may be in another department, so seeking to address what people care about may results in a slightly different focus in a particular conversation around an issue.

> "*I do think it is different based on the roles the persons plays in the organization, their place in the in the world, I guess, and their ability to hear you and your message."*

This participant felt that the bottom line of communication was really individualized:

> *"My interaction with the message is at an individualized basis."*

Participant 6 also spoke to their focus on particular, specific needs when addressing people in their division:

> *"Depends on what the audience is. Right? So if the audience was my team in [redacted division] and I talk about the brand…And so I think it's a really important, when I'm talking to them, 'Here's what this is going to add value for us: we will get a chance to refresh our brand if that's something we choose to do.'…And so it's really "what's in it for them" type of thing."*

Participant 8 felt that some of their role was to return messaging to the leadership team based on their division's feedback:

> *"I had my other role as representing our college and our staff, in particular. I've been involved in Innovation [Teams]…I've really been trying to bring back at least our process to communicate that to our staff members so that they have a sense, that they had some idea of where things were going and the types of topics that were being brought up. And then also to provide their input back to the innovation team."*

This representation and shepherding of information extended out to interactions that occurred in the community; getting the message out to individuals on chambers, local boards, and others that would have a vested interest in the successful outcome of the college merger process. As Participant 1 shared,

> *"I've been to umpteen social groups in town. The chamber, [redacted] board leadership, I've made it –I mean, early on-- went to every local school board and gave them an update on our process*
>
> *... So if I think of going back to "why spend time with those stakeholders?" I don't know. It's just like a deep personal conviction."*

This method of intense focus on individual conversations is likely to be a condition unique to smaller institutions. Participant 7 acknowledged that, stating:

> *"Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I think that the means in which I did reassure, calm, be enthusiastic towards the merger were, would've been different than they would've been at a larger institution. But I think the goal was probably would've been the same. But the means by which I got there are definitely different."*

The size and scale of the opportunity to ***micro-message*** and ***read others*** is related to the opportunities for individual interaction afforded by the more intimate settings of small colleges. **Tailored Messaging** could take place at a larger scale, but in the findings of this study, much effort was expended to be present at each campus or within each stakeholder group to have the opportunity to create these conversations. This would not be feasible in some college settings or mergers.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 3, Subtheme 2: Micro-Messaging

The Political frame took a larger part in this subtheme of ***Micro-Messaging*** than the previous subtheme in this category of ***Reading Others.*** Participant 7 noted the politics and optics involved in some of this work:

> *"We have to make sure that we're seen in the light that we want to be seen in and then make sure that the community knows what's coming."*

Much of this theme centers on both the Political and Human Resources frames; again, the focus is on attending to the individualized needs of the division or group of stakeholders. Bolman and Deal (2017) focus on how organization can be political agents. Messaging would need to be tailored to the resource needs of the groups involved with the merging college (i.e.: employers, politicians, K-12 partners, funders, alumni groups, etc.). Bolman and Deal (2017) compare these entities to members of the same ecosystem. By virtue of sharing a common environment, the stakeholders here must understand what their particular interest is within this merger. For example, will programming be available in other geographic areas covered by the newly merged college that once existed only on one remote campus? Will that mean that as an employer, I may have more graduates in the hiring pool to choose from? If I am part of a funding entity, will I be able to fund projects that impact a greater geographic reach? By ***micro-messaging*** to external stakeholders, leaders can share the benefits of the merger and how that impacts each individual entity.

Theme 4. Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection

The participants in this study noted that change processes may be iterative and that the piloting of the new structure may not be the final state of the college. Participant Six noted,

> "*So the runaway is huge. The change is not linear. Change and decision-making isn't linear. You can make a decision then you can [ask]: are they already doing this right? Are we doing this right? What are we thinking about this? What's the reason for doing this? What's the "why"?"*

Communicating that iterativeness and evolution was key to avoiding the impression that when the "switch was flipped" and the college was one unit, that the imperfections were permanent.

Although participants noted the positivity of the communication and the desire to cheerlead the process, they also acknowledge that this work was challenging for all involved, and they felt that it was important to validate that challenge. Participant 3 noted that part of the communication was,

> *"Trying to acknowledge that this is hard, that we're asking a lot out of people. I don't think it does any good to minimize that or try to be Pollyanna-ish about it, just kind of, you know, looking at this whole thing through rose- colored glasses. The process itself-- it is, we're asking a lot [out] of people, and I think we're both feeling that to a degree, so I think, one, acknowledging that. Trying to be as supportive and encouraging as we can be through that."*

Participant 1 tried to note guardrails which had been part of the design of the change, to ensure that everyone was moving in the same direction,

> *"Otherwise, we could all start to fracture off instead of coming together, and having some really seen that connectivity, we could refracture in a new way."*

Participant 2 also noted the responsibility of owning the decisions that created the guardrails around the process, as well as communicating praise to those who are facilitating work,

> *"And by owning, it that means taking responsibility for things that don't go well and giving credit for those things at do go well."*

One factor that created messiness was ambiguity. Clarity is not always present in the merger process, which is unsettling. Trying to touch base with stakeholders and keep a balance in that approach was challenging for the leaders in this system. Participant 1 felt that

> *"A lot of times just trying to keep a goal and a vision, and what we'd set out. But really trying to support that whole Vision Northeast process, and it felt like kind of*

> *scrambling around at times to be here, to be there. I'm not complaining in any way, it just, it was so important to start getting the rest of the structure in place so people can… it's hard for them, in that abstract mode, to see things. And so I guess trying to help them to see things, feel like there's movement. I mean, a lot of times, it felt like just we were spinning plates so at least there are plates spinning, whether we're going anywhere or not."*

Participant 6 felt fairly open about the fear that may exist due to lack of assigned structure and positional identity that people were tethered to in the past:

> *"Other stakeholders that are internal, like faculty, and potentially some staff, are probably really uncertain with what is going to happen, what isn't going to happen. The best thing I can do if that ever comes up is give them the factual information that I have at the time and be as honest as I can and open and transparent as I can and don't be scared to say I don't know."*

Ambiguity (an initial code, Figure 2.) was a key part of the structural change that participants tried to combat by utilizing the previous theme of **Tailored Messaging.**

However, Participant 2 pointed out that ambiguity may exist while processes are waiting to play out. The manner of course in which certain stakeholder groups need to be apprised of certain changes necessitated measured communication streams:

> *"Just a very simple example is if something happens or there's an event or an action is being taken, and people learn about it through something other than formal chains of communication that may be purposeful because we haven't had a shared governance meeting yet. You can't communicate to the general public before you talked with shared governance, and go through whatever process that would be, as*

just one example. Another might be that the chancellor hasn't been notified yet, so there are priorities to everything, but most- you know -your larger decisions and larger events have a chain of communication with priorities attached to them. When it's complex like this, you have to follow those because if you speak out of turn, you'd be in more trouble, if you will, then if you just blurted it out to everybody just so everybody knew."

Overall, Participant 4 noted that the evolution of the process would continue to take place over time. The messiness of the transition would not disappear as soon as the "flip-the-switch" date (the legal name change) took place.

"There will be some level of decisions that we've made that we will figure out a year from now that it wasn't the right decision. I think we need to… it's not like we get to May 23rd ,and then at the end of the change. We need to continue to communicate that's a longer-term thing, and I think that is important in the messaging. Making sure that you're communicating that there's not really the end date to change-- it keeps going."

Much concern in this theme was around structure, and the fear that the potential lack of clarity or finality in structure may cause mistrust or fear in constituents of the change. Beyond this, burnout in the leadership team was noted as a strong possibility with the level of change management taking place. Participant 7 noted,

"One thing that I probably would change if I were ever to be a part of this again or recommend to others, is that the burnout factor of the "messy middle" is real. And the people that are coming into new roles… the people that are coming into new

roles versus having their old roles at the same time without bringing on new people, it's unhealthy. And things get missed."

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 4: Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection

Interestingly, there was a closer balance between all four frames of leadership for this particular theme. Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic lenses, with a slight edge toward Symbolic framing, were all present in this theme. Broadly, this indicated that imperfection and change that is messy and iterative is something that must be examined in a well-rounded fashion. This may relate to reframing of ethics of an organization, as ethical leadership would be more direct in acknowledging the imperfections of the process and seeking to come to a more improved system as time progresses. The organizational ethic for each theme—excellence (Structural), caring (Human Resources), justice (Political), and faith or belief (Symbolic)—may be evidenced by the comments shared by participants, in the following ways (Bolman and Deal, 2017).

1. Excellence (Structural): By working toward a better system as the merger takes place and evolves into the future, the college is better able to support the needs of its students and community. Noting that the structure that is in place now will likely change is in accordance with the idea that this excellence will be part of the goals and growth of the organization.
2. Caring (Human Resources): Sharing that this system will not be perfect is a way of letting people know that there is a hope of improvement and betterment for their satisfaction and comfort with their roles in the new team.
3. Justice (Political): The idea that resources may not be shared out in the same was as they have been in the past will concern those that have been working in a

resource-scarce environment for years. Noting that any inequities will aim to be rectified is an acknowledgement of the need for justice.

4. Faith and belief (Symbolic): The overall belief that even if the post-merger system is not perfect, it will be allowing the college a better chance of achieving its mission. This will engender faith in the process of merger and change itself.

Theme 5: Trust in the Process

Regardless of the messiness noted above, the leaders interviewed in this research project focused on aiming for trust and transparency in the process of merger. Participant 2 shared that,

> *"…the message is simply that this is a valuable process, that we determined on our own, and we built it in an extremely inclusive manner so that people could be a part of the process and be part of the message versus being told."*

The feeling of creating this change before being told that it must take place or prior to a mandate that those within the college would have less control over was a big driver in the building of the merger process, according to participants. Within mergers, there is a lot of fear of job loss or loss of identity. Participant 7 shared that they felt that

> "*…building that trust amongst who's going to be working together in the future more closely is the key to the success or failure of the endeavor for me."*

This individual also believed that to build trust meant to first focus on the relationship with others.

> "*I put a lot of stake in relationship building, so I think that trust is important. So I tried to find places to build out [that trust] wherever I can, especially moving forward."*

This boiled down to individual trust-building opportunities, such as during search processes for people assuming new roles in the new structure. Participant 1 valued one-on-one communication with candidates after a hire was made, to ensure that those that did not receive that new role felt valued.

> *"And that's a real micro message where you're down with the individual person. You can't have people like that lose confidence in where we're going. The rest of process doesn't matter if they bail on you."*

Furthermore, this participant noted relying on the process of an equitable search and the opportunities to hire for specific new roles.

> *"The process, I had trust in it, I wasn't gonna buck that. But I knew enough that I had to go meet with those two [that were not hired into the new role] just because, I am not going to change the decision, I am not going to excuse anything, but just go. They just had to process 'cause they had lost you know, basically…[a job opportunity]."*

Trusting the system and structure built for this change is something that others noted, as many of the decisions were determined collectively:

> *" A lot of it, for me, it's not so much being the controller on decisions, but what kind of processes are we putting in place? Especially as we started to- well, you're part of that personally- you start to make positions, but there's long delays between positions. So a lot of it was trying to help; seeing how much I could shepherd or guide so many different facets with not truly being in…you know, never felt like I was in control of anything but just guiding."*

Participant 3 mentioned that, in terms of hiring and focusing on developing the structure,

> "*There has been a pretty consistent approach for that, and even when the timing hasn't been as quick with some positions as we'd hoped, just encouraging people that the process has worked up to this point. And continue to just trust that when your turn comes, right, there is a process, and a place and that hopefully it will work out in a way in your favor. So I think that's about the process."*

Participant 6 outlined some of the trust that leaders had to place in their colleagues—faculty and staff—in opening themselves up to conversations that may be difficult or uncomfortable:

> *"And I think that's probably a-- what's the word I'm looking for-- an evolution in my thinking on some things. Sometimes I would be more nervous to have a lot of those conversations because more can go wrong. You know, you can say things that you don't want to be misconstrued or what have you. But I would say, the hotter the constituency groups--- what I mean by the hotter, is it's just the more nervous constituency group about any systems change or any change management--you should probably make sure that they have a seat at the table."*

By distributing the ownership of decision-making, this led to a greater sense of buy-in, and a better revisitation of the decisions that had been made. Namely, the future communications and conversations could be recalled to the previous, collective decision and dialogue. Participant 7 emphasized this,

> *"I think, especially within the workplace, I think one of the most important pieces is to empower those around you. No matter what position you're in, whether you're the supervisor or colleague or whatever. And so people want to feel that they had a stake and a say in the process and the outcome. And so you want to make sure*

> *that everybody feels empowered and involved. If they weren't involved, at least they know they had the opportunity to be and made a conscious decision not to be."*

It was important to participants that all stakeholders felt that they could take part in the process or be involved in some of the building of the new model.

The idea of vulnerability in the communication and co-construction of the new model for the newly merged colleges was echoed by Participant 2, who noted that

> *"most importantly, it's just impacted me in seeing how hard people work and how invested people are in their work. It's made me recognize the value of empowering people. I knew that before, but in this particular case, it is a no-brainer…You wouldn't go home and suddenly tell your family "here's the way it's going to be at home and here's the edict and then everybody's got to live with it." You would never do that in a family, and you should never do that in an organization, and this process has proven that to be true."*

Although in some cases, the vulnerability that this caused created some trepidation, overwhelmingly, the participants here spoke to the benefits and importance of the shared ownership of the model, as well as being able to share that not all answers were imminent or apparent.

Participant 6 posited the need to ask stakeholders about their needs at this time,

> *"Because I don't think that that question gets asked enough, and I think there's a lot of silence and a lot of nervousness. That's something that I started to think about lately… because people are not heard. And so, how can you translate that into also effective organizational change, an effective team, team working relationships as well: "What do you want?".*

Participant 8 also echoed this, noting that in their conversations with their workgroups, they were often asking,

> *"What kinds of concerns do you have? What kinds of questions do you want me to bring forward? Do you want [cabinet leader] to come to our campus and speak to where we are with these decisions? Or do you want [administrator] to come to campus and get a sense of what our current staffing model is here?"*

Seeking that feedback was a notable part of the process for many. They felt that the more opportunities for engagement with the decisions that faculty and staff had, the better they felt about the change.

Bolman and Deal Frames Present in Theme 5: Trust in the Process

There was a recalibration of focus to Human Resource framing in light of the ambiguity surrounding roles and expectations in the Structural Frame. Because that Structural Frame could not be relied upon, leaders acknowledged that and instead leaned into other frames around the expectation of the family model of Human Resources framing. Because trust is a function of the success of relationships, much of the last theme overlapped with the Human Resource and Political needs of the change framework, once again. Although trust is built upon with relationship, time, and the structure of a process to fall back upon, the idea that care was built into the merger process was a key feature in this theme.

Document Analysis

At the outset of this study, a document analysis of prepared written and presented communication was planned. Throughout the duration of this study, it was noted that most of the communication that was individual to the participants was created verbally, in both meetings via Zoom and one-on-one. Much of the work of the merger took place in innovation teams, focused on specific areas of the new college, such as counseling and advising, information technology, and curriculum work. Unfortunately, most of those meetings were not recorded, so a transcript was not available for analysis. Additionally, the report-outs that occurred for these meetings took place verbally in leadership meetings. Documents produced from these groups were not necessarily produced by the leaders interviewed for this research, and much communication produced in writing by these leaders was fashioned either collaboratively (see Appendix D for example), or via one or two members of higher-level leadership, then forwarded on to the campuses (see Appendix E for example). Although some of the key themes listed above (i.e. **Acknowledgement of Messiness** and **Tailored Messaging**) were present in these documents, as well as Bolman and Deal's frames, there was not a clear tie to each individual participant within this study. Rather, the documents were produced by one or two leaders or collectively across a leadership team and spoke to the general attitude of the merger. Thus, the paucity of documentation here means that these results are extremely limited at best.

However, these documents were analyzed for the same themes and codes that were presented in the interview transcripts. Interestingly, much more focus was placed on conveying Structural change (therefore the Structural Lens from Bolman and Deal), than the transcripts noted from the more individualized, in-person communication methods that are described within the interviews. This may be due to the nature of written communication, which is much less contextualized in the nuances of back-and-forth communication (thereby eliminating much of the subtheme from **Tailored Messaging:** ***Reading Others***).

Notably, many of the announcements revolved around position descriptions and role attainment (see Appendix D and Appendix E), as well as process updates that may support the Theme of **Trust in the Process:**

- *Communication flow to applied and enrolled students will begin in mid-February with monthly updates sent via e-mails and postcards.*
- *Online application design is in the final stages of being built by SO team + Enrollment Management Admissions Staff.*
- *Position Updates*
    - *Academic Coordinator positions: interviews scheduled. These positions will support deans, faculty, and help coordinate various academic initiatives.*
    - *Registrar and Financial Aid directors' positions: interviews scheduled.*

Overall, the focus of these broad-scale, written documents was mainly on the Structural frame of the change and focused on communicating these changes out in a more concise, methodical way of keeping others informed. This was in contrast to the more tailored, interactive approach shared by leaders and noted below in the final theory generation of the overall interactions that leaders had with others during this process.

Grounded Theory Development: The Theory of Dynamic Interactionism

Overall, the following themes emerged from the codes and conversations with interview participants, as well as within documents analyzed from the merger process:

1) **Coaching and Guiding**
    a) *Cheerleading and Positivity*
    b) *Value-Add of Merger*
2) **Timeliness**
3) **Tailored Messaging**
    a) *Reading Others*
    b) *Micro-Messaging*
4) **Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection**

5) **Trust in the Process.**

Each of these themes and subthemes intertwine to form a larger grounded theory of *Dynamic Interactionism*. The name of this theory, borrowed from the field of cognitive development and rehabilitation, which notes that "cognition is a continuous product of the dynamic interaction between the individual, task, and environment" (Toglia, 1992, p.104), speaks to the development of a process of leaders approaching communication by way of 1) interacting with individuals in a timely manner to address their specific concerns regarding the change (Human Resources framing), 2) adapting messaging to the specific needs of the stakeholder group at hand (Political framing), and 3) building trust by focusing on the positives within the merger process and guiding people to focus on the mission-driven outcomes of the reorganization (Symbolic framing; Figure 5).

Furthermore, the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism* is an appropriate name for the process of communicating change for buy-in due to the rooted nature of the theory in change and adaptation. The term *dynamic* refers to being "characterized by constant change, activity, or progress" when referring to a system, and when referring to a person, it means they are "positive in attitude and full of energy and new ideas" (web definition, Oxford Languages, 2022). *Interactionism*, in philosophical contexts, refers to "the theory that there are two entities, mind and body, each of which can have an effect on the other" (web definition, Oxford Languages, 2022). Thus, the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism* takes the communication of change, shared between leaders and stakeholders, and notes that the approach taken by leaders is a reflection of the information that they receive from their stakeholders and the direction that they drive communication in light of that information.

By focusing on the other three frames of Bolman and Deal’s (2017) change leadership, the Structural change of merger is offset by the focus on: Human Resource concerns and care for the people in the organization, Political coalition-building for resource maximization, and Symbolic significance for the new identity and context of the organization.

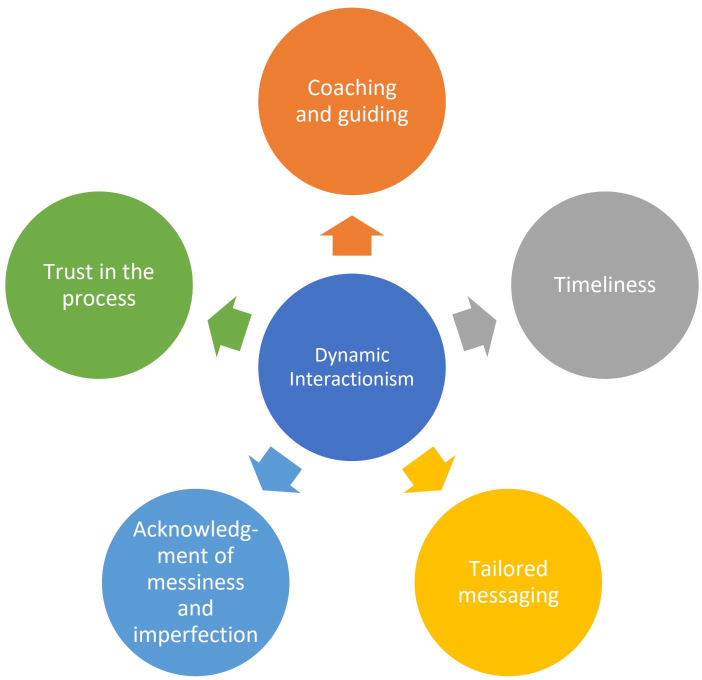

Figure 5. The Theory of Dynamic Interactionism. Themes from the theory coalesce to the approach that leaders take to communicate change in an attempt to create buy-in for the merger.

Likewise, the dynamic nature of the balance that leaders took within the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal speaks to the theory in practice. If changes take place in other realms, such as mission (focus on Symbolic framing), then the other three frames must be attended to in response. Interestingly, the more limited document analysis of written communication did focus more on the structural changes and attention to roles and events (hires, key merger dates, etc.). However, the approach elucidated by leaders focused far more on the other three frames.

Conclusion

In chapter 4, the responses of eight interview participants were shared in light of the thematic constructs that emerged from their comments during the interview process, and document analysis of widely shared communication artifacts took place. The findings show that five core themes emerged following the research questions:

Q1: What communication strategies are utilized by leaders at different public institutions to create buy-in from stakeholders within a reorganization process that consolidates these colleges into one institution?

Q2: How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?

These core themes were: Coaching and Guiding, Timeliness, Tailored Messaging, Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection, and Trust in the Process. Bolman and Deal's (2017) change leadership frames were used as the theoretical framework for this change communication. Specifically, the leaders interviewed in this study balanced the Structural change by focusing more on the other three themes: Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. Using this dynamic relationship between the change in structure and the balance with the other change frameworks, this led to the development of the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism*.

In the next chapter, these results will be summarized and discussed within the context of literature on the topic, and conclusions from this study will be asserted. Limitations surrounding this current study will also be explored in chapter five, as well as implications and suggestions for future study.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the results from the interviews of eight participants and five representative documents were qualitatively analyzed for codes that developed into themes as data was collected from the participants. Memoing for patterns and overarching themes took place utilizing NVivo to organize the transcripts and group codes into initial codes, focused codes, and themes by way of Charmaz's grounded theory approach. From the data, five key themes emerged to form the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism*, an approach leaders took to balance the Structural change that college merger engendered with three other frames of leadership, including Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. In this final chapter, the results from this study are summarized, then compared to previous literature. Further exploration of unique implications of the research, as well as limitations of this study, is completed. Finally, suggestions for future study and conclusions for the overall work are drawn in this chapter.

Summary of the Results

This study is important in light of the increasing need for higher education institutions to reassess their costs, particularly in the high-demand workforce following the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising specter of student loan debt (ECMB Group, 2021). Accordingly, the loss of public appropriations also has led to a dearth of resources for institutions of higher education (Kelchen et al., 2021). Particular strain is placed in two-year community colleges, which are called upon to provide many human services to their students (Boggs, 2011) and also maintain roles as pillars of culture and learning within their local communities. Restructuring is seen as an approach to streamline services and expand programming that may be restricted by accreditation in separately maintained entities (Kohvakka, 2021). Beyond this, it is seen as a way to survive market pressures that beleaguer smaller institutions, as well as provide economies of scale (Perrson & Frostenson, 2021).

This study regarding communication approaches is critical in providing insight to the approaches leaders take to attain buy-in, as well as elicit relationship-building in the new structure of a merged institution. As evidenced in other studies (Ribando & Evans, 2015; University Business, 2015), improper onboarding to new entities and ideas can permanently damage the culture of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2017) and lead to roadblocks in communication, coalition building, and student success years down the road (Perrson & Frostenson, 2021; Skodvin, 1999). Changes in school structure, whether they be physical, financial, administrative, or system-wide, may have a broad impact on student experience, an outcropping of the concern from faculty and staff. Although the proper structure of a change is important, the coalition building, the internal and external relationships, and the narrative behind the new mission of the institution all play key roles in the success of the newly minted entity.

There are not many studies of the impacts of merger on higher education institutions, and the opportunity to study them in-progress has been limited thus far. The best-studied systems in the United States often involve larger entities, such as the University of Georgia system (Beuchert et al., 2018; Ribando & Evans, 2015; Ribando et al., 2017; Russel, 2019). In addition, many other mergers have been studied outside of the United States Higher Education System, such as in the Netherlands and Norway (Skodvin, 1999; Norgård & Skodvin, 2002; Valentine, 2018). This present study allowed the researcher to interview subjects at a rural, two-year higher education system during key change stages of the merger;

between the actual merger date and the site visit of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) team, whose comments will lead to the approval process at the HLC board. Likewise, this change occurred in an embedded fashion to the comparatively large change of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impacts of COVID-19 on the financial solvency of institutions of higher education cannot be understated. Kelchen et al. (2021) "project that losses in state and local appropriations are likely to be about half the magnitude of losses in the Great Recession, or on the order of $17 billion to $30 billion over the period 2020– 2025. However, appropriations represent a relatively small fraction of the cumulative revenue losses from the three main revenue categories, which we estimate to be $70 billion to $115 billion over the next five years." These authors also find that though these impacts will be felt throughout the landscape of higher education, that "cumulative revenue losses will be the most severe (>50% of 2019 revenue) among institutions with fewer than 1,000 students, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and certain for-profit colleges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic" (p.1). The preponderance of these impacts would fall squarely upon the institutions undergoing merger in this study; all had a pre-merged FYE of less than 1,000 students. Additionally, enrollment nationally—which in the study system accounts for the other half of financial support, next to appropriations—"declined by 2.5% between fall 2019 and fall 2020, with much larger losses among community colleges (10%), first-time students (13%), and new international students (43%)" (Kelchen et al., 2021, p.2).

Recent studies by Sajwani et al. (2021), indicate that, through quantitative survey of leaders in higher education during merger, a strategy tripod of a resource-based view or approach, balanced with both an industry-based view and institution-based view allows for the most forethought in planning large-scale change such as merger. Within these frames, taking stock of the governmental and stakeholder support for the merger, as well as the possible knowledge creation and competitive edge that merger can provide are all key findings in their study. For instance, building programming that covers a wide range of stakeholder employers, or creating new programming from the new knowledge base of the institution. In order to effectively accomplish this and leverage the knowledge base within the new organization, "The senior managers must emphasize clear and proactive communications that support knowledge sharing and dissemination for successful outcomes. Decision makers must produce sufficient channels of communication for the exchange of information and the creation of knowledge" (Sajwani et al., 2021, pp. 934-935).

The effects of merger at the micro-level are also more recently being examined since the onset of this present study. This work, reviewed by Wollscheid and Røsdal (2021), notes that micro-processes that impact the learning of students and the overall culture of an institution are much different and less well-studied than the larger themes of efficiency, branding, and productivity. Micro-processes noted by Wollschied and Røsdal include academic processes, culture, and staff reaction to the change. These researchers also note that voluntary and forced mergers have quite different impacts, and the micro-processes involved are quite different. Voluntary mergers, such as the one in this study system, tend to have more positive feelings surrounding the change than forced mergers. Likewise, Perrson and Frostenson (2021) note that support and opposition are processes that are social; they are driven by how those engaged in a merger interpret and live the process within their lives day-to-day. Whether or not people support or oppose a merger often are reactions to their feelings about resource scarcity, their empowerment within the process, and the ultimate outcomes and stability of the change. This will be discussed more below in the interpretation of the findings for this study.

Benefits of Methodology

Grounded theory allows for the recognition of processes that occur within a given phenomenon; and it respects the lived experience of the actors within that process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis is challenging, though it is widely "recognized as a suitable methodology to gain an understanding of underlying social processes associated with a phenomenon" (Nagel et al., 2015). The use of grounded theory and semi-structured interview in this study meant that the participants and researcher could co-construct a *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism* based on the feedback through the interview process. For instance, the revelation of the impacts of distance communication, spurred on by pandemic processes and necessity, would not necessarily have come up within a more structured interview process, yet this appears to be a unique finding that has ramifications for relationship-building in rural, geographically isolated educational institutions undergoing merger.

"We also believe participants' meanings of phenomena are not only shaped through social interactions but are contextual and change over time" (Nagel et al., 2015), and "Charmaz suggested researchers "let this material lie fallow" (p. 307) until categories are developed" (Nagel et al., 2015, p 373). This allowed for the data collected in this study to be part of an iterative constant-comparative methodology, which paired the growing body of knowledge with each interview to the new data entering the analysis, until saturation was met. This was relatively quick, in some of the more pronounced themes (i.e. **Coaching and Guiding**). In some of the more nuanced themes, such as **Acknowledgement of Messiness**

and Imperfection or **Trust in the Process**, these themes arose later as part of the focused coding stage (Figure 3).

Data collected in this study were used to explore the following research questions:

1) *Which communication strategies do leaders at five different public institutions utilize in an attempt to create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation?* , and

2) *How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?*

The transcripts from the eight participants holding leadership positions in the study site were coded and iteratively examined to formulate a grounded theory from the themes that arose in the research. Document analysis was used to further expand the theory to a broader perspective.

The findings in this study pose that the following themes and subthemes form the basis of a grounded theory called the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism*, by which leaders are engaged with their faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. In this theory, leaders approach their communication—in an attempt at creating buy-in for the merger—in an interactive way. They read the messages sent by stakeholders, engage in a timely messaging process that is tailored to the concerns that they perceive from others, use positive guidance to support stakeholders in visioning the value of the merger, and do not shy away from acknowledging the challenges surrounding these changes in order to create trust in the process. The themes and subthemes are as follows:

1) **Coaching and Guiding**

a) *Cheerleading and Positivity*

b) *Value-Add of Merger*

2)**Timeliness**

3) **Tailored Messaging**

a) *Reading Others*

b) *Micro-Messaging*

4) **Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection**

5) **Trust in the Process.**

These themes aligned to balance out the approaches, or lenses, of change communication elucidated by Bolman and Deal (2017). For balanced approach to change, Bolman and Deal share that often it is best to use all four frames of change communication: Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic (Appendix C). However, in their one-on-one and personal communications, leaders shared that they tend to focus heavily on the Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic aspects of the change. This balances out the overwhelming Structural change of merger as a process. In contrast, in the widely shared written communication during a merger, more focus is placed on roles and responsibilities within the Structural Frame. By placing focus on the positive aspects of change, aiming to support their team through the process, and by relying on relational-behavioral cues to address concerns and acknowledge the difficulties experienced by those in the ambiguous state of change, leaders are able to follow processes that they can rely upon to attempt to address the holistic needs of their constituents in this study.

Interpretation of the Findings and Comparison to Current Literature

Within each theme is a focus on a communication approach that each leader expressed as part of their process to bringing about a message of positive change during a merger. Azziz et al. (2019) share that merger communication should accomplish the following:

1. *Minimize confusion and misunderstanding regarding the merger's purpose, drivers, and vision.*
2. *Reduce uncertainty and anxiety of campus and local communities.*
3. *Mitigate any negative impact of on enrollment and level of support from alumni and local community.*
4. *Leverage academic strengths and traditions of merging institutions.*
5. *Streamline internal communications; and*
6. *Develop new identity and raise awareness of the universities new name, scope, and impact* (p. 170-171).

Each participant emphasized that their approach within their communication was aimed at alleviating concerns and addressing each of the proceeding items. Noted below are each theme and the interpretation of the findings therein. This will then be followed by an examination of the intersection of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames and the data from this study.

Theme 1: Guiding and Coaching

Some themes from this study, such as the theme of **Coaching and Guiding** with positivity, may be an approach to counteract the grief process that accompanies change, noted by the Kübler-Ross Model of change (Buller, 2017). Buller also notes the rose-colored glasses frame of leadership that allows followers to see the benefits and possibility associated with the change if all goes well. Leaders that frame up change in a way that allows for growth and potential create a model for others to follow suit (Eddy, 2010). As Participant 3 shared, *"I've been very deliberate about that, to try to build some kind of sense of optimism or anticipation for the work."*

Likewise, Becker (2004) noted more positive feelings surrounding voluntary mergers versus forced mergers, and hope and optimism, aligned with the subtheme of *Cheerleading and Positivity*. Symbolism looms large in this theme, and Bolman and Deal (2017) note that "what is most important is not what happens, but what it means" (p.241). One example from the findings is evidenced here by Participant 4, who notes, "*The easier ones[messages] are, again, things I have more of a core belief in. Right? Like this is a good thing. This is why this is a good thing. These are the efficiencies we're going to gain. Look at all these great things that are going to happen."*

With the Theme of **Coaching and Guiding**, much conversation around the subtheme *Value-Add of Merger* outlined what the newfound capacity of the merger could mean for student access, success, and even the internal capacity of having departments that are larger and more well-resourced. As noted by Participant 1, their approach was

> *"...probably with an emphasis on what this can mean for our region in access and opportunity for students and expansion of programming. That's really been, I would say, the forefront of the message. But I've also pointed to elements that I've either personally learned, or that various departments or colleagues have, learned from others as well. I've tried to point to wins during the process itself, but I don't think that's been my default. I think I naturally shift to what this will mean, you know, 2,3, 5 years down the road, 10 years down the road for our students in our region."*

Having a plan is also one way to share symbolism (Symbolic frame) and cheerlead a process. As noted within Bolman and Deal (2017), plans can be symbols, they can also become excuses for interaction and communication, and they also may become advertisements for the excellence of the outcome of the process or project. Azziz et al. (2019) suggest highlighting short-term wins within the merger process as a part of that strategic communication. Many of this study's participants noted early wins and areas of *Value-Add of the Merger* as part of their communication processes (Appendix C). These participants also noted the efficiencies that would easily be realized with the change, and those that may have already happened in the process. As shared by Participant 3, they were excited about *"what this can mean for our region in access and opportunity for students and expansion of programming."*

Theme 2: Timeliness

Communicating regularly and early within a merger process (Azziz et al. 2019) or virtually any large-scale institutional change (Yue et al., 2019) has been noted as a key process to alleviate fear and uncertainty within the change. Leaders must communicate regularly to dispel anxiety or confusion and address current concerns of their constituents (Azziz et al., 2019). This is done by just-in-time communication as concerns arise.

Skodvin, who has studied merger processes in higher education extensively in Western Europe notes that these changes require a long on-ramp, as noted by several of the participants in this study:

> *Moreover, the merger processes are time consuming. Furthermore, they are obviously processes that demand a lot of resources, especially in the short term. Experiences have shown that this often is underestimated. A merger needs a lot of planning before, during and after the process. Experiences from USA, Australia and The Netherlands demonstrate that it can take up to ten years before the situation is normalized after a merger*. (1999, p. 70)

This is reflected by Participant 6, who said "*I observed this Vision Northeast thing to be this 20-year process*" as its roots began years prior. Other reviews of merger processes caution that institutions must take enough time to develop relationships and work through team building. As noted by Perrson and Frostenson (2021) there is often wide-spread dissatisfaction with merger processes that take place within a year or less. More often, these processes must take place over a more protracted scale of time to allow for culture and relationship development. Interestingly, the theme of Time/Timeliness also permeated the work by Wollscheid and Røsdal, who note that "Time appears to be a crucial element for micro-level processes and post-merger integration. That it is time-consuming to build a new culture and identity for the merged higher education institution might be underestimated" (2021, p. 275). "Allow enough time for the merger process: this will enable thorough evaluations to take place, and for trust and good relationships to be established between the institutions." (Fielden & Markham, 1997, p. 8).

Theme 3: Tailored Messaging

Micro-messaging, the sub theme of **Tailored Messaging**, aligns with most recent literature review work by Wollscheid and Røsdal (2021) regarding micro-changes due to merger. The authors reference work by Harman and Harman (2003), where they note "that sensitivity to human and cultural factors is crucial for successful mergers. By micro-level processes we mean activities and routines related to staff (academic and administrative), changes in (academic) identities, and staff emotions and perceptions" (p. 258). Eddy (2010) talks about framing meaning for constituents, which involves traditional messaging, but also in the actions that follow (note **Trust in the Process**). Participant 5 hoped that they were "*being very inclusive of everybody"* in terms of involving people in key decisions that shaped the identity of the new college.

Individualized consideration for each constituent is a key aspect of change-oriented leadership (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). These authors relate that individual consideration may be related to higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where those that are engaged individually in a process are more likely to feel empowered, fulfilled, and secure. This covers base-level considerations as well, such as safety and security. As Participant 7 noted,

> *"I think, especially within the workplace, I think one of the most important pieces is to empower those around you. No matter what position you're in, whether you're the supervisor or colleague or whatever. And so people want to feel that they had a stake and a say in the process and the outcome. And so you want to make sure that everybody feels empowered and involved. If they weren't involved, at least they know they had the opportunity to be and made a conscious decision not to be."*

This relates to the **Trust in the Process** they may feel ultimately. However, each person may have different concerns and considerations. By paying attention to what others are sharing, what nonverbal communication they are eliciting, and even by what is not being said, as noted by Participant 2, as they outlined how to read between the lines of what people may not share directly (Appendix C). "Each reaction reflects a different perception of what's important" (Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1998, p. 5).

Theme 4: Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection

Persson and Frostenson (2021) note how support and opposition to merger can relate to ultimate success in the process. Further, Cavins (2021) states that leaders must encourage "constituents to help them carry on in the face of challenge, frustration, and discouragement." (2021, p. 18). Realistic optimism is a key concept in acknowledging the stresses and challenges that each party is working through but approaching these challenges with problem-solving approaches is key (Eddy, 2010; Cavins, 2021). Yue et al. (2013) note,

> *When communicating the change initiative, an organization that values accountability would disclose both benefits and threats of a change initiative. Otherwise, hiding negative ramifications of the change initiative will breed rumors and misinterpretations, cause misunderstanding and distrust, and heighten employee uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety*. (p. 5).

Transformative leaders can manage change by ‘thriving in ambiguity and uncertainty”, amongst other characteristics. By modeling comfort with the lack of clarity that many people need to feel security, leaders can point to processes (**Trust in the Process),** that will help drive outcomes and answers that constituents are seeking. As noted by Cavins, “Positive emotional leadership is a necessity in times of chaos and change because constituents closely examine and then emulate or “mirror” their leaders’ behaviors and actions” (2021, p. 21). By being patently transparent about the areas that are less certain but having the ability to point to plans and processes by which input may be gained or decision matrices may be examined, this allows constituents to feel as though there is no hidden agenda within the process. Again, as noted in the results section, this theme spanned all of Bolman and Deal’s frames of leadership almost equally. This may be due to the nature of uncertainty itself.

Theme 5: Trust in the Process

As noted earlier, mergers that take place voluntarily are generally more well-received and go more smoothly than involuntary mergers. In addition, Skodovin (1999) notes that, “Merger processes that use a strategy with a high degree of ‘bottom-up’ input (e.g. some in USA and partly in some of the latest HBO mergers in The Netherlands) are often smoother and more successful” (p. 70). This kind of input, such as the input driven by the Innovation Teams in this particular study, helps increase the trust in the process. This was an avenue for communication via leaders, as noted by Participant 8, as an opportunity to ask: *"What kinds of concerns do you have? What kinds of questions do you want me to bring forward? Do you want [cabinet leader] to come to our campus and speak to where we are with these decisions? Or do you want [administrator] to come to campus and get a sense of what our current staffing model is here?"*.

This is echoed by work by Wheatley and Kellner- Rogers (1998), who note that change that takes place without input from those impacted by it will likely necessitate a recapitulation of the process, due to lack of involvement and dissatisfaction with that perceived disenfranchisement. As Participant 2 noted, *"You wouldn't go home and suddenly tell your family "here's the way it's going to be at home and here's the edict and then everybody's got to live with it." You would never do that in a family, and you should never do that in an organization, and this process has proven that to be true."* Participant 8 also reflected that this was a key part of their process: *"I guess probably the most important message has been where we are in the process. Because people who aren't necessarily part of these teams or part of the information circle, they're wondering, you know, where are you in the process? Are you making decisions? What kinds of decisions are you making? Will I be part of approving that decision or how will that impact me?"*

Leaders that seek to build trust also must rely upon their Emotional-Social skills, as noted below regarding EQ, IQ, and CQ. Cavins notes that "Emotionally-Socially Intelligent leaders who apply relational leadership practices influence their team and organizational culture and help to create stability and confidence during uncertain times" (2021, p.1). This is particularly true during the large-scale change of merger. Likewise, a study by Yasir et al. (2016), noted that leadership styles are part and parcel of the trust building between employees and the leader themselves and the process that they are collectively undergoing. Yasir and others found that transformational leadership, in particular, was positively associated with trust in processes; consilient with the literature reviewed in chapter 2 of this manuscript (more in Yue et al., 2019, as well).

Interestingly, in this research study, leaders themselves rely upon processes by which to engender trust. The nature of having a process for hiring internally, for example, into new roles within the merged institution allowed for frank and open communication when these processes played out. Participant 1 referred to speaking with staff after such a process played out, and Participant 3 noted that they shared that people may need to trust that their opportunity is coming within the hiring/re-structuring landscape (Appendix C). Both of these leaders also trusted that the process laid out would create equal opportunities for the stakeholders involved and would eliminate some of the potential conflicts and political inuendo that could be inferred from a less process-oriented organizational approach.

Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership

Bolman and Deal's (2017) seminal work on change leadership focuses on the following four themes or lenses: Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. Because much of the core of the changes during this merger were structural, the communication approaches taken by leaders in this study focused much more heavily on the other three lenses to 1) note the *symbolic* identity of the newly merged entity; 2) share a respect for building up the new "family" of the merged institution, a facet of *human resources* frameworks; and 3) gain support by broad stakeholders by approaching communication about the benefits of merger mindfully, in tune with the needs of those stakeholders, as aligned with *political* frameworks.

In Bolman and Deal's (2013) outline for leaders looking to match frames to particular contexts and changes, they note the following questions to ask, as well as the frame that would address that question (See Table 5).

1. *Are individual commitment and motivation essential to success?*
    a. *If yes: Human Resource or Symbolic*
    b. *If no: Structural*
2. *Is the technical quality of the decision important?*
    a. *If yes: Structural*
    b. *If no: Human Resources, Political, or Symbolic*
3. *Are there high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty?*
    a. *If yes: Political or Symbolic*
    b. *If no: Structural or Human Resource*
4. *Are conflict and scarce resources significant?*
    a. *If yes: Political or Symbolic*
    b. *If no: Structural or Human Resource*
5. *Are you working from the bottom up?*
    a. *If yes: Political or Symbolic*
    b. *If no: Structural or Human Resource* (p. 303, See Table 5).

For each example here, a corresponding analysis can be made at a merged institution. For question one--*Are individual commitment and motivation essential to success?*—this is absolutely the case in the model of this merged system, where individuals serving on innovation teams were tasked with developing processes and proposals within their fields of expertise. This had impacts on roles and responsibilities, so these commitments were personal in some cases. For question 2-- *Is the technical quality of the decision important?*—this is not an absolute. There would be many ways to accomplish a reorganization of areas within the college, so it was far more important to consider the Human Resources and

Political aspects of the changes. For question 3-- *Are there high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty?*—this was absolutely the case, hence the focus on Political and Symbolic lenses. For question 4-- *Are conflict and scarce resources significant?*—this may depend on the particular decision within the merger, and this this answer may change depending on the stakes within a particular decision. Finally, question 5 asks *Are you working from the bottom up?* This is the case with most decisions within the merger, so the focus is much more on Symbolic framing.

Symbolic frame means that a compelling story must be told regarding the change and the newly formed entity. This was accomplished by participants within this study, as they noted the **Coaching and Guiding** theme, with the subtheme of *Value-Add of the Merger*. Much of the focus in this case was on the benefits of the change. As shared by Participant 3,

> *"I'm just trying to keep conveying a message of, we're doing this for a reason it's necessary work, there are so many positives that are going to come out of this. A lot of strengths for coming together, and even the ability to point toward what some of those wins have already been. I think the curriculum merger that's happened had been an enormous home run. I think that's been something we can point to as, yes, this has been difficult. There have been battles but look what we've already done*."

Table 5 .Reframing organizational change. Excerpted from Bolman & Deal (2013).

Table 18.1(a)

Reframing Change

Frame	Barriers to Change	Essential Strategies
Human resource	Anxiety, uncertainty People feel incompetent, needy	Train to build new skills Participation & involvement; Psychological support
Structural	Loss of clarity and stability; confusion, chaos	Communicating, realigning, and renegotiating formal patterns and policies

Table 18.1(b)

Reframing Change

Frame	Barriers to Change	Essential Strategies
Political	Disempowerment Conflict between winners & losers	Create arenas for negotiating issues, forming new coalitions
Structural	Loss of meaning and purpose; clinging to the past	Transition rituals Mourn past , celebrate future

Impact of EQ, CQ, and SQ on change leadership

The participants in this study focused heavily on reading others and tailoring their messages to the fears, concerns, and perspectives of those individuals that they were communicating with. As Participant 2 noted, "*Part of it is intuition, and people have different levels of emotional intelligence and have a sense of what to do. Part of its having longevity in an organization and understanding how people react."* Recent work by Dogra and Dixit (2019) focuses on the need for leaders of institutions undergoing change to be dialed in to strong emotional, cultural, and social intelligences: effectively underscoring the need for high emotional quotient (EQ), cultural quotient (CQ) and social quotient (SQ). Dogra and Dixit note that "a culturally intelligent leader is aware of countless behaviors rooted in a culture" (2019, p.1). Each campus in NHED had its own culture, as well as structural divisions such as the student services area or housing, academic programs with differing cultures, and communities and business with different needs. As such, each leader interviewed here needed to be aware of the nuances of each of those constituencies and the possible concerns that arose from the cultures that individuals were coming from.

Though much of the **Coaching and Guiding** theme focused on the symbolic shared mission and ideals of the new, merged college, the existing cultures and identities were still important to address and recognize. In some cases, the research participants noted that within themselves. Participant 1 shared that, *"as we went into the regional-- the true regional-- academic planning, I started that little bit of a pivot of realizing "I've gotta be a leader for [original college/town] and the college and the people here, but I've also got a look at [the fact that]we have a broader regional need".* The self-awareness and reflection noted here, a part of EQ defined by Dogra and Dixit: "…as the capacity of an individual for recognizing his/her own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions in ourselves and in our relationships” (2019, p. 2).

Vulnerability

Noted in some of the participants’ feedback, the idea of walking into difficult conversations or “hot” conversations, as Participant 6 termed it, could be a daunting proposition. In addition, the idea of not always having every answer was noted by several participants:

> *“Other stakeholders that are internal, like faculty, and potentially some staff, are probably really uncertain with what is going to happen, what isn't going to happen. The best thing I can do if that ever comes up is give them the factual information that I have at the time and be as honest as I can and open and transparent as I can and don't be scared to say I don't know.”*

> *“And I think that's probably a-- what's the word I'm looking for-- an evolution in my thinking on some things. Sometimes I would be more nervous to have a lot of those conversations because more can go wrong. You know, you can say things that you don't want to be misconstrued or what have you. But I would say, the hotter the constituency groups--- what I mean by the hotter, is it's just the more nervous constituency group about any systems change or any change management--you should probably make sure that they have a seat at the table.”*

Vulnerability as a mechanism for trust building has not been well studied in the literature, according to Mishra and Mishra (2013). This may also relate to distributing the power within decision-making. The ability to engage and involve others in the process of decision-making probably created additional complications and messiness, but also bolstered

Trust in the Process. Without this engagement, further issues or concerns may be allowed to persist in the newly made entity. If this is not a priority, then issues could delay the conclusion of a successful structural redesign. As noted, " How much of your energy went into redesigning the redesign after the organization showed you its glaring omissions, omissions caused by their lack of involvement in the first redesign" (Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1998, p. 5).

Limitations

One significant limitation of this study was that the focus was on the leadership of the institutions involved in the merger, and their communication outward, or at least the interpretation and intent of the communication. Because communication is a two-way endeavor in many definitions, the impressions and interactions with the receivers of the messaging from leadership was not taken into account within the scope of this study. "While the study of messaging from leadership is important, it does leave out the reciprocal end of the rest of the stakeholders in the process. This could be expounded upon in a follow- up study where stakeholders could be surveyed, either qualitatively or quantitatively, to determine whether the intention of the approaches listed here were received in a similar vein. Hartig (2020) recently completed a qualitative study of faculty perspectives during a merger process, but expanding this type of study to other stakeholders would be helpful. Likely, a quantitative approach to survey would engender the widest response and allow for further analysis of stakeholder groups. Further study to note if long-time employees had a different reaction to the merger, or if employees that had taken part in a community college/technical college merger in the past felt differently than employees who were not around during that time would also be an interesting area of analysis.

Beyond this, comparing merger in a unionized state with fairly strong shared governance practices, such as the state the study took place in, would be key to contrast with states or institutions that do not have a long history of shared governance. The theme around **Trust in the Process** may look differently without the guardrails of a union contract, and the protections that such provides, not to mention the dialogue that it requires between administration and faculty. Beyond this, the small size of the study system may mean that the approach of individualized communication may not be as effective in larger systems with entities that do not have individual representatives on the leadership team.

Also noted as a significant limitation is the lack of diversity within this particular study system. While nineteen percent of the student population within the Northeast Higher Education District are BIPOC students, only six percent of the staff reflect this diversity, and none of the administrative and leadership team noted in this study identify as BIPOC. This study population does present a sample of leadership that is more diverse in terms of gender identity than many studies: three of the eight interviewed here were female-identifying. Also, length of time in administrative and leadership roles varied considerable across members of the sample, leading to a diversity in perspective, experience, and even educational attainment.

The length of time that this merger process took place, as well as the preceding academic planning, may not be available to all institutions needing to merge. The initial strategic planning for this process took place in 2016, with academic planning in subsequent years, and merger processes beginning in earnest in 2020. This long on-ramp allowed for buy-in development, and work by Wheatly and Kellner-Rogers (1998) suggests that change must happen with the involvement of all parties affected. As they note, “enormous struggles with implementation are created every time we *deliver* messages, rather than figuring out how to involve people in their creation" (Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1998, p. 5). These researchers also point to a key theme of this study, which focuses on the **Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection.** The authors contend that:

> *We know that while people are engaged in figuring out the future, while they are engaged in the difficult and messy processes of participation, that they are simultaneously creating the conditions of new relationships, new insights, greater levels of commitment—that facilitate more rapid and complete implementation* (Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1998, p. 5).

Size and Scope of Institution

Much of the approach regarding communication by leaders in this system centered on one-on-one and just-in-time communication. Problems and concerns that arose were addressed individually and at the time of their urgency. This is not likely to be an appropriate approach for each institution and leaders of those spaces. Given the rural nature of the merged institutions here, this approach may have been more likely given the tight ties to community. Azziz et al. (2019, pp. 169-170) relate the audience of communication to merger on three different scales:

1) *Primary Audience: current students, staff, faculty, alumni, governing boards*
2) *Secondary Audience: state and local government officials, community members, local media, prospective students and their families, high school counselors*
3) *Tertiary Audience: state and national media, accrediting agencies, educational organization, foundations and agencies that provide funding support, neighboring institutions*

Notably in this study system, many participants in the study served as peers within each of the preceding audiences, whether as parents of students attending the college, as members of local community boards and activities, as closely tied advisors to local agencies, or as board members of foundations. This may address some of the communication pathways and lower the barriers to communication within those three audiences.

Autonomy of leadership

In this study, each leader shared language around their responsibility to communicate change, and the conversations and interviews noted that they were empowered to do so. Although some noted not wanting to step out of line on a communication, each noted sharing out messages as being part of their role. This autonomy of individual leadership may not exist in more top-down structures. Due to the nature of the geographic separation, as well as the multiplicity of divisions covered by each participant, the onus of communication was heavily tilted in that direction. Interestingly, one of the complications and limitations of this study—lack of formalized, craft communication from each leader—was in exchange for much more autonomous individual communication. Larger, more periodic and committee-based communications were produced, but they were done in coordination with teams and other individuals outside of the core leadership group interviewed here. This widened the scope of broad messaging, and this is an interesting angle to this research. As noted in the chapter 2 literature review, not often are studies done regarding change and communication from middle management; rather, the focus is often on the highest level of leadership (Voet et al., 2015). Because of the structure of the Innovation Teams, which were led by middle-managers, as well as some of the shared communications, this has lent a unique perspective in this work.

Participation in change

One major factor on buy-in in this study is the shared governance approach to leadership and decision-making in this institution. The system studied is a subsidiary of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, which is unionized. In particular, within this study, the Minnesota State College Faculty (MSCF) union played a leading role in the guidance of curriculum processes through the Academic Affairs and Standards Council (AASC). This is a key process in a college merger- bringing all of the curriculum under a shared associates of arts (AA) degree, as well as shared career and technical programming. Because the representation of faculty in shared governance, as well as in a two-thirds/ one-third distribution of faculty and administration on AASC, there is a well-established process for making decisions regarding the core processes of education: curriculum development and approval. This may have some impacts on the theme of **Trust in the Process.** Pope (2004), noted that building and maintaining positive relationships creates higher education institutions that increase collaboration, decrease costs, and even navigate crises more effectively. Trust as a concept, noted by Pope (2004), is a "willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that that party will perform an action of importance" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer, 1998).

Interestingly, a leadership team built upon representatives from each of the campuses involved in the merger, with a mix of new, long-term, and developing relationships, may lend to more trust in the processes undertaken in a merger, given the history of these processes being successful at the previous/original college/campus. Likewise, use of Innovation Teams made up of broad stakeholder groups may also create more opportunities for trust-building.

Implications of the Research

The implications of this research suggest that developing a process for communicating change during higher education mergers should engage all four frames of Bolman and Deal's change leadership, but a heavy focus should be placed upon Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic frames in order to address and balance the highly Structural change of merger. This research notes that leaders rely upon EQ and CQ in particular to read others and respond accordingly. They also develop and participate in processes that allow for constituents to build relationships one-on-one, provide opportunities for communication amongst groups, and provide clear and honest feedback about the "messy middle" of such a change process.

As noted by several participants in this study, although communication was at the forefront of their awareness, a communication plan was cited by a few members as a missing element to the communication. As noted by Participant 8: *"I do want to say one of the pieces that I felt was missing in this process was a communication plan, somewhere early on. And maybe that was just understood because we had representatives from all the colleges and people just probably understood that they were supposed to be communicating."* By formalizing that plan, rather than relying on the interpersonal relationships built by a trust-based process, there may be more transparency for future work. Although not every communication is appropriate or timely, it may be worth it to develop a regular, written communication to ensure that the Structural lens is appropriately covered.

Future efforts to undertake a merger process could begin with a communication plan that has regular dispersal of information. As noted by Azziz et al. (2019), even if there is no new information, stakeholders want to know what is happening. By having a regular update process, even if there is nothing that is shareable or no notable progress, those that are not engaged in the current decision-making processes will trust that work is being done.

Further Study

Further study on this subject could focus on the quantitative survey of stakeholders participating in the merger. Investigating their perception regarding the communication would expand the "receiving" perspective of communication, as it is sometimes a dual-directional endeavor by definition as it is "the imparting or exchanging of information or news" (web definition, Oxford Languages, 2022). This current study focused mainly on the perception of those "sending" or imparting the communication. This would align with work out of the University of Georgia System focused on initial change perception (Ribando & Evans, 2015), as well as the longitudinal effects of the change over time (Ribando, Slade & Fortner, 2017). The longitudinal nature of a study may be interesting, as this study is taking place just as merger is imminent in May of 2022.

Beyond this, a comparative study of the approaches that leaders of larger institutions may take versus those shown here from leaders of smaller institutions may be interesting, as the individualized communication may not be an option in larger systems. Likewise, method of communication and the impacts of the concurrent COVID-19 pandemic and resulting distance/digital communication reliance may also yield interesting results. Participant 7 noted that this likely made for a more graduated approach to integration of cultures at each campus in this study: *"Because of the pandemic a little bit and Zoom, our staff had an opportunity to ease into their relationships with their future colleagues. I think this has allowed us to maybe make that a little easier and maybe build a little bit more trust within a more comfortable format than the face-to-face might have been."* Study on the impact of trust in communication and increased digital communication during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 has yielded few results as of yet; most of the studies thus far have focused on media communication and public health communication (Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020) or team building and collaboration (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Other studies have focused on telehealth communication, and the increased access that this has provided to rural patients.

Interestingly, work by the Air Force regarding communication during competition among messages during change and conflict or crisis yield the following “truths”, as noted by Koslov and McIlvaine:

> *1. The commander owns the narrative. The narrative is driven by strategy, and no single office owns the message or the process through which the message is disseminated. Messaging is a cross-functional effort guided by the commander’s intent and objectives.*
>
> *2. The narrative drives operations. Information objectives must shape operations. Messaging is more than articles and pictures, every operation and activity sends a message and must be synchronized against command objectives and desired perceptions.*
>
> *3. The narrative is consistent, but messaging is dynamic. Long-range planning builds effective message synchronization, but emergent events also require thoughtful, cross-functional responses that can only be achieved through established crisis communication procedures*. (2021, pp. 420-421).

While the ownership for merger must ultimately lie within the president’s office in a higher education institution, the process of engaging others and decision-making sends messages and subtle forms of communication about what is important and centered in the process. Although **Tailored Messaging** may occur, the key message must be supported in the dialogues that take place with different stakeholder groups.

Conclusions

This dissertation study set out to examine the approaches that leaders take in communication change during a higher education merger process, and to seek whether or not Bolan and Deal's four frames of leadership are applied in this process. Through a grounded theory qualitative examination of interview transcripts and document analysis, the five main themes of the *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism* emerged. Each of these themes of 1) **Coaching and Guiding**, 2) **Timeliness**, 3) **Tailored Messaging**, 4) **Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection**, and 5) **Trust in the Process** spoke to the approach of building culture and focusing on the people within an organization that is undergoing change, as well as the stakeholders-- internal and external—impacted by the change. This alignment with the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal's (2017) four frames of change leadership focuses mainly on the three frames that balance structural change (via the Structural Frame): Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. This was particularly pronounced in the interview data, while document analysis revealed more focus on the roles and responsibilities designated via the change in structure.

In conclusion, the research here finds that merger leaders utilized a positive communication framework to guide their stakeholders and employees through the change, noting the value-add of the change in light of the difficulties associated with merger (Theme 1). Leaders take time to allow for change processes to occur and people to walk through the stages of accepting the change, while being mindful of just-in-time communication to address issues that arise and require response (Theme 2). Leaders utilize EQ, IQ, and CQ skill areas to read others and tailor messages that address specific concerns within the change, as they pertain to the people within the organization and impacted by the new identity (Theme 3). Leaders are clear about the complicated, messy nature of change, and they acknowledge that this change will not end with the merged state; rather, this process is iterative, and the messiness is not a failure, but rather a function of the process (Theme 4). Lastly, leaders work to build trust in the change processes, both by building connections with others, seeking to communicate as often as possible, and work on team building and empowerment of those they supervise (Theme 5). This *Theory of Dynamic Interactionism* is how leaders in this study approached the changes related to college merger.

In future, this work examining merger can be utilized to review identity and change processes in higher education; particularly those processes that occur at small, rural institutions with high connectivity between internal groups and external constituents. Community college mergers, in particular, build new sub-communities of student services staff, faculty, students, and support staff that work on concert to support the mission of providing access to dynamic, life-changing learning opportunities. To do so, all parties must be engaged and honored within the process to protect the relationship-based work that is done on each campus. Voluntary mergers that are focused on balancing the frames of change with the structural upheaval allow for reflective growth of a new biological system of learning—one that is a living, breathing, evolving entity. This entity is able to adapt to the pressures of the changing world around it. As noted by Azziz et al. “Closure of a merger, similar to a university’s commencement exercise, marks the beginning, not the end, of a long journey. It’s a journey that is more about people, emotions, and commitment, and much less about buildings and spreadsheets” (2019, p. 239)

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT

"Communicating Change during a College Merger Process: A grounded theory approach"

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with me, Hibbing Community College, the Northeast Higher Education District, or with Minnesota State University Moorhead.

The purpose of this study is to understand how change is communicated to stakeholders during times of increased interaction across sister colleges, such as during a merger of accreditations. This overall project will utilize a grounded theory qualitative research design that will rely upon interviews and other artifacts to demonstrate processes and planning that lead to stakeholder buy-in for a cooperative merger.

This data for this specific research will be collected between May 6, 2021, and August 6, 2021. Data will be in the format of interview transcripts and communication artifacts (emails, videos, etc.). Individuals involved in the data collection will include the interview subjects, as well as the MSUM advisor and research student.

Please feel free to ask questions before or during the study is in process. I will make the findings of the study available to you after the completion of the research. The researcher and the advisor of the research that this study is being utilized for will know your identification. In all other aspects, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Because this study is part of a doctoral dissertation, findings will be de-identified in publication or public presentation.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality: (1) storage of data and notes will be kept in a secured location accessible only to the researcher; (2) purging of all personally identifiable information from transcripts and research reports. This project will involve making an audio recording of your interview conversation. The digital audio recording, accompanying notes, and transcriptions will be kept on a password-protected computer. Information from this study will be kept until May 2025, when all information will be destroyed. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue or refuse a follow-up interview at any time.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits associated with your participation are discovery of the findings about the change communication process and the opportunity to participate in a qualitative research study.

Please get in touch at any time with questions about this study. You may contact Jessalyn

Sabin, Minnesota State University Moorhead, 218-969-9688 or jessalynsabin@hibbing.edu.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Acceptance to Participate: *Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, and you have given consent to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.*

Signature of Participant	**Date**
Signature of Researcher	**Date**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jessalyn Sabin

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Place:

Interviewer: Jessalyn Sabin

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Description of Project:

This grounded theory qualitative study will explore the process of 2-year rural community and technical college consolidation. The focus will be on communication of change, creating buy-in for the merger process, and the steps taken to frame this issue in multiple ways to address stakeholder needs and concerns. Q1)What communication strategies from leaders at five different public institutions create the most faculty and staff buy-in during the process of college consolidation? Q2)How do these strategies align with Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership?

Questions:

7) *How do you see your role as a leader during this merger?*

8) *Tell me about the message that you are aiming to communicate regarding the merger process and outcomes.*

9) *What types of messages have been easier or simpler to communicate during this change?*

10) *Tell me about the frequency of your communication during this process? With whom do you communicate most and least frequently?*

11) *Describe any insights that you have learned in this process.*

12) *If you were to advise another leader about this process, what would you tell them?*

Statement of Thanks: Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses and identity will remain confidential.

APPENDIX C: THEMES, EVIDENCE, AND FRAME ALIGNMENT

Theme	Subthemes	Emergent Codes	Evidence	P	Bolman and Deal Frame
Theme One: **Coaching and Guiding**	Cheerleading and positivity	Positivity Capacity	"Yeah, and then my third message is, you know, as frightening as all of this change is, and particularly change that will be evaluated by an accrediting agency as being worthy or not worthy. Moving forward, ultimately, we are really positioned dwell, in my estimation, for this merger. This is the place we've been heading."	8	Structural
		Coaching Planfulness Positivity	"…so much more important to really help guide and coach and facilitate people through this merger process. So that our nursing program, [in example], is well-equipped, you know, they've got good processes that they can follow they can make good decisions 'cause I really put a lot of value and the autonomy and the self-determination piece. "	1	Human Resources
		Own roles and identity Cheerleading Positivity	"But two, I think I've tried to-- also as much as I can-- be a cheerleader for the work as well to try to… I don't think I've ever cast the merger in negative light, at least I have tried not to. And I think I've been very deliberate about that, to try to build some kind of sense of optimism or anticipation for the work."	3	Symbolic
		Cheerleading	"[One part of my role,] it is kind of a champion or a ra-ra! kind of person for the merger."	4	Symbolic
		Positivity Capacity	"Obviously, business and industry partners, our K-12 partners, our employees, our legislators, because they advocate for us at the funding level and support levels, so we do well, they have a good message to sell."	2	Political
		Capacity Positivity	"It's impacted me in a way that I have greater faith than I ever have in people and [their] work ethic, and their willingness to trust and willingness to try things and willingness to get excited. So that's impacted me just in seeing the good in	2	Human Resources

			people.		
		Positivity Own roles and identity Capacity Cheerleading	In terms of outcomes, I think I spoke to it briefly already. I'm just trying to keep conveying a message of, we're doing this for a reason it's necessary work, there are so many positives that are going to come out of this. A lot of strengths for coming together, and even the ability to point toward what some of those wins have already been. I think the curriculum merger that's happened had been an enormous home run. I think that's been something we can point to as, yes, this has been difficult. There have been battles but look what we've already done.	3	Symbolic
		Positivity Planfulness Communicating	I think I've, really quite frankly and truly, enjoyed speaking with people about the merger. People that are interested in what's happening. I get the question a fair amount because word is starting to spread and again, I think it will be helpful when we have maybe more formalized communication. Items to point toward and direct people toward. But for the time being, on a more informal level, to be able to speak with people about this, I find that not only simpler but, in a way, enjoyable. I think they can sense truly my enthusiasm for what's happening .	3	Human Resources
		Capacity Positivity Value-add	"The easier ones[messages] are, again, things I have more of a core belief in. Right? Like this is a good thing. This is why this is a good thing. These are the efficiencies we're going to gain. Look at all these great things that are going to happen."	4	Symbolic
		Planfulness Positivity	"I'm just trying to keep conveying a message of, we're doing this for a reason it's necessary work, there are so many positives that are going to come out of this. A lot of strengths for coming together, and even the ability to point toward what some of those wins have already been. I think the curriculum merger that's happened had	3	Structural

			been an enormous home run. I think that's been something we can point to as, yes, this has been difficult. There have been battles but look what we've already done."		
	Value-add of the merger	Communicating Coaching	"You can get a lot of good input from them [the students], have them advise on the process to the sense of which way they think things could go based on how they are experiencing their education, and so I think it's a little different message, although at the end of the day they're the ones that will reap the benefits, and they're why we are doing this."	2	Symbolic
		Capacity Planfulness Value-add	We have all this capacity, and in the past, we didn't have this capacity. I'm always thinking of my constituencies with that kind of lens. How can we, I don't want to use, but how can we use these different constituencies to our advantage?"	6	Political
		Capacity Value-add Timeliness	"We've had five campuses that have been in competition with one another, whether real or made up or imagined. But going from five to one and being able to have one common vision and one common direction, it really lends itself the efficiency sort of conversation, I guess…"	6	Symbolic
		Coaching Guiding Capacity	"I would say for this, for Vision Northeast, that is probably the efficiency. It's not sexy to some constituents though, especially internally. Efficiency, the capacity, the way we can deliver, utilize resources from all over our region and deliver for students. Being able to refresh the brand for the next 100 years. I think that's an awesome thing as well. But probably, probably that one."	6	Symbolic
		Capacity Positivity Own roles and identity	"That team of not only administrative leaders, but directors and faculty leaders, anybody that has benefited from this process both personally and professionally: that excites me."	2	Human Resources

		Timeliness Capacity Positivity	"…probably with an emphasis on what this can mean for our region in access and opportunity for students and expansion of programming. That's really been, I would say, the forefront of the message. But I've also pointed to elements that I've either personally learned, or that various departments or colleagues have, learned from others as well. I've tried to point to wins during the process itself, but I don't think that's been my default. I think I naturally shift to what this will mean, you know, 2,3, 5 years down the road, 10 years down the road for our students in our region."	2	Symbolic
		Positivity Value-add	"The fact that there's been such-- I think at each campus-- a certain amount of pride in the work that's been done, and what's been built. But also, I think there was a measure of honesty and acknowledgment at here's what we've done really well, but here are maybe some elements that we could improve upon. And really a willingness to truly learn from one another to build the best possible final outcomes."	3	Human Resources
		Value-add Capacity Positivity	"I try to with employees, with students and people that community, try to paint it in a very positive sense. Even sometimes the questions come from a more negative tone: "Why are you doing that anyway, what's the point?" So, try to really lay out the case as succinctly as I can and try to build some enthusiasm, anticipation for it."	2	Human Resources/Political
		Positivity Own roles and identity Timeliness	"…with an emphasis on what this can mean for our region in access and opportunity for students and expansion of programming. That's really been, I would say, the forefront of the message. But I've also pointed to elements that I've either personally learned, or that various departments or colleagues have, learned from others as well. I've tried to point to wins during the process itself, but I don't think that's been my default. I think I naturally shift to what this will mean, you know, two, three, five years down the road,	3	Human Resources/Symbolic

		Coaching	ten years down the road for our students in our region.”		
		Planfulness Positivity Communication	“I think I've, really quite frankly and truly, enjoyed speaking with people about the merger. People that are interested in what's happening. I get the question a fair amount because word is starting to spread and again, I think it will be helpful when we have maybe more formalized communication. Items to point toward and direct people toward. But for the time being, on a more informal level, to be able to speak with people about this, I find that not only simpler but, in a way, enjoyable. I think they can sense truly my enthusiasm for what's happening.”	3	Human Resources
		Positivity Old roles and identity Value-add	“Truly, this is a place we've been heading all along and with already so many shared services under our belt. And plus, all of our experience, our individual experience with HLC, we don't need to explain the importance of assessment to anyone. We've got that. We don't need to explain the importance of data driven decisions. We've got that, so we don't need to go through that whole process. That the challenge is receiving, getting buy-in, on new processes, that isn't perhaps by college process, you know. Getting past that competition and that past experience to seeing the possibilities of what's new and what can be better with a merged institution.”	8	Symbolic
Theme 2: Timeliness		Long term planning Patience Timing	“I think this is a negative thing with us in large-scale systems like this, though. I feel like sometimes large-scale systems-- to actually change---they need somebody to come in and just tip over the whole table. So, I think there’s two ways of doing it. I observed this Vision Northeast thing to be this 20-year process. So, it's not just now, [current president] is tasked with doing that now, but this has been something in the works for a long, long time. It takes a long runway”.	6	Structural
		Patience	“… ultimately, the message for the end of the process, which really isn’t the end, but	2	Symbolic

		Long term planning	the beginning, too, I guess, [as] we become Minnesota North, is that the effects may not be immediate. It will take time to fully recognize the value of consolidation and merger, and so that people need to be patient, and understand that patience will be a virtue here, but some of the benefits may not even be seen by some of us as we may retire before you know three ,four, five years into Minnesota North."		
		Timing Communicating Patience	"I think that's been a real challenge with the scale, the movement, and really the time elapse that took place between the start of the structure to… we're still not done. That time delay, it's been important to have [not only] this macro [messaging], but yet really kind of have more that micro messaging."	1	Structural
		Trusting Patience Communicating	"I think vision and communication was important to that. [It] helped to build trust in the process. Being visible. Going and doing listening sessions multiple times so people left and felt like their voice was getting heard. As much as I could, in that process, knowing that we've got all these other activities with innovation teams and people working on mission and vision."	1	Human Resources
		Micro-messaging Communicating Planfulness	"here's kind of a micro messaging… I mean the moment you know that something needs to be attended to. And to be honest right now, I've tried to be very responsive and attentive to seeing that kind of… maybe [focusing on] more of the micro messaging and not waiting for something formal. I'm not saying I'm doing it better or worse, but I've just seen where I don't think some people paid attention to the micro messaging in the moment and waited too long to communicate. And that's caused either frustrations or having to back up."	1	Human Resources
		Positivity	"… primarily, for me, it's driven on the situational timeliness and then situational 'cause that's how it's coming at me, the groups that I'm working with, the stakeholders I'm working with, a lot of it is	4	Political

		Communicating Timing	coming at me situationally rather than in a planned manner, I guess.”		
		Communicating Planfulness	“I would really look back at the steps that we've taken and realize there's been a lot of good stuff. There's things that you wish would have gone a little bit more smoothly, and there could have been just some better timing on communication.”	1	Human Resources
		Communicating Timing Planfulness	“Yeah, you probably sensed I defaulted right away to jobs and positions. I think those are…the communication around that I think has been among the most important. Both where maybe perhaps we’ve gotten it right and certainly when we've gotten it wrong. That's where I think I felt the most agitated by a misstep in communication.”	3	Structural/ Human Resources
		Communicating Planfulness Timing	“So, is that enough? Or is there more? Are there more informal conversations that can happen? There's just not enough. You can never have too much [communication].”	6	Human Resources
		Timing Planfulness Old roles and habits	“I do want to say one of the pieces that I felt was missing in this process was a communication plan, somewhere early on. And maybe that was just understood because we had representatives from all the colleges and people just probably understood that they were supposed to be communicating.”	8	Political
		Timing Planfulness	“It’s probably of all questions related communication, not the most difficult question, but the most difficult thing to do is prioritization of who to communicate with. Because people want information all the time. And people may not accept or believe this, but there are times where it's better that you're not putting out information when it's not ready to be put out, even though people want information.”	2	Political
		Old roles Planfulness	“I guess probably the most important message has been where we are in the process. Because people who aren't necessarily part of these teams or part of the information circle, they're	8	Human Resources

		Communicating	wondering, you know, where are you in the process? Are you making decisions? What kinds of decisions are you making? Will I be part of approving that decision or how will that impact me?"		
		Timing Planfulness	"It's better to be slow and methodical with the communication and have some people occasionally upset because they haven't heard anything in a while. It's better to have that than it is to miscommunicate, because we live in a unionized environment with shared governance, with a system, with legislators, stakeholders, administrators, leadership cabinet and there's a method to the madness."	2	Political
		Timing Communicating Listening	"As an example, I put out a letter to students this fall. It had a lot of information about COVID, a lot of information welcoming them to the semester; said nothing about the merger. That would have been a great opportunity to say something about Minnesota North, and yet…I could ask the question, but I wasn't sure about the appropriateness. And even if it were appropriate, what degree of messaging I should share that would be consistent?"	3	Human Resources
		Timing Communication	"Yeah, the space and time that we are living in, the timeliness of it is indeed where the priority comes in. That's not to say if I had been here at the beginning, right at the very beginning of this work, this conversation, I would be in a different place with my ability to prioritize that and the timeliness of it. I feel like there's probably a timeline in which certain things need to be communicated in a specific way, and I entered into the middle of that timeline, and so it's a little bit loose for me."	4	Structural
		Timing Planfulness	"I would tell them to communicate early and often. And be as transparent as you can be. There are some things that obviously you can't share, you know, personnel related decisions, those sorts of things. But	4	Human Resources

			communicating as often and as transparently as you can.”		
		Communication	“We recently connected during our listening sessions about a month ago and then we connected again during Duty Day. And now we'll connect again with our upcoming faculty visit days to all of the different colleges, too, so that will provide us another opportunity to connect in person.”	5	Human Resources
		Communication Planfulness	“Being thoughtful in our communication style, for example, they're presenting the rebranding process, being very inclusive of everybody.”	5	Human Resources/ Political
		Planfulness Timing	“Once we get more of the staffing model in place, I would like to create some type of, if not bi-weekly, monthly check-ins with [the participant’s division] as a group. So that would definitely be a goal.”	5	Human Resources
		Planfulness Timing Communication	“I was just with the [local] chamber, and I gave an update about Vision Northeast. And what did I say? Here's what we're doing. We have Higher Learning Commission that's coming to visit. We have these timestamps: February sort of decision times that are going to happen. We have a brand that we rolled out internally, but once we get official approval, then we'll make some sort of splash about it. Just to kind of keep people updated and generate buy-in and advocacy for our work.”	6	Political
		Planfulness Communication Positivity Coaching	“Well, with each group, there's a different amount of information that they need, I feel. Staff and faculty probably need the most real-time information. Students, probably next. Then I probably would follow that up with the Foundation or the community. Alumni come to you for information versus us going to alumni most often. Not that it should be that way, but that's the way it is. And then I'll always, the perspective student is always in the back your mind, too. How somebody is reading this, how somebody is interpreting what's	7	Human Resources/ Political

		Communication Planfulness Deciding Culture of new entity	going on, views this in a positive light, that kind of thing." "…HLC is interested in how the new organization will function. Certainly, they want to see our organization, our organizational structure. But that's only the framework for: how does it function? How do the currents of communication flow through that organization structure so that data and experience are used to inform decisions and that priorities are determined through the functionality of that structure?"	8	Political/ Structural
Theme 3: Tailored Messaging	Reading Others	Reading Own roles and identity	"Part of it is intuition, and people have different levels of emotional intelligence and have a sense of what to do. Part of its having longevity in an organization and understanding how people react."	2	Human Resources
		Reading Tailoring	"So, just because you're intuitive to people's feelings or emotions doesn't mean that you can overly rely on that as a gauge. Just be aware of it. Recognize it. Do what you can with it to keep those people feeling good and involved."	2	Human Resources
		Own roles and identity Reading Tailoring	"I don't know if this is accurate, but I feel that I have a decent read on group dynamics. And when I feel the anxiety, frustration, hesitation, whatever it may be at that moment, I attempt to address it as soon as I can. Most of the time it's reassuring [them] of the process."	7	Human Resources
		Reading Tailoring	"And I can see people's faces and read them a little bit, read the room a little bit. Can't do that in a Zoom presentation where you only see yourself. I'm interacting with myself basically, at that point, then that just starts to feel weird, so I think in person certainly is a little bit easier."	4	Human Resources
		Reading Tailoring	"I would only say I think that changes are…I think it's important in the change management is to gauge the level of fear that people have around it. And the uncertainty that they feel that exists and	4	Human Resources

			make sure – and that's a part of tailoring the message…"		
		Reading Culture of new entity	" So, the message-- specifically to my team: we conducted listening sessions so I could initially make that face-to-face connection with people that I will most likely eventually be supervising."	5	Human Resources/ Political
		Culture of new entity Own roles and identity Trusting	" I guess understanding how to manage those relationships and building them from a distance is a bit challenging because you can really get to know people more in-person when you're face-to-face with them."	5	Human Resources
		Trusting Culture of new entity Reading	"Because of the pandemic a little bit and Zoom, our staff had an opportunity to ease into their relationships with their future colleagues. When they get opportunities to actually meet people face to face, it's like they've already met them when in fact they haven't. And so, it's like seeing a cousin that I haven't seen in a long time but yet you've never seen them. And so, it was kind of nice. So, I think if it was just a "feeling-out" process where if we were to gather all in one spot… had to do that in a more formal setting I think it would have taken longer. It would have been harder, but I think this has allowed us to maybe make that a little easier and maybe build a little bit more trust within a more comfortable format than the face-to-face might have been."	7	Human Resources
		Communicating Reading Communicating Own roles and identity	"How can I show them that we've done that and what evidence do I have to back up what I'm saying and writing? Whenever I have done any presentations for the leadership group, it's all about how can we conceptualize this? So, we're all working from the same image, whether it's a roadmap or building a structure that has phases to it. How can we all have the same understanding of what we're building so that we can build it together."	8	Symbolic
		Reading	"So, you kinda have to pick this stuff up sometimes from watching people and intuition and repeated messages from one	2	Human Resources

		Timing	or more people. You know, they keep kind of hinting at the same thing, you know it's time. And so, baked into that is, really try to encourage your people to be dissenters, respectfully, obviously, and they would be, to ideas that don't seem to line up…Keep an eye on your team in the sense that you gotta watch for those nuances of their reaction, actions, because of that hesitancy."		
	Micro-messaging	Tailoring Communicating	"Making sure that you're tailoring your message-- not changing the core of the message-- but tailoring how you communicate that message. I guess that would be the general advice I would give someone going through this process."	4	Human Resources/ Political
		Planfulness Tailoring	"It's just like, yeah, but you know, the decision was made here. It was made jointly with this direction. You're really not in a spot to decide to go over in a different direction unless the rest of the group agrees and in that because people see different parts fitting in different spots. Those are private and more challenging conversations that are more individual, that communication."	1	Political
		Micro-messaging Tailoring Timing Old roles and habits	"There's kind of a micro messaging, I can say, I mean the moment you know that something needs to be attended to. And to be honest right now, I've tried to be very responsive and attentive to seeing those kind of… maybe [focusing on] more of the micro messaging and not waiting for something formal. I'm not saying I'm doing it better or worse, but I've just seen where I don't think some people paid attention to the micro messaging in the moment and waited too long to communicate. And that's caused either frustrations or having to back up."	1	Human Resources
		Tailoring Positivity	"I think it comes down to what the person you're talking to needs, or the group you're talking to needs, and tailoring that message as long as it fits in with the overall message… tailoring it to that group. But generally, my overarching message to	4	Human Resources

		Old roles and habits	whoever I'm talking to is that this is a good thing.”		
		Tailoring Reading	“I do think it is different based on the roles the persons plays in the organization, their place in the in the world, I guess, and their ability to hear you and your message.”	4	Human Resources/ Political
		Tailoring	“My interaction with the message is at an individualized basis.”	4	Human Resources/ Symbolic
		Value-add Own roles and identity Communicating	“Depends on what the audience is. Right? So if the audience was my team in [redacted division] and I talk about the brand…And so I think it's a really important, when I’m talking to them, ‘Here's what this is going to add value for us: we will get a chance to refresh our brand if that's something we choose to do.’…And so it's really “what's in it for them” type of thing.”	6	Political
		Planfulness Tailoring	“I had my other role as representing our college and our staff, in particular. I've been involved in Innovation [Teams]…I’ve really been trying to bring back at least our process to communicate that to our staff members so that they have a sense, that they had some idea of where things were going and the types of topics that were being brought up. And then also to provide their input back to the innovation team.”	8	Political
		Tailoring	“I've been to umpteen social groups in town. The chamber, [redacted] board leadership, I've made it –I mean, early on-- went to every local school board and gave them an update on our process ... So, if I think of going back to “why spend time with those stakeholders?” I don't know. It's just like a deep personal conviction.”	1	Political
		Positivity	“We have to make sure that we're seen in the light that we want to be seen in and then make sure that the community knows what's coming.”	7	Political

Theme 4: Acknowledgement of Messiness and Imperfection		Ambiguity Deciding Interdependence	"So, the runaway is huge. The change is not linear. Change and decision-making isn't linear. You can make a decision then you can [ask]: are they already doing this right? Are we doing this right? What are we thinking about this? What's the reason for doing this? What's the "why"?"	6	Symbolic
		Own roles and identity Interdependence Own roles and identity	"Trying to acknowledge that this is hard, that we're asking a lot out of people. I don't think it does any good to minimize that or try to be Pollyanna-ish about it, just kind of, you know, looking at this whole thing through rose- colored glasses. The process itself-- it is, we're asking a lot [out] of people, and I think I we're both feeling that to a degree, so I think, one, acknowledging that. Trying to be as supportive and encouraging as we can be through that."	3	Human Resources
		Timing Ambiguity	"Otherwise, we could all start to fracture off instead of coming together, and having some really seen that connectivity, we could refracture in a new way."	1	Political
		Own roles and identity	"And by owning, it that means taking responsibility for things that don't go well and giving credit for those things at do go well."	2	Symbolic
		Ambiguity Planfulness Old habits and roles	"A lot of times just trying to keep a goal and a vision, and what we'd set out. But really trying to support that whole Vision Northeast process, and it felt like kind of scrambling around at times to be here, to be there. I'm not complaining in any way, it just, it was so important to start getting the rest of the structure in place so people can… it's hard for them, in that abstract mode, to see things. And so, I guess trying to help them to see things, feel like there's movement. I mean, a lot of times, it felt like just we were spinning plates so at least there are plates spinning, whether we're going anywhere or not."	1	Symbolic

		Old habits and roles Own roles and identity	"Other stakeholders that are internal, like faculty, and potentially some staff, are probably really uncertain with what is going to happen, what isn't going to happen. The best thing I can do if that ever comes up is give them the factual information that I have at the time and be as honest as I can and open and transparent as I can and don't be scared to say I don't know."	6	Human Resources
		Planfulness Timing Ambiguity	"Just a very simple example is if something happens or there's an event or an action is being taken, and people learn about it through something other than formal chains of communication that may be purposeful because we haven't had a shared governance meeting yet. You can't communicate to the general public before you talked with shared governance, and go through whatever process that would be, as just one example. Another might be that the chancellor hasn't been notified yet, so there are priorities to everything, but most- you know -your larger decisions and larger events have a chain of communication with priorities attached to them. When it's complex like this, you have to follow those because if you speak out of turn, you'd be in more trouble, if you will, then if you just blurted it out to everybody just so everybody knew."	2	Political
		Planfulness Ambiguity	"There will be some level of decisions that we've made that we will figure out a year from now that it wasn't the right decision. I think we need to… it's not like we get to May 23rd ,and then at the end of the change. We need to continue to communicate that's a longer-term thing, and I think that is important in the messaging. Making sure that you're communicating that there's not really the end date to change-- it keeps going."	4	Structural
		Own roles and identity	"One thing that I probably would change if I were ever to be a part of this again or recommend to others, is that the burnout	7	Structural

		Old habits and roles.	factor of the "messy middle" is real. And the people that are coming into new roles… the people that are coming into new roles versus having their old roles at the same time without bringing on new people, it's unhealthy. And things get missed."		
Theme 5: Trust in the Process		Communication Planfulness	"So yeah, the message is simply that this is a valuable process, that we determined on our own, and we built it in an extremely inclusive manner so that people could be a part of the process and be part of the message versus being told."	2	Human Resources
		Trusting	"…building that trust amongst who's going to be working together in the future more closely is the key to the success or failure of the endeavor for me."	7	Human Resources
		Trusting	"I put a lot of stake in relationship building, so I think that trust is important. So, I tried to find places to build out [that trust] wherever I can, especially moving forward."	7	Political/ Human Resources
		Micro-messaging Communication Planfulness Communicating	"And that's a real micro message where you're down with the individual person. You can't have people like that lose confidence in where we're going. The rest of process doesn't matter if they bail on you."	1	Human Resources
		Planfulness Coaching Guiding	"The process, I had trust in it, I wasn't gonna buck that. But I knew enough that I had to go meet with those two [that were not hired into the new role] just because, I am not going to change the decision, I am not going to excuse anything, but just go. They just had to process 'cause they had lost you know, basically…[a job opportunity]."	1	Human Resources
		Planfulness Old habits and roles	" A lot of it, for me, it's not so much being the controller on decisions, but what kind of processes are we putting in place? Especially as we started to- well, you're part of that personally- you start to make positions, but there's long delays between	1	Structural

		Evolving Communicating	positions. So a lot of it was trying to help; seeing how much I could shepherd or guide so many different facets with not truly being in…you know, never felt like I was in control of anything but just guiding.”		
		Trusting Ambiguity Reading others Coaching and guiding	“There has been a pretty consistent approach for that, and even when the timing hasn't been as quick with some positions as we'd hoped, just encouraging people that the process has worked up to this point. And continue to just trust that when your turn comes, right, there is a process, and a place and that hopefully it will work out in a way in your favor. So I think that's about the process.”	3	Structural
		Own roles and identity Old habits and roles Evolution Trusting	“And I think that's probably a-- what's the word I'm looking for-- an evolution in my thinking on some things. Sometimes I would be more nervous to have a lot of those conversations because more can go wrong. You know, you can say things that you don't want to be misconstrued or what have you. But I would say, the hotter the constituency groups--- what I mean by the hotter, is it's just the more nervous constituency group about any systems change or any change management--you should probably make sure that they have a seat at the table.”	6	Political
		Trusting Coaching	“I think, especially within the workplace, I think one of the most important pieces is to empower those around you. No matter what position you're in, whether you’re the supervisor or colleague or whatever. And so people want to feel that they had a stake and a say in the process and the outcome. And so you want to make sure that everybody feels empowered and involved. If they weren't involved, at least they know they had the opportunity to be and made a conscious decision not to be.”	7	Human Resources
		Coaching Trusting	“most importantly, it's just impacted me in seeing how hard people work and how invested people are in their work. It's made me recognize the value of empowering	2	Human Resources

			people. I knew that before, but in this particular case, it is a no-brainer…You wouldn't go home and suddenly tell your family "here's the way it's going to be at home and here's the edict and then everybody's got to live with it." You would never do that in a family, and you should never do that in an organization, and this process has proven that to be true."		
		Old roles and habits Trusting Coaching	"Because I don't think that that question gets asked enough, and I think there's a lot of silence and a lot of nervousness. That's something that I started to think about lately… because people are not heard. And so, how can you translate that into also effective organizational change, an effective team, team working relationships as well: "What do you want?"	6	Political
		Coaching Guiding Old roles and habits Ambiguity	"What kinds of concerns do you have? What kinds of questions do you want me to bring forward? Do you want [cabinet leader] to come to our campus and speak to where we are with these decisions? Or do you want [administrator] to come to campus and get a sense of what our current staffing model is here?"	8	Human Resources/ Political

APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE GROUP COMMUNICATION CONSTRUCTION

Vision Northeast Updates

February 4, 2022

Content:

- **A Message from President XXXX**
- **February 25 Minnesota North College Informational and Planning Day** - XXXX
- **IT and Bookstore –** XXXX
- **Enrollment Management –** XXXX
- **Fall 2022 Course Schedule –** XXXXX
- **Public Relations –** XXXX
- **Financial Aid –** XXXX
- **Searches & New Hires**

Happy February!

Thank you to everyone that contributed the information below related to our Vision NE merger efforts. The next several months will be hectic, and I thank everyone in advance for the hard work, patience, and understanding that will be required from us in order to navigate our way to Minnesota North College*. The fact that these extraordinary efforts are on top of supporting our current students on their educational path during a pandemic underscores the compassion and dedication of the people we have working in our colleges.

A few key dates to keep in mind: The Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees will take action on our merger at their February 24-25 meeting and

then the Minnesota State Board of Trustees will then act on the merger at their March 15-16 meeting. Assuming both boards approve our merger, we will hold a Minnesota North College* Brand Launch event at the new Iron Trail Motors Event Center in Virginia on Friday April 22 so hold this date on your calendar – more details to come!
Take care,
XXXXX

Minnesota North College* Informational & Planning Day - February 25

All activities will be held via Zoom sessions. The basic agenda for the day is as follows:

- *8:30 am – 10:00 am: 30 Minute Concurrent Sessions*
  - The format is 15 minutes of information sharing followed 15 minutes of Q & A. Sessions will be recorded.
  - Employees can choose which sessions they attend.
  - Example sessions include: Financial Budget Process Updates, Branding Guidelines, Webpage, Regional Recruiting Strategy, Student Services, Concurrent Enrollment, Bookstore Operations, 5-Year, Strategic Academic Plan, HR Open Office Hour, and many more. The final list of topics will be provided prior to the 25th.
- *10:00 am – 11:30 am: Course Prerequisite and Pathway Informational Session*
- *11:30 am – 3:30 pm: Program/Department Work Session Times*
  - Exact times and sessions will be shared prior to the 25th.

Contact: email

Information Technology

- Active Directory:

    - The contract for the Active Directory work has entered final stages for approval, and we expect work to start in the next couple of weeks.
- Hardware/Equipment:
    - Campus IT staff are receiving and installing new equipment ordered long ago, that will improve campus computing experiences and standardize many things as we near the merge.
- Infrastructure
    - Campus IT staff continue to work with System Office staff to upgrade/stabilize campus infrastructure that will positively impact merge projects.

Bookstore

Bookstore staff are proposing a shared bookstore services model to Presidents Cabinet (1/28) and the Faculty Leadership Work Group (2/3). They plan to incorporate the feedback from these meetings into the future model. A college-wide e-commerce site is central to the model, which will be new to some of the campus locations. This will allow for a uniform and streamlined process for all students to follow when purchasing course materials. The goal is to get this site running by summer session.

Contact: email

Enrollment Management

- The new website development/design is moving along. Target go live date is July 1.
- Branding guidelines have been finalized and approved by cabinet. Let Tommy, Molly or Kayley know if you have any questions.
- Communication flow to applied and enrolled students will begin in mid-February with monthly updates sent via e-mails and postcards.
- Online application design is in the final stages of being built by SO team + Enrollment Management Admissions Staff.

- Enrollment management lead team has concluded meeting with program faculty at each NHED campus location to learn about their specific marketing needs and ideas.
- The Enrollment Specialists will be meeting with faculty in mid-March to learn about how to sell their programs.
- Presto Sports has made significant progress on building the athletic pages for each individual school/athletic teams.
- The brand launch event will be hosted on Friday, April 22. More details to come from xxxx.

Contact: email

Fall 2022 Course Schedule

We appreciate your patience as we continue to work on the academic schedule for next year. This is a new experience for us all, and we recognize that the timeline and feedback processes right now are different from what our individual campuses have historically been accustomed to. Much of that is due to the unique circumstance of building the inaugural schedule for our merged college in a relatively compressed timeframe. Our goal for next year is to have a much more comprehensive process in place, and we welcome feedback on how to improve the schedule development process going forward for Minnesota North College.

As we have communicated throughout this process, our goal is to remain as close as possible to the established schedules at each of our campuses. One area of focus, though, is the ratio of online sections compared to in-person. As you are well aware, our campuses abruptly switched to predominately online delivery in spring 2020, and as a result, we are continuing to see a higher-than-average number of online sections throughout the district. Our hope for the 2022-2023 schedule is to achieve the right balance of online and in-person course offerings, using pre-pandemic campus schedules as the primary templates. We are looking to create this balance for two main reasons:

1. Following extended periods of distance learning, students are increasingly voicing their preference for in-person course offerings.

2. Regarding student-athletes in particular, the NJCAA has ruled that 75% of a student-athlete's credits must be ground-based at their home campus.

We recognize, of course, the ongoing value of online opportunities for our students—our hope is simply to achieve the proper balance between online and in-person course offerings to meet student need.

The Fall schedule is currently being planned to be visible February 28th to all students and employees. There will be a one-month review and feedback time period with registration window opening March 28th. In the meantime, the academic deans and academic affairs coordinators are meeting with programs and departments for input. If you have questions or concerns about the number of online course offerings or about the schedule as a whole, please don't hesitate to reach out to one of them.

Contact: email, email

Public Relations

Important Upcoming Public Relations Dates
February 24-25, 2022 - Higher Learning Commission Decision on Merger
March 16th, 2022 – Official Minnesota State BOT Decision on Merger
March 16th, 2022 – Minnesota North College* Press Release with Brand Kick off Date
April 22th, 2022 – Brand Launch Event @ Iron Trail Motors Center Virginia, Mn (5-9pm)
April 20th-26th, 2022 – Spring Open House/Brand Mini Events, All Campuses
May 9-13th, 2022 – Commencement Exercises – Celebration of the Past, Forward to the Future
May 23rd, 2022 – ISRS Term Switch Flip Officially Becoming Minnesota North College*

Submit a story
As we become Minnesota North College*, we will have a much more prominent "News" page on our website where we will generate content to brag about the awesome work going on across our six campuses with the hope that these stories will be picked up by local media, present our college in a positive light,

help provide legislative advocacy, and also serve as recruiting pieces. Once we have our website up and running, we will have a clearer way to submit stories for consideration. For the time being, if you have an idea about a potential story that will positively impact our reputation, please let me know:

Contact: phone, email

*Pending Higher Learning Commission and Minnesota State Board of Trustees Approval

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The world of Financial Aid in the middle of a merger

We all know and hear the transition date of the merger as being May 23rd (pending approval) however students have been completing their 22-23 FAFSA applications since October 2021. Because of this, the Financial Aid team has been working diligently over the past year with the System Office IT staff to create a seamless transition for students as their financial aid files migrate from our individual colleges into the Minnesota North College* database.

Students are currently completing the 22-23 FAFSA and indicating the college they will be attending according to where the campus the Academic Program they will be registering for is located (ex: MRC for a Welding Diploma or HCC for an AA Degree). When that same student logs into his eServices to view his financial aid information, he is currently viewing it “at that chosen college”. (ex: This MRC Welding student is still looking at his eServices with the MRC name and logo at the top). What students don’t know is that in the background the Financial Aid staff is copying the FAFSA data from the current school into the Minnesota North ISRS student system database so we can begin our work towards completing the student’s financial aid offer. Once the merger is approved, prior to paying financial aid for the summer semester, The Department of Education will open a crosswalk within their system that will migrate that same student FAFSA information into the new Minnesota North College, Department of Education, student data base aligning us so that the student data matches between our Minnesota North data base and the Department of Education data base. This will allow us to disburse federal financial aid funds to students, starting this summer semester, seamlessly from our new college.

What does all of this background work, migrating, and cross walking mean for the student? When the Minnesota North eServices goes live on May 23rd students will be looking at the same information, they did on May 22nd but with new Minnesota North College name and logo displayed at the top of the page. Seamless….

Contact: email

New Hires

Submitted by xxxx

ASSISTANT FINANCIAL AID DIRECTOR
I am pleased to announce that XXXX has been offered and accepted the Assistant Financial Aid Director position for Minnesota North College*. This position is responsible for assisting the Financial Aid Director with the overall administration of federal, state, institutional, and private financial aid programs for students attending Minnesota North College*.

XXX holds an Associate in Science Degree in Business Administration, coupled with an Associate in Arts Degree from Itasca Community College. Additionally, XXX is in her seventh year at Itasca Community College where she is the Assistant Financial Aid Director.

XXXX officially started in her new position on December 22, 2021, at which time she hit the ground running. She truly has a passion for financial aid as was demonstrated during a recent conversation when XXX shared with me that she listens to financial aid podcasts while in her vehicle.

I would like to thank the members of the search committee for their participation with this important position. Congratulations, XXX!

DISTANCE RECRUITING SPECIALIST
I am pleased to announce that XXXX has been offered and accepted the Distance Recruiting Specialist position for Minnesota North College*. This position is responsible for the implementation of recruiting strategies for Minnesota North College* to increase enrollment outside of all campus regional

locations. This position will focus on recruiting in the Twin Cities region, as well as target areas in Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan, and other regions as developed.

XXXX holds a master’s degree in Strategic Leadership and a Bachelor Degrees in Psychology and Philosophy from Bethel University. Additionally, xxxx brings 24 years of leadership and recruiting experience in the healthcare industry to Minnesota North College*.

XXXX’s official start date will be Monday, March 7, 2022, at which time she will begin leading the distance recruiting activities.

I would like to thank the members of the search committee for their participation with this important position. Congratulations, XXXX!

Contact: email

Searches

Job Postings that are currently open and accepting applications for:

- General Maintenance Worker, Permanent FT at Mesabi Range College
- College Lab Assistant 1 – Electrical Maintenance Lab Assistant, Permanent PT at Hibbing Community College
- Customized Training Representative, Permanent FT with Advanced MN to sit at Itasca Community College
- Information Technology Specialist 1, Temporary FT at Vermilion Community College
- Women’s Athletics Coaches, Temporary PT at Vermilion Community College

Job Postings that have recently closed and are in the decision-making process:

- AP1 Enrollment Specialist, Permanent FT to sit at Vermilion Community College
- Account Clerk Sr, Permanent FT, two positions to sit at Hibbing Community College
- OAS, Permanent FT at Hibbing Community College/Advanced Minnesota
- OASI – Campus Services Coordinator, Permanent FT at Hibbing Community College

- Facilities Services Supervisor, Permanent FT, 4 positions at Hibbing, Itasca, Mesabi and Vermilion campuses

Contact: email

APPENDIX E: EXAMPLE DISTRIBUTED COMMUNICATION

Dear NHED Colleagues –

Please find July district updates below.

I am looking forward to seeing those that are able to attend the Minnesota North College* employee day at Minnesota Discovery Center in Chisholm on Wednesday, August 11th with a BBQ buffet lunch beginning at 12:30. We are looking forward to seeing all of you there!

- The legislature and governor passed a higher education bill in June for the upcoming biennium. This is a good bill for our NHED colleges especially given the *supplement aid to non-metro schools (2nd bullet point below).*

Minnesota State Highlights include

- $45 million over the biennium for campus operations and maintenance
- An additional $5.4 million, or $2.7 million each year, for **supplemental aid to non-metro colleges** for a total of $11.4 million over the biennium
- $1 million, or $500,000 each year, in additional funding for the workforce development scholarships, for a total of $9 million over the biennium. The program is amended in the bill to include an additional area of study or certification available for a scholarship, based on a workforce shortage for full-time employment requiring post-secondary education that is unique to the institution's specific region.
- $500,000 over the biennium, or $250,000 each year, for the Z-Degree textbook program. The funding is for four additional colleges or universities to offer the opportunity to earn a Z-Degree by the 2023-2024 academic year.
- $1.5 million in one-time funding for student mental health awareness
- $1 million in one-time funding to support students' basic needs
- $2.015 million over the biennium for the system office; $1.008 million the first year, and $1.007 million the second year
- Tuition language that allows the Board of Trustees to increase tuition each year of the biennium up to 3.5% and allows universities to adjust tuition to account for a reduction of online differential charges if the change is revenue neutral.

- NHED Colleges' fall enrollment - same point relative to the start of term. NHED Colleges gained 53.9 FYE from last week; same week last year increased 37.2 FYE. Compared to same time last year, enrollment at all Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are down – Colleges -4.0% or 1,518.3 FYE and Universities -10.4% or 1,947.1 FYE.

- Welcome to XXX, VP of Finance and Facilities, who formally started in her position on July 6th!

- XXX and XXX retired within our Business Office staff, which has necessitated the following position postings:
  - 2 Account Clerk Senior positions – Postings close on Thursday, July 29, 2021

- Vision NE merger work has centered on the Higher Learning Commission's Change of Control application, continued development of the organizational chart, brand development with our vendor (Object), and AASC/Innovation/Planning team activity.

- Organizational structure (Difficult to capture all of the detail but here are some of the latest highlights. Thank you for your collective patience as we carefully make our way through all of the different staffing areas!)
  - Position Updates
    - Academic Coordinator positions: interviews scheduled. These positions will support deans, faculty, and help coordinate various academic initiatives.
    - Registrar and Financial Aid directors positions: interviews scheduled.
    - Enrollment Management staffing structure is under development. Staff listening/planning sessions begin next week.
    - Facilities, Information technology (IT), and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) director areas are up next for planning and posting positions.
    - As these director positions are filled, staffing structure in each respective areas will be determined shortly after through conversations/planning with appropriate staff members.

  - Academic Program and Faculty Administrative Leadership
    - XXX: Dean of Academics, Career and Technical
      - Career and Technical Programming
      - Early childhood
      - Allied Health
      - Accounting, Business, and Economics faculty for programmatic alignment of faculty
    - XXX: Dean of Academics, Natural Resources and Humans Services
      - Natural Resources and Humans Services Programs
      - Fireline Emergency Medical Technician
      - Wilderness Emergency Medical Services

- Biology and Psychology faculty for programmatic alignment of faculty

- XXX: Dean of Academics, Associate of Arts and Transfer Programs
  - AA degree (and associated degrees) and discipline faculty, except as noted with XXX and XXX
  - Transfer Pathways, specific to crosswalk and articulations agreements, faculty may report to XXX and XXX as noted above
  - Class Act, Pre-Education
  - Engineering
  - Health Sciences Broad Field
- In addition:
  - XXXX
    - Nursing, program and faculty
    - Athletics, programming and faculty AD and coaching assignments.
    - TRIO-Funded Programming
    - 4-year programming (XXX will continue to oversee Bell/IRE 4-year partnership programs)
  - XXXX
    - Faculty counselors

- The Vision NE HLC writing team has been working at a feverish pace. Special thanks goes to xxxxx who are the lead writers for the HLC Change of Control application. xxxx and others are playing big support roles in providing data and other information. The application has been submitted to meet the August 1, 2021 deadline!

- Object (our Branding/Marketing partner) and our core branding team meet weekly to continue work on building the Minnesota North* brand and eventually marketing materials. Web development is scheduled to begin in August.

- The Vision NE Technology Innovation Team and System Office IT Team are making good progress.
  - Key Accomplishments: Continue the rollout of Multi-factor authentication, New D2L site in place, and QA environment
  - Current Focus: Technology standardization/purchases and upgrades, Classroom Technology Pilots, Technology Five Year Plan review, Windows 10 upgrades
  - Upcoming Work: Security management, AD and O365 provisioning, website infrastructure prep work, develop web teams, and Data Center (Itasca)

Thank you and hope to see you on August 11 at Minnesota Discovery Center!!