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The Transmission of Saga at West Virginia University

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The Transmission of Saga at West Virginia University

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ABSTRACT

The Transmission of Saga at West Virginia University

James Froemel

Changes in the higher education landscape continue to bring new regulations which enforce standardization and similarities in organizational behavior. Because of these pressures, institutional identities and differentiations are more dependent on the unique way students experience an institution rather than the structure of the organization. Through focus groups and interviews, this phenomenological study seeks to understand the ways in which the traditional undergraduate experience impacts the transmission of organizational saga at West Virginia University. To do so, it examines stories told by students through thematic analysis to connect student experiences with symbols of the university. Focusing on these connections and the ways in which students derive meaning from symbols and embed their own meanings into symbols of the university, can bring greater clarity to the elements of student experience which are significant and transmittable within organizational saga.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This study will examine the phenomenon of traditional students' experiences with West Virginia University and how sensemaking around these experiences contributes to the larger organizational saga. Through analysis of this data, I seek to understand the symbols of WVU which students are interacting with, the sensemaking process taking place through that interaction, and how students are sharing these stories in ways that contribute to the organizational saga.

An organizational saga is "a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on the historical exploits of a formal organization, offering strong normative bonds within and outside the organization. Believers give loyalty to the organization and take pride and identity from it" (Clark, 1972, p. 178). Clark suggests that sagas are initiated and fulfilled through elements present on campus. Personnel, programs, and campus life imagery contribute to this saga's construction, fulfillment, and perpetuation.

As observed through a symbolic interactionist lens, the study of saga transmission will monitor how symbols across campus are received and made meaningful to students. Further, this study considers how individuals engage in sensemaking, how they make meaning of behaviors and experiences (Blumer, 1969), and how this process can affect the students' perception of the university.

Utilizing a focus group and interviews with current WVU students, I seek to understand the symbols by which students are engaged with the saga of West Virginia University. Through observing student engagement with these symbols, the sensemaking around their experiences related to them, and how students organize this information into a personal narrative, this study

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strives to understand better the role traditional undergraduate students play in guiding

organizational saga.

West Virginia University is a land-grant, Research 1 institution complete with a research

corporation and hospital system (https://www.wvu.edu/about-wvu). The university's

organizational structure is designed to allow for the advancement of high-level academic

initiatives connected to the R1 mission. Institutional structures and designs are intentional and

exist within a rational relationship of applying organizational resources to organizational

objectives. (Lewis, 2013) In this way, university administrations have agency in making

decisions that help guide the story of their institution and its image to internal and external

constituencies. However, the informal aspects of the saga and the ways students interpret their

experiences are equally important when considering saga transmission.

Students, engaged in campus life, interpret symbols of the organization, and create

individualized meanings for them. Blumer (1969) suggests that in this process of symbolic

interactionism, students subjectively apply values and narratives gathered from their own

experiences to create a new, more personalized meaning. The imposed meaning becomes more

pronounced to the student than an implied meaning.

Students engage in storytelling with others as they develop these new, subjective

meanings for campus symbols. This type of organizational storytelling emerges as a way for

students to create and share meaning with others simultaneously. Boje (1991) notes that

organizational members tell stories not just to share the meaning they have created but to

"Supplement individual memories with institutional ones" (1991, p. 106). As they engage in the

storytelling of their experiences, students understand university life through personal and group

memories, further modifying the meanings of the symbols they encounter in this setting.

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Understanding organizational saga as being created through student engagement with symbols requires a look at what symbols students are encountering and the frequency and intensity of those interactions (Blumer, 1969). Doing so may provide an understanding of how saga and the sentiment surrounding experience are created and transmitted among undergraduate students.

Understanding saga transmission can aid in creating distinction for a university, an attribute that has become both more elusive and important in the current academic marketplace. The desire to be distinct and assimilate with peers creates tension at WVU, as with other colleges. WVU has aligned itself with several national organizations and academic groupings in the last decade. Among these are an athletic affiliation with the Big 12 and Carnegie Classification as an R1 institution (https://www.wvu.edu/about-wvu). While both affiliations can be seen as achievements, they both come with demands for adherence to the norms of that group. As a Big 12 competitor, WVU must have a specific type of athletic facility and showcase itself through the television networks contracted by that partner organization. As an R1 institution, WVU must meet the standards of research and Ph.D. production, and graduate program offerings (Carnegie Classifications, 2021). This process of becoming more like the members of a peer group is called *normative isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In normative isomorphism, a group creates norms that the membership must strive to achieve. As similarities increase, distinctive organizational designs decrease.

The power to create distinction in higher education may shift toward the unique ways students experience the institution and relay those experiences to others. Understanding how students' stories are created and transmitted based on their sensemaking process may help institutions promote and embrace distinctiveness while maintaining the similar structures of their peer groups.

To examine the phenomenon of the student experience, the data collected through a focus group and follow-up interviews will identify symbols found on campus and the ways students interpret those symbols. Through this data, the study presents a clearer understanding of how student experiences with symbols alter how they interpret and transmit organizational saga in ways that foster the unique identity of West Virginia University.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study seek to understand how students interact with and interpret symbols of WVU, and how they transmit the story of those experiences in ways that impact the organizational saga.

- What are the symbols of West Virginia University which have shaped current undergraduates' understanding of WVU's identity?
- What experiences are students having in response to these symbols which contribute to their lived experience of West Virginia University?
- What are the shared qualities of stories students tell others about their experiences at West Virginia University?

Conceptual Framework

Symbolic interactionism suggests that individuals infuse symbols with meaning derived from personal experiences and social interactions (Blumer, 1969). This culturally derived meaning can be embedded in symbols which take the form of items, people, places, and language.

This study proposes that traditional students at West Virginia University are encountering symbols and engaging in meaning-making to create a more personalized and distinct version of WVU's identity and that these symbols can be said to derive from three sources or *Symbol Pools*.

These pools are social symbols, curated symbols, and academic symbols. Table 1 provides the definitions for these symbol pools.

Table 1.

• Social symbols: Symbols encountered prior to or post-matriculation through communal experiences. These symbols are rooted primarily in interpersonal experience, the 'lifestyle' aspects of WVU, as opposed to the academic. They are received in a familial, informal manner and would include 4-H, campus engagement through athletic events, clubs, nightlife, and participation with religious groups.
• Curated symbols of WVU: Representations of WVU through crafted imagery and narratives presented by the institution. The 'Flying WV,' the Mountaineer, and television and radio advertisements are found in this pool.
• Academic engagement symbols: Symbols which can be tied directly to academic pursuits. Academic Engagement Symbols may include study groups, professors, program rankings, and academic based classifications.

As students first receive and interact with symbols, their interactions are based on prior understandings and beliefs. As they interact further, the meaning becomes more culturally constructed and affected by their direct experiences and the meanings others have applied to the symbol (Blumer, 1969).

As students engage in sensemaking, they organize the information provided by the group and the information found in their own experiences and sense of self (Weick, 1995). The result is a new meaning for the symbol, which fuses the information provided by the symbol, the individual, and the group. Blumer describes this sensemaking as an "interpretive process" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

The phenomenon under study is how student experiences with symbols of West Virginia University contribute to the organizational saga. The meanings of symbols are socially constructed. Because of this, any change to the individual's understanding of the symbol changes

the group's understanding. Therefore, changes in the meaning of symbols are cumulative for every student they contact (Blumer, 1969). The result is the co-construction of a narrative around a symbol.

As students construct these experiences into a narrative, they engage in organizational storytelling (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). With time and repetition, these narratives become part of the organizational saga. They become the "historical exploits" that Clark (1972) speaks of and help to create the collective understanding of the institution. Clark suggests that histories are "felt by participants and some outsiders. The more unique the history and the more forceful the claim to a place in history, the more intensely cultivated the way of sharing memory and symbolizing the institution" (Clark, 1972 p. 182).

By collecting stories of student experiences with symbols and deconstructing symbolic interactionism through thematic analysis, a greater understanding of how undergraduate students contribute to the organizational saga can be gained.

Figure 2. (Conceptual Framework)
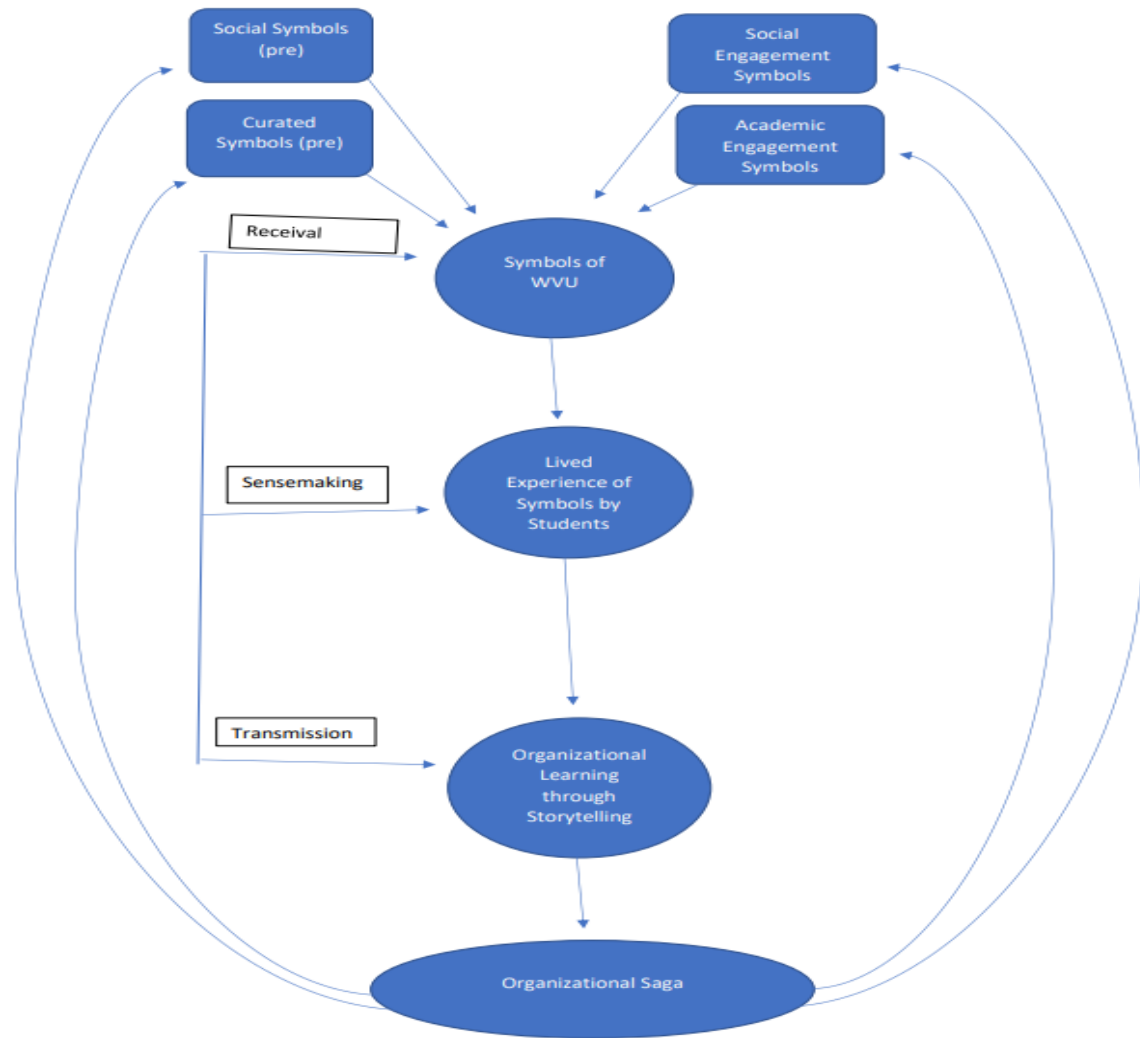
Significance

Studies of the organizational saga and organizational learning in the higher education

environment have previously focused on administrators' behaviors or institutional policy rather

than the undergraduate interpretation of campus experiences (Swisher, 2019: Fay & Savattaro, 2016).

This study links the concepts found in organizational learning and storytelling in the corporate setting (Boje, 1999) with Clark's (1972) Organizational Saga in the higher education setting. This study explains how organizational saga is filtered through student engagement with symbols, and in doing so, it moves beyond organizational saga's focus from the administration's perspective, i.e. Swisher (2019), addressing a gap in the existing literature on this subject.

Understanding student experience as a saga conduit can help institutions create a bulwark against the dilution of institutional culture because of isomorphic behaviors because saga experiences by students are unique and intimate (Clark, 1972). This specificity of a connection between institution and student makes the experiences distinct.

When experiences are shared as stories, they contribute to the institution's culture and identity. As Sole (2002) describes, this organizational storytelling assists with transmitting institutional norms, developing trust and commitment, sharing tacit knowledge, facilitating unlearning, and generating emotional connection, moving toward continuous saga fulfillment and a distinct identity.

Collegiate identities are in a period of profound change due to both technological and social forces. Distinguishing an institutional saga has become more complex as universities and colleges compete for students by engaging in similar practices and promoting similar narratives (Zha, 2009). Furthermore, a tendency to commoditize education by focusing on employment outcomes suggests a narrow definition of what should be considered valuable about a college experience. These realities of higher education in the first half of the 21st century necessitate

focus and vigilance in preserving institutional identity as a valuable component of institutional life.

Limitations

This study is rooted in the experiences of traditional students at West Virginia University. Through its focus on symbolic interactionism, much of the data collected will reflect student interpretations of their experiences in the social sphere. Saga as described by Clark (1972) more broadly considers aspects of administrative approach to guiding campus culture and to uniqueness of curricular offerings and pedagogical methods.

The symbols under study are not intentionally related to these pedagogical methods or curricular offerings. Therefore, the study is limited to the ways students contribute to stories through experience and shared narratives.

Definitions

Organizational Saga: A collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on the historical exploits of a formal organization, offering strong normative bonds within and outside the organization. (Clark, 1972)

Symbolic Interactionism: A sociological perspective developed by Herbert Blumer to describe how human beings create meaning from interactions with symbols. Blumer suggests three tenets to symbolic interactionism. 1) Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; (2) the meanings of things derive from social interaction; and (3) these meanings are dependent on, and modified by, an interpretive process of the people who interact with one another. (Blumer, 1969)

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Normative Isomorphism: Pressures to become more similar, brought about by professional

atmospheres. These pressures include licensing and credentialization, and inter-organizational

networks wherein norms develop. The similarities caused by these processes allow firms to

interact with each other more easily and to build legitimacy among organizations (Dimaggio &

Powell, 1983).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review provides context for the significant conceptual themes applied throughout the study. These concepts include, organizational saga, sensemaking, symbolic interactionism and organizational culture.

The literature review describes case studies, and prior applications of these concepts, as the research for this project is situated in a single institutional case at West Virginia University. The chapter begins with a brief overview of this single institution's history and unique cultural characteristics as described by Lewis (2013), Doherty and Summers (1982), and Swisher (2019).

This chapter explains the literature on organizational saga and Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking are introduced to examine how individuals create personal narratives around organizational life and how participants create distinctions about the institution with which they are engaged. Blumer (1969) considers symbolic interactionism as a way of understanding students' methods for organizing the information in their surroundings.

Smart and St. John's (1996) work considers different types of culture that organizations might trend toward based on the relationships of organizational members. And DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe the phenomenon of normative isomorphism, the process by which broader behaviors and trends mute organizational distinctions.

As the purpose of this study is, in part, to examine saga as a tool to differentiate institutions, the work of Fay and Savattaro (2016) is reviewed. Fay and Savattaro suggest how to amplify components of the Saga and narrative in ways that reestablish organizational distinction.

The literature discussed in this review provides the conceptual foundation for a study of West Virginia University as an organization and the knowledge base on which a study of student

experiences with sensemaking around symbols can contribute to understanding the organizational saga.

West Virginia University and West Virginia

Understanding how resident and non-resident students interpret the symbols of West Virginia University requires understanding how WVU amplifies or changes the saga of the state of West Virginia. West Virginia University has been the subject of at least two comprehensive history texts, *Aspiring to Greatness* (Lewis, 2013) and *Symbol of Unity in a Sectionalized State*. (Doherty, Summers, 1982). Additionally, Swisher's work (2019) provides an account of university presidents' and the administration's response to the challenges of institutional governance in the face of rapid change. These texts provide an overview of the existing and historical tensions between WVU and the political actors of the state.

West Virginia University was formed under the Morrill Land-grant Colleges Act of 1862 (Lewis, 2013). Originally named the Agricultural College of West Virginia, and later changed to West Virginia University at the behest of its first president Alexander Martin (Doherty, Summers, 1982), WVU grew around the developing land-grant mission to embrace the "tripartite missions of research, teaching, and service" (Sorber, 2018, p.182) and to:

> …support economic modernization, facilitate social mobility, and aid the rise of the nation-state, while concurrently supporting local community development and sustainability initiatives aimed at addressing the negative effects of bureaucratization, rural outmigration and industrialization. (Sorber, 2018, p. 182)

Morgantown was an unlikely choice for the location of the land-grant, as the directives given by congress around where to establish land-grant suggested that institutions be situated in

more developed, industrialized areas. The emerging prospects that came with West Virginia's

new statehood complicated matters as those more established areas, i.e., Moundsville, had

withdrawn themselves from consideration to become WVU's home, choosing instead to receive

consideration for other state-funded ventures (Doherty & Summers, 1982).

The land scrip provided by the federal government to create WVU was allocated from

territories further to the west. Iowa and Minnesota provided the most of the acreage to be sold. A

total of $79,000 in the capital was raised to begin a state university in a new state with shaky

financial standing (Doherty & Summers, 1982).

Higher education as an economic driver for a community at that time was an emerging

concept. Moundsville, located in the state's northern panhandle, withdrew from consideration to

be the home of West Virginia University, preferring to host the new federal prison. According to

Lewis, one unnamed politician quipped, "the enrollment is steadier" (Lewis, 2013).

Morgantown's location provided some advantages, including proximity to transportation,

rail, and river; a major industrial city, Pittsburgh, just 70 miles to the north, provided access to

potential faculty and other resources of a developed urban community. Further, as the university

was given the Monongalia Academy and the Woodburn Female Seminary building, some

physical components of a university were already in place (Doherty & Summers, 1982).

West Virginia benefited economically from the second industrial revolution and a

national reliance on coal. The mining program flourished. With the end of the Second World

War, however, industrialization and automation began to dwindle the coal industry's employment

prospects. During this time, WVU continued to seize new opportunities, which propelled the

institution forward, beginning a shift in the state's economic balance away from the capitol in

Charleston and toward Morgantown. As a result, WVU was seen in the following decades as a

vital educational resource and a significant economic resource (Lewis, 2013).

The desire to share the wealth of WVU led to a push for the decentralization of some

resources. Calls for the fracturing of the university to distribute the economic impact throughout

the state and move the medical school and the law school closer to the capitol in Charleston

intensified (Lewis, 2013).

As Lewis (2013) explains, a central tension between WVU and the state of West Virginia

emerged: Whether the primary function of West Virginia's land-grant is to serve the state

financially or students educationally. While efforts are directed toward harmonizing these two

agendas, there are instances in which they appear as more binary choices. At the heart of this

issue is the transient nature of a college's product, the student. Students can be educated at great

expense only to leave the state following graduation; indeed, many do (O'Leary, 2016). Much of

the focus within studies of WVU and Swisher's (2019) study of WVU's changing mission has

concerned the administration's dealing with the tension of simultaneously serving these students

and the state, and moreover the access and opportunities offered to the academic community and

those offered to West Virginia's citizens. This tension is common to land-grant, as described in

the quote below:

> The underlying tension—from the welding of the scientific and the utilitarian and
> of liberal learning and practical study—persisted, as land-grant institutions tried
> to reconcile research university ideals with Morrill Act commitments to access,
> utility, access, and agricultural uplift. (Sorber, Geiger, 2014 p 386)

The texts (Doherty & Summers 1982: Lewis, 2013; Swisher, 2019) address the unique

positionalities of West Virginia University and the state of West Virginia. West Virginia is one

of the poorest states in the nation, ranking at 48th among state economies (U.S. News, 2019). The state's population has decreased in the past 10 years (Kabler, 2021). West Virginia has an unusually high number of state-supported higher education institutions per capita, "eleven public four-year colleges and universities, only two fewer than neighboring Ohio, a state with six times the population." (Vedder, 2018, p. 2). All are supported with one of the lowest state funding allocations by percentage (Swisher, 2019) and graduation rates from West Virginia based institutions as of 2023 are the lowest in the country at 21.3% (World Population Review, 2023)

The challenges faced by the state create a tension as WVU attempts to balance reaching out to help the state and reaching up toward institutional aspirations. The tension of prioritizing service to the state and service to its constituencies of students, faculty, and alums is more pronounced at WVU than at other land-grant because of the state's economic struggles.

WVU has handled this tension not by distancing itself from the mission of service to the state but rather by distancing the university governance from the state's governance (Swisher, 2019). The move to a state-affiliated institution provided greater latitude in decision-making while decreasing the reliance on funding from the state. Marketplace positioning and a unique non-resident focus on enrollment practices generate more out-of-state tuition revenue than typically seen at a land-grant. The WVU research corporation, WVU Hospitals and nationally televised athletics programs generate additional revenue and notoriety. Trends toward marketization, of the expansion of expenditures as well as revenue generation within land-grant began following World War II.

> Universities embraced the mission of contributing to the economy, especially by forging links with private industry. They substantially revised the pricing and marketing of their principal product, undergraduate education. And they modified their labor inputs,

especially the utilization of faculty. By the 1990's, these practices became the new

realities for higher education. (Geiger, 2004, p. 3)

Meanwhile, the funds generated through these ancillary activities, which are more

independent of the state, also help to fund programs that are directly in service to the state. Rural

medicine programs and a flourishing 4-H program all support the mission of service to the state

more than service to the student (Lewis, 2013).

The West Virginia University of the present day is amongst the largest employers in the

state due to its academic and medical campuses operated as WVU Medicine (Workforce, 2020)

The Morgantown campus includes the original Downtown campus, the Evansdale campus

expansion of the 1960s, the medical campus, and the College of Law. The Personal Rapid

Transit, or PRT, connects these sections of the Morgantown branch. The PRT is a one-of-a-kind

electronic cart system operated on a track that brings students to and from different areas of

campus (Lewis, 2013). West Virginia University enrollment now has more than 29,000 students

enrolled in the system (WVU.edu, 2021).

With the ascension to a Research 1 institution in 2015 (Swisher, 2019), record

enrollments, and expanding academic programs to offer more than 200 majors, WVU is well

positioned to continue its growth and success in the years to come. WVU's unique placement,

physically in a multi-campus operation and emotionally as a symbol of the state, influence how

WVU is structured and chooses to behave as an organization.

However, challenges exist. The Covid 19 pandemic exacerbated new financial pressures

resulting in shifts to enrollment trends and new cost pressures on the institution. A statement on

the WVU Provost's Office webpage reads:

Higher education is at a crossroads, which was apparent even before the COVID-19

pandemic upended our traditional ways of providing instruction. With a declining high

school population, limited instructional support and growing skepticism in the public

about the value of a college degree, higher education is facing an existential crisis. In

such an environment, universities like ours must restate our relevance to current and

future students and their families, stake our claim as a leader in innovative and purposeful

research, and be ready and willing to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.

(https://provost.wvu.edu/academic-transformation, p. 1)

The result of academic transformation has included the consolidation of two colleges, the

College of Physical and Activity and Sport Sciences and College of Education and Human

Services to become the College of Applied Human Sciences, as well as numerous programmatic

cancellations and consolidations (Slade, 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, WVU faced enrollment challenges created by the so-called

"enrollment cliff":

The implications of a declining U.S. birthrate are widespread, not the least of which is

how the nation's colleges and universities will be impacted by a rapid drop in college-

aged individuals in the general population. This looming enrollment cliff is being talked

about among presidents' cabinets and boards of trustees across the nation, as higher ed

leaders look to get in front of this challenge. (Kline, 2019, p.1)

These changes play into the context of how students interact with WVU. It represents a

potential shift to what campus life might look like in the future with regard to program offerings

and the types of students the university may attract. Through this, it provides the foundation for

which many students are approaching the symbols. The unique relationship between West

Virginia University and West Virginia impacts how residents and non-residents interpret WVU's symbols of social life. This relationship has the potential to change how curated symbols saturate the lives of residents who have grown up with a Mountaineer and Flying WV around them.

Organizational Studies

The field of Organizational Studies concerns the formation of structures and practices which guide human interaction and can influence human behavior (Clegg & Bailey, 2008). Organizational theory is rooted in Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy (Wolin, 1981) which suggests a critical lens for observing how organizations function. The bureaucratic design proposes a hierarchy based on objective skills, which Weber explained, would limit the occurrence of nepotism and favoritism in personnel selection and thus improve the atmosphere as well as the efficiency of the workplace. In doing so, Weber opened the door to considering the organization as a unique entity that could undergo behavior modifications (Weber, 1947).

Serpa, et al. (2019) describe how the scope of studies around organizations has expanded beyond capitalist organizations in bureaucratic forms to studying higher education as a specific type of organization. Clark (2004) took this further with his conceptualization of the Entrepreneurial University. He observes the characteristics that make an institution distinct and the structural requirements that institutions must embody to grow and change to be both reactive to changing environments and proactive toward future goals. In this way, Clark considers the agency of an institution to purposefully alter the experiences of organizational members.

Beyond the study of organizational structure, organizational design and culture offer different perspectives on how organizations impact their members (Allen, 2020). How the organization responds to structure and utilizes personnel and strategy to operate similarly or distinctly from peer organizations can be gleaned within the organizational design.

Organizational culture encompasses how organizational members interpret and experience this design and the behaviors associated with their response (Allen, 2020).

Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) note that the focus of higher education organizational research has often been on the transposition of organizational studies from the corporate setting to higher education. Because of this transposition, the focus has remained on the interplay of structural and design-oriented constituency groups such as political and financial stakeholders, executives, and employees/faculty. Within this practice, the relationship between college administrators and external constituencies, receives more focus than the relationship between the students and their institution (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013).

Clark (1972) suggests a broader, bottom-up approach to organizational studies wherein an individual's relationship with a college or university is sentimentalized to have a unique effect on participant behavior. Clark states, "pride in the organizational group and pride in one's identity taken from the group are personal returns uncommon in the modern social involvement" (p. 183). The complexity and uniqueness of the relationship between student and institution makes the transposition of organizational study from the corporate to the educational setting challenging.

Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) argue that even with a shift in focus to higher education, much of the organizational research has relied on more corporate metrics and quantifying outcomes in higher education. Existing studies have commonly addressed organizational aspects specific to corporate needs rather than assessing the effects of the student experience on organizational life. "By focusing the research agenda on policy studies, articles on the transformations of higher education have disregarded somewhat the point of view of

practitioners, or, in other words, the needs of those that, within universities and colleges, must cope with the reforms being implemented" (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013, p. 488).

This prior focus on administrators suggests that more attention could be paid to students when considering how their responses to policies and administrative agendas affect higher education institutions' operations. Understanding the student's response to their environment can direct organizational culture, structure, and design.

For this study, organizational culture will refer to the observed values, beliefs, and traditions within a distinct population (National Academic Press, 2021). Examining organizational culture from a student lens focuses on the communicative perspective to understand the culture (Eisenberg & Riley, 2011). A communicative perspective observes how narratives, metaphors, symbols, and identities are used to teach and structure cultural behaviors. From this foundation of organizational theory, this communicative perspective:

> Acknowledges the symbolic character of ordinary language and how cultural meanings are co-constructed in everyday conversation, textual evidence of patterns, and the entire nonverbal, semiotic field, from the structure of parking lots to the structure of work processes. Further, these fields are not simply observed but can also be cast physically, sensually. (Eisenberg & Riley, 2011, p. 5)

Organizational culture, as described here, is not a proposed ideal but a tangible amalgamation of what is happening and has happened on campus. Hence, culture is an experience as opposed to a concept. In exploring these experiences, the resulting beliefs and sentiments the students transmit can be better understood (Eisenberg & Riley, 2011).

Student relationships to the university may differ based on college or program, as each subset may have different sub-cultures. Understanding the types of cultures students may experience helps them understand their response to symbols. Smart and St. John (1996) investigated whether the type of higher education institution, viewed culturally through clan culture, bureaucratic culture, adhocracy culture, and market culture, would perform better on nine performance metrics.

Clan culture (Smart & St. John, 1996) is built around the mentor, mentee relationship and is the least formal in hierarchy and authority. It is more self-governing and dependent on intrinsic motivation to learn and to teach rather than external pressures to produce graduates and secure employment outcomes. The familiarity between members of clan cultures allow for deeper bonding and a greater emotional connection to the institution. The preference for this clan culture model is prevalent amongst the administration and faculty.

In their findings, Smart and St. John (1996) found that Clan cultures presented the most positive ratings from students, faculty, and administrators. These perceptions concerned their sense of organizational health, student personal development, and faculty and administrator employment satisfaction, three of the nine indicators of effectiveness (Smart & St. John, 1996).

Adhocracy cultures are also rated well with strong culture indicators, followed by market and bureaucratic cultures. Just as clan organizations rated a more positive perception of personal development, market cultures felt more prepared for career development opportunities. Therefore, developing organizational culture as a practice of institutions is less a matter of success or failure and more directional. It requires the leadership of an institution to choose which of the opportunities presented through each cultural lens presents the most benefits to their students (Smart & St. John, 1996).

Mythology and Symbols

Symbols are sometimes visual but can be embodied in actions or communicated verbally (Dandridge, et al., 1980). Within verbal symbols, Malinowski (1971) writes that myths, the stories carried in symbols, provide individuals with the motive for participating in the ritual while simultaneously instructing the performance of the ritual. Myths, whether positive or negative, concerning the organization's culture, can embolden but also skew the meanings of the symbols they contain.

Dandridge et. al (1980) examine how organizational symbols affect organizational culture and life. This study argues that while traditional management systems have often focused on traditional awards structures to guide behaviors, the presence of symbols is as strong component regarding how membership in the organization is communicated and understood. Dandridge et. al (1980) organized these symbols into descriptive, energy-controlling, and system maintenance categories.

The descriptive category represents the intentional symbols, those an organization puts forth to project its distinct characteristics. Energy-controlling symbols are used internally to inspire or deter behaviors within the culture. System maintenance symbols are more directly instructional and used to justify decisions and provide steps to change or maintain the organization's status. These categories are not considered exclusive, so that a symbol can be descriptive, energy controlling, and assist with maintenance simultaneously.

Learning Organizations

The study of learning organizations concerns how knowledge is transferred and used to modify organizational behaviors (Smith et al., 1999). As the study around organizational learning has received increased attention in the last two decades, two distinct ways of

considering learning organizations have emerged: Organizational learning as a technical process and organizational learning as a social process. The technical process suggests that a template can be developed and followed to engage members in organizational learning. This theory is more in line with traditional knowledge management practices through which clear delineations can be made around which individuals needs specific information and how and when they should receive it (Smith et al., 1999).

From this technical viewpoint, Argyris (1977) examined single and double-loop learning processes by which information is spread and feedback quickly gathered with the intent of implementing changes based on this feedback. This systematic organizational learning has become a quantifiable process attractive to a business setting. Managers seeking change can more easily demonstrate the process and the resulting feedback and institutional changes as proof of commitment to change and growth within their organization (Smith et al., 1999).

Social learning is rooted in sensemaking and suggests that how individuals learn is not entirely formal and quantifiable but still holds immense organizational value. "A central idea from this perspective is that much crucial organizational knowledge exists not on paper nor in the heads of individuals, but within the 'community' as a whole" (Smith et al., 1999, p. 12). When socially constructed, learning is not seen as a siloed, independent process but how the community of students as a unit contributes to sensemaking in each member. Socially constructed learning is accomplished by observing how other group members have made sense of an experience. Social construction looks at the sum of individual experiences to create a societal experience.

While the workplace culture may be more ambiguous concerning the social connection of the workers, i.e., the ways their sense of identity is tied to work. This distinction is necessary

within a group of traditional undergraduate students. The traditional undergraduate experience at a land-grant university like WVU is intensely social and ritualistic, the school's alumni webpage lists 22 separate traditions in which WVU current students and alums take part, including the First Down Cheer, Fall Fest, and Mountaineer Week (alumni.wvu.edu). Students are exposed to songs and chants in an emotionally charged atmosphere through campus athletic activities. The residential learning atmosphere creates a fully immersive experience that profoundly connects their social and student identities.

To facilitate this connection of student activity to student identity, the student must make sense of their experience. The sensemaking process shows how information enters the community and is processed by the group into something personally meaningful. However, it is challenging to measure the effects of organizational learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Fiol and Lyles' (1985), view the collective behaviors of organization members as organizational behavior. The information that then alters this organizational behavior is the organizational learning process. Studying organizational behavior in this way requires a two-tiered approach. Tier one, focused on lower-level organizational learning, sees patterns and behaviors adjusted on the micro level in reaction to stimulus. In higher-level learning, tier two, patterns emerge that present an overall approach as a new organizational behavior. In this way, lower-level individual and higher-level organizational learning are separated by time, repetition, and level of participation (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Fiol and Lyles (1985) note that there are several unknowns concerning organizational learning, such as the formality of these behaviors and whether they are entirely organic or can be controlled through administrative practices. Whether the complexity of the setting plays a role in

the level of learning that can take place also needs to be clarified, as are the activities most

associated with lower or higher-level organizational learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Reid (2021) suggests a spectrum across which organizational learning can occur

from the intelligent to the unintelligent organization based on their capacity to learn.

Unintelligent organizations are those that fail to build the capacity to learn. Along this

spectrum we find evidence of organizational intelligence – organizations who actively

and holistically learn. At the other end of the spectrum, we find organizational

unintelligence – organizations that fail to learn and adapt at any level. Most organizations

fall somewhere along the spectrum. (Reid, 2021, p. 89)

This revised approach to organizational learning concerns environmental factors which

support or deter learning. Through this outlook, organizational learning becomes less dependent

on introducing modes of transmission and more dependent on supporting behaviors that

encourage growth and learning.

Reid (2021) provides five facets organizational learning that will allow organizations to

build learning capacity strategically. Facet 1) Developing a set of learning goals, styles, and

roles. Facet 2) Developing learning values, beliefs, and constructs. Facet 3) Promoting active

learning for all types of knowledge capital. Facet 4) Strengthening the organization's formal

learning capacities and Facet 5) Developing rich learning sources and partnerships. Reid (2021)

goes on to define each of the facets as follows:

Facet 1 presents actionable and measurable objectives for the organization to consider.

It considers the opportunities for experiences by organizational members and how the

organization might design roles to guide those experiences.

Facet 2 involves the recognition of the existing learning culture and how members are currently receiving and processing information within the organization. It acknowledges the group's aspirations and finds ways to guide experiences aligning with these values.

Facet 3 clarifies and formalizes learning experiences so that the membership shares deeper experiences with the organization's values and goals more broadly and deliberately.

Facet 4 ties the learning organization objectives related to culture and values into the recognized expectations of membership.

Facet 5 deals with the importance of identifying and cultivating new sources of information to facilitate learning. It moves beyond the formal trainings and workshops to produce newer, more individualized ways of cultivating experiential learning.

In the study of organizational learning in the higher education environment, attention must be paid to the processes by which the student group teaches itself to make sense of the information presented. Understanding this sensemaking process and the structural and design elements that become most prevalent helps explain how organizational learning occurs within the undergraduate student population at WVU.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism presents a methodological framework in this study for observing the behaviors of group members based on three fundamental premises: 1) human beings act toward things based on the meanings that the things have for them; 2) the meaning of such things is derived from or arises from, the social interaction one has with one's fellows; 3) these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in

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dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969. Blumer's subjectivist view suggests that

objects can be experienced differently based on the psychological interaction with the individual.

Snow (2001) expands on Blumer's work with the concept of interactive determinism:

> The principle of interactive determination stipulates that understanding focal
>
> objects of analysis—be they self-concepts, identities, roles, organizational practices,
>
> or even social movements—cannot be fully achieved by attending only to qualities
>
> presumed to be intrinsic to them. Instead, this principle requires consideration of
>
> the interactional contexts or webs of relationships in which they are ensnared and
>
> embedded. For all practical purposes, then, neither individual nor society nor self
>
> or other is ontologically prior but exists only in relation to each other; thus, one
>
> can fully understand them only through their interaction, whether actual, virtual, or
>
> imagined. (Snow, 2001, p. 369)

The web of interaction suggested by Snow (2001) positions symbolic interactionism as a

lens for studying saga in higher education. A college campus is where symbols are interwoven

into the student experience. The experiences around these symbols can change during a student's

education. The extent to which institutions control this interaction is through presenting what

Snow describes as "framing". Framing presents an element of control in how students interpret

symbols and directs them to attribute meaning more efficiently and positively. A framework

creates a process for meaning-making routine rather than revolutionary for the student.

Snow (2001) notes that human agency accounts for individuals acting on and interpreting

symbols independently of their peer group. Cumulatively, these individual interpretations shift

the overall framework. Because of this result, asking students to present a more detailed narrative

of their meaning-making experience throughout the focus group setting exercises and individual interviews creates a clearer picture of the directions the institutional narrative may take.

Sensemaking

In his book *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick (1995) suggests that people within organizations consider their experiences retroactively, rationalizing them based on their innate understanding as well as other past experiences. Through this process, individuals construct their account of the world. If, according to Weick, individuals cannot have experiences independent of their narrative, experiences must be molded to fit the existing narratives of the individual.

Sensemaking emphasizes plausibility over reality. It does not objectively describe what is happening but how individuals structure the information received. By engaging in this process, they can understand what has happened to them and may feel more confident in predicting the future and adjusting their behaviors accordingly (Weick, 1995).

Weick lists seven properties of sensemaking, asserting that the process is: Grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995).

Grounded in identity construction refers to how individuals interact with their surroundings to maintain or alter their concept of themselves. A student may engage in identity construction by adorning the walls of a generic dorm room with posters specific to their sense of who they are.

Retrospective sensemaking refers to how individuals make sense of events after they have already happened. They work from the memory of an event and apply their own values to determine the most impactful points of that experience to create meaning. A student might

therefore conform to peer pressure from a friend to get a tattoo, only to later view the experience as an act of individualistic rebellion later.

Enactive of sensible environments refers to how individuals engage in creating the environment in which experiences take place and then engage in categorizing experiences in their mind. A student who wishes to be part of a socially progressive institution, may act within the school to help it become more progressive and aligned with their personal values.

The social aspect of sensemaking refers to the ways others can shape the way the individual may process experience. If is possible for a student who doesn't follow sports to feel elated after a big win because their friends who do follow the team, are happy.

Extracted cues refer to the verbal, visual, auditory, and other signals that tell an individual how to react to an experience. The tone in a friend's voice can convey disappointment or approval over a decision and alter one's feelings about the experience.

Plausibility over accuracy is the efficient response of individuals to seek out the simplest and most obvious outcome, rather than seek more information for the most accurate outcome. For a college student, the roommate who makes a mess of the room and comes and goes at odd hours might be considered simply a bad roommate, rather than considering the complexities which contribute to this behavior.

Mills (2010) addresses the inherent challenge of researchers engaging in sensemaking when studying the sensemaking process. The challenge of engaging in sensemaking while studying it, is that the data collected might more accurately reflect how the researcher interprets the study based on their experience rather than how the participants engage in the sensemaking process.

To improve the validity of the data, Mills (2010) suggests a triangulation of the methodologies in a critical sensemaking approach. This triangulation includes interpretivism, poststructuralism, and critical theory.

Interpretivism offers belief that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed. Poststructuralism, meanwhile, suggests that the structures which inform belief and experience must also be studied to understand the experience, and critical sensemaking which explores the relationship between human beings and the structural, contextual, and interpersonal aspects of experience (Mills & Mills, 2010).

Together they provide a heuristic device to guard against data corruption. Within this study, there will be a focus on the critical sensemaking approach. "Critical sensemaking argues that the analysis of sensemaking needs to be explored through, and in relationship to, the contextual factors of structure and discourse in which individual sensemaking occurs" (Mills & Mills, 2010, p. 190). This lens is not dealt with sufficiently by Weick, how power dynamics influence an individual's response to stimuli.

The traditional college environment presents opportunities, structured and unstructured, which contribute to creating the collegiate experience. As students begin to make sense of the world around them and engage in identity construction, they face a barrage of experiences, from highly structured academic pursuits to chaotic social environments. This tension between formal and informal experiences is essential to traditional student learning.

Weick's (1995) case studies often began with an organizational shock, a significant, measurable change that disrupts the existing culture and ways of doing things. This organizational shock could include the introduction of new technologies, a reduction in force due to broader economic changes, or hiring a new CEO with different ideas around culture. In

addition to changes in leadership, colleges must also adapt to new students bringing with them new experiences every year, presenting a different type of organizational shock.

Gonzales (2013) offers that sensemaking in higher education concerns how faculty interpretations of the meaning in an administration's decisions can be contrary to the intended message. This contrast can be seen in how financially driven decision-making at the administrative level resonate with the cultures they impact. For example, eliminating academic programs due to cost considerations often has a specific narrative interpretation for the individuals experiencing these changes. It may create the perception that the administration does not value the faculty or students within that program. In the case of Gonzales' (2013) institution, the move toward becoming a more research-focused institution was experienced by some as a way of diminishing the accomplishment of teaching undergraduates.

The organizational change consists of both the intentional objectives and the unintentional reaction of the individuals to those objectives. Kezar (2012) studied 28 higher education institutions undergoing transformational change. Transformational change, as referenced in this work, "alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions of institutional behaviors, processes, and products; is deep and pervasive and affects the whole institution; is intentional; and occurs over time" (Kezar & Eckel, 2002, pp. 295–296).

Kezar (2013) observed that while sensemaking is an individual process, engaging all participants, the process can be guided by leadership, "leaders can put structures and processes in place that help people to create a shared sense of organization" (p. 763). Understanding the lasting effects of sensemaking, a theoretical framework that connects with the ideas of organizational saga is central to Kezar's work. The process of externalizing meaning is what Kezar calls sensegiving. Sensegiving aims "to influence the sensemaking and meaning

construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia &

Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442)

The organizations involved in Kezar's (2013) study shared an institutional goal of

transformational change to become more interdisciplinary. "Three key elements of

sensemaking/sense giving appeared to move institutions toward transformation, depth of the

process, breadth of engagement across departments campus-wide and connection to strategies

and barriers" (Kezar, 2013, p. 768):

> Deepness of the process refers to sensemaking and sensegiving becoming more
>
> embedded within individuals' consciousness and more concrete over time as change
>
> processes move to later stages of implementation. Early efforts at sensemaking and
>
> sensegiving focus on more superficial understanding and persuasion (what is inter-
>
> disciplinarity anyway?), and later to very concrete and deep understandings and forms of
>
> persuasion (what do interdisciplinary learning goals look like and how can we
>
> assess them?). Breadth refers to campuses working the change through the various levels
>
> of the institution, from departments through divisions to the overall campus having
>
> people at each level rethinking their work and persuading individuals at these various
>
> levels. Lastly, connections to strategies and barriers means that change agents saw and
>
> made a connection between sensemaking/sensegiving and specific barriers they are
>
> trying to overcome and strategies they are trying to use. Within these cases, the
>
> greater intentionality in linking sensemaking and sensegiving to barriers/facilitators,
>
> the more likely the campus would move toward transformational change. (Kezar, 2013
>
> p 267-268)

To ensure that these three elements of transformation were activated within the study group, the project provided settings and instructions for participants to engage in a transformative process. This mobilization effort within the study involved breakouts into campus teams which allowed faculty leaders to confirm their understanding of the intent of the changes being suggested. As the transformative change in this group hinged on the movement toward more interdisciplinary learning, establishing the definition of interdisciplinary work and how the work had been approached on campus was needed. Becoming more intentional in providing an interdisciplinary experience was the proposed transformation, but for the buy-in from faculty leadership to take place, sensemaking and determining the benefit to students and the faculty community had to occur (Kezar, 2013).

Pilot courses that offered an interdisciplinary take within departments and visions of the universities were found to be helpful, as was consistent communication on the importance of interdisciplinary work. This way, the sensemaking focus was less organic and more designed. There is a transient nature to personnel in higher education. Faculty may take new positions elsewhere, and graduate student work is designed for the short term. A structured sense-giving approach, reminding constituents of this initiative's outcomes and placing the initiative's value not within their own lives but on the value in the student experience, was a valuable method for attracting buy-in (Kezar, 2013).

Notably, not all twenty-eight institutions involved in this study successfully moved through the three stages of transformational change. The "mobilization" phase proved the most difficult as the initiative moved from a personal understanding of the reasons for the change to a reliance on the internal motivation to carry out the process through the succeeding stages (Kezar, 2013).

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    Sensemaking opens the door to how experiences influence individuals' perceptions of themselves and the relationships to which they belong. Gioa and Thomas (1996) examined the concepts of image and identity in higher education, suggesting that,

    Image generally has been defined in the organizational literature as how members believe others view their organization" while identity is typically taken to be that which is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization." pp. 2-3).

These scholars went on to state,

    What endures within an institution is not a singular identity. However, the symbols and labels within the institution become vessels for identity, which can be used to shift institutional identity, depending on the meanings associated with them. (Gioa & Thomas, 1996, p. 64)

    Organizational identity concerns not just the collective acknowledgment of attributes in an organization but how those attributes make the organization distinctive in the long term (Gioa & Thomas, 1996). This view of identity creates the basis for the sentimentality one might feel for an institution, that some aspects of place and experience do not change over time. To remain the same in appearance or perceived attitude can require remarkable change. For example, an institution where a progressive curriculum is a component of identity must change continuously to meet what is considered a progressive curriculum.

    Though separate, identity and image are inextricably linked, image affects identity, and identity affects the image. Often the initiating factor for organizational change is based on this relationship. A projected image is likely to be aspirational or idealized, so if the way "we see ourselves corresponds with how others see us – then identity is affirmed and no apparent need for change exists" (Gioa & Thomas, 1996, p. 68). A change can be made to the projected image

or to the components of identity used to support the image. For example, a change is required if an institution craves the image of academic excellence but performs low in academic rankings.

Gioa and Thomas (1996) note that one practical and relatively simple way institutions might compose their identity to fit a desired image is through revisionist history practices, using components of the institution's past to skew it toward a new identity. This process of destabilizing identity to allow for modification and improvement does not negate the concept of saga and enduring identity but instead speaks to the strength of core concepts in identity and the necessity of adherence to these core concepts while engaging in change. "The strategic concern of the management is no longer the preservation of a fixed identity but the ability to manage and balance a flexible identity in light of shifting external images. Maintenance of consistency becomes the maintenance of dynamic consistency. Instability fosters adaptability" (Gioa, Thomas, 1996, p. 79).

Organizational Saga

Clark (1972) displays the idea of a saga in organizations as interwoven with concepts from organizational theory and sensemaking.

> An organizational saga is a collective understanding of unique accomplishments in a formally established group. The group's definition of accomplishment, intrinsically historical but embellished through retelling and rewriting, links stages of organizational development. The participants have added affect, an emotional loading, which places their conception between the coolness of rational purpose and the warmth of sentiment found in religion and magic. (Clark, 1972, p. 178)

Clark's work establishes the Saga as a sensemaking process in which the collective narratives around an organization exist as a stand-in for the institution's identity. As suggested by Clark, this identity is not entirely directed through structures but is highly dependent on the experiences of individuals engaged with the institution. From a sensemaking perspective, Clark returns to the concept of rationalization. While efforts have been made to externally rationalize the college experience through quantifiable metrics in publications such as U.S. News (https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges), using salary differentials of those with a college degree to those without from any institution cannot account for the intensity of emotion and sentiment surrounding the college experience.

As Clark (1972) explores, for many, attending college is a personalized experience. The sentiment is, therefore, part of the rationalization process for students. If a student feels a certain way about a place, there must be elements of the place to which this feeling is attached. Saga in higher education is built over time through two stages, initiation, and fulfillment. According to Clark (1972), within saga initiation, a lack of structure is preferred, allowing individuality to shine through and present new ways of doing things that participants can sentimentalize.

Sentimentality and time are perhaps why land-grant universities like WVU are seen to have such strong sagas. While the parameters through which these institutions were conceived were strict for the time, sharing a collective mission and funding source, they came of age when regionality could significantly impact institutional culture. West Virginia University was conceived as a new college in a new state in a region poised for growth during the second industrial revolution. The university was greatly influenced by the culture of the surrounding community to offer specific programs.

Saga fulfillment and continuation depend on personnel, programs, student subcultures, and imagery. How much the faculty care about the institution's traditions and whether the programs are consistent with those traditions is vital to this concept. How students take these traditions and attach their own informal cultures to this identity and the extent to which their sentiment and culture are visible will also assist in directing saga.

Lewis (2002) examines the effects of saga as a concept on the behaviors of organizations. To accomplish this, Lewis considered the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) systems. These TQM systems call upon organizations to thin-slice behaviors to enact many micro changes, which will, in turn, redirect the organization.

The central tension suggested by this study is whether saga is meant to be sustained or redirected. Whichever answer an organization chooses, there are several patterns and behaviors associated with engaging constituents toward the redirection or preservation of saga. As newer management concepts arise, they offer new and recycled ways of doing things.

Within Lewis' (2002) work, two concepts are critical components in saga: knowledge management and organizational learning. Knowledge management shares with saga the element of directing storytelling. Within knowledge management and saga, organizational values are coded in "stories, legends, myths, and parables about key people and critical events" (Lewis, 2002, p. 283). Knowledge management has evolved from knowledge sharing and the need to communicate the necessary information for proper management. In the digital age, individuals are inundated with a near-constant feed of knowledge about various things, and curating this knowledge becomes a focal point in knowledge management practices (Lewis, 2002).

Saga transmission depends on skillful knowledge management within the organization in the corporate setting and higher education. While Lewis suggests that terminology and trends in

the field may come and go, they affirm that organizational culture will continue to be at the center of management practices.

Isomorphism

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three types of isomorphic behaviors: mimetic, coercive, and normative. Normative isomorphism in higher education is the process by which institutions become more similar due to their structuring.

This tendency of institutions to become more similar as they strive to attain the same goals becomes problematic from the perspective of institutional identity. A tension between exhibiting a distinct institutional identity and adhering to the needs of the isomorphic structures is often dealt with through institutional branding (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The structuration in organizations affects not only the existing institutions' diversity but also what is being done. While isomorphism may present risks and challenges, better, more efficient processes are also shared within the peer group as they work to meet the needs of the similar pressures they are facing (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The structuration also creates a new barrier to entry so that new organizations entering the group must participate in ways like the rest of the peer group.

Isomorphism affects the institution through influencing decisions toward seeking alignment with a peer group rather than meeting the needs of students. Isomorphism, in this sense, presents another cause of mission creep (Gonzales, 2013) when the field becomes too broad, and institutions begin to behave as their peers, disregarding their specific environmental context and purpose.

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This behavior may result from institutions that feel pressured, based on the activities of their peers, to offer arts programs without the requisite funds to support them in the long term. The past expansion and more recent contraction of arts programs within state universities are examples of this behavior (CAA, 2021). The College Arts Association lists several schools which have cut arts majors or programs in their entirety. The idea to offer these programs in the first place may be due to the proximity of other state institutions offering the same programs and the pressure to belong to the group. While doing so allows a school to claim diverse programming and opportunities, it may cause them to grow away from the central function of their institution.

Isomorphism has the power to change the function of a university and the administrative decision-making process. It becomes problematized when institutions begin to lose elements that provide distinction. The result is a homogenization of their institutional identity. Fay and Savattaro (2016) examined the other two forms of isomorphism, coercive and mimetic. Branding calls for an institution to say who they are through a concerted effort in ways its intended audiences can understand. The function of branding is to affirm the story of an institution with its constituency. How and when institutions engage in this behavior is significant. The publicness of institutions has been shown to influence branding directly.

Fay and Savattaro (2016) studied how public and nonprofit organizations make decisions around funding to assist in branding efforts by exploring the tensions which develop as institutions are pushed toward behaviors and decisions through the need to compete with and differentiate themselves from peer institutions. This process, when higher education institutions spend significant portions of their budget to define and promote branding initiatives is called marketization (Fay & Savattaro, 2016).

Fay and Savattaro consider these circumstances through the lens of New Public Management, a practice by which nonprofits are increasingly being managed with tactics and philosophies from the competitive and profit-driven business sector (Fay & Savattaro, 2016). These tactics become more attractive to institutions when public financial support decreases.

Public disinvestment has resulted in institutions increasingly trading off the promise of state funding to receive greater latitude and self-governance from pursuing funding opportunities through research, medicine, and other means (Mays, 2014). This repositioning presents two significant shifts: The institution may engage in more private practice for the enrichment of the institution over the state, and those new funds may be increasingly directed toward branding and marketing efforts.

Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) studied government, non-profit and for profit organizations to determine the similarities in differences in reacting to isomorphic pressures. Institutional forces—particularly coercive and, to a lesser degree, normative forces—seemed to be working to break down the differences among for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental agencies, resulting in the adoption of hybrid structural patterns of control. Exposure to these types of institutional influences homogenized organizational structures across the entire organizational population (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz).

Their findings suggested similar reactions across the sectors for organizations to bend toward isomorphic pressures. One factor they saw as of particular importance was external oversight, or the degree to which organizations are beholden to regulating boards from the outside. This is of particular importance to state colleges and state affiliated organizations like WVU.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

This chapter describes the design and rationale for the study, participants, instrumentation, researcher role and responsibility, setting, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and ethical consideration.

Design and rationale explain the usage of hermeneutics in phenomenology and its application within this study. Additionally, this section will describe the use of symbolic interactionism to understand the shifting meanings of symbols through their contact with students. Participant selection, instrumentation and the process for conducting a focus group and interview are described as well.

Design and Rationale

Phenomena are "ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living" (Valentine et al., 2014, p. 20). The phenomenological study examines the intentionality of experience and the "interconnectedness between people, things, and the world they live in" (Valentine et al., 2014, p. 20). This study of the transmission of organizational saga considers how undergraduate students create meaning from the symbols they encounter as members of the collegiate community and the stories they tell of their experiences with symbols.

The hermeneutical phenomenological framework builds from Husserl's phenomenology. In Husserl's phenomenology, a lived experience can be observed through reduction, using a systematic approach to examine the essence of experience (Husserl, 1970; Moran, 2000). A hermeneutical approach allows for the entanglement of the researcher's existing knowledge and experience in the world (Suddick et al., 2020). Using this perspective provides an understanding of the essence of the student experiences while utilizing my knowledge and experiences

surrounding West Virginia University gained from being the researcher as well as an alumnus, an employee, and a current student at the time the study took place.

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) allows a progression of understanding from how exposure to a symbol of the university can relate to an experience with the university itself, which depending on the unique lived experience of the student, changes the nature of what that symbol means to them and others.

The results are presented through a pragmatist epistemological stance wherein "the meaning of a phenomenon derives from its effects on the world rather than from any intrinsic properties it might have" (Dennis, 2011, p. 464). In this way, the findings do not negate or contradict other versions of WVU's identity. Instead, they will describe the components of the identity via the organizational saga as conveyed by its undergraduate population.

With this rationale in mind, the design allows for the co-construction of narratives between the participants and the facilitator. The construction of narratives around symbols was accomplished through a focus group during which stories were initiated. Following the focus group, interviews were conducted, and the validity and reliability of the data were confirmed. Within the focus group setting (Appendix A), students were asked to share their personally constructed meanings for symbols. All the symbols in this portion of the study were researcher selected. They were those that most embodied qualities of each type of symbol within the symbol pools, social, academic, and curated symbols related to life at West Virginia University. Refreshments were made available, and all dressed casually for the event to create a comfortable setting to engage students in storytelling about their experiences of symbols.

Following the focus group storytelling session, the initial data was collected and analyzed before the follow-up interview. Follow-up questions and concepts which might need additional

probing to affirm validity, or which had the potential to become richer data sources were

identified.

Participants

This study took place in Morgantown, WV, during the 2021-22 academic year at West

Virginia University. The sample size was seven students ranging from sophomore to senior

status who had spent at least one full year on the campus of WVU. Study participants were

current, traditional students at the Morgantown campus of West Virginia University.

Purposeful sampling was used in the selection of participants. Requests were sent out to

offices across campus, including Residence Life and the Visitor Center, to identify and refer to

highly engaged students to apply to participate. Amongst the participants were three students

whom I had worked with through the application process to the university and whom I knew to

be highly engaged with college activities. Two were resident assistants, and two were tour guides

with the WVU Visitor Center. I knew these students to be skilled at speaking to others about

their experiences at WVU because of their student work experiences. Participation was

incentivized with a twenty-dollar Visa gift card.

The applicants to participate in the study were screened to ensure the sample contained

college students who were representative of several key demographics. These demographics

were male/female, resident/non-resident, first generation / second generation, and legacy, non-

legacy status. These demographics were chosen for their relationships to symbols students may

have encountered before matriculating to WVU.

Instrumentation

The focus group included all students participating in the study. Before beginning the

storytelling around student experiences with symbols, a brief overview of the study was provided

verbally to help students understand symbolic interactionism as a process and to provide examples of the type of symbol and experience connections included in a story.

After establishing a shared vocabulary and understanding their expectations as participants, they took turns passing around photographs of prominent symbols of West Virginia University connected to each of the established symbol pools: social, curated, and academic. As students shared their stories, they held the photograph of the symbol in their hand and, when finished speaking, would pass it on to the next participant to their left.

While it was understood that the student holding the card was the primary speaker, other students were allowed to comment, ask questions as needed, and react to the stories with laughter or other verbal cues to empathize with the content. Students were encouraged to consider connections between their direct experiences with a symbol and any emotional state created by the interaction.

With the first round of open storytelling completed, the group broke into teams of two. These teams were assigned written symbols printed on paper for storytelling prompts. I again selected these symbols. Participants remained in two-person breakout groups and were then instructed to create a symbol using either text or an image on a blank paper. This portion was designed to introduce new symbols that might present some overlap in student conceptions of symbols of WVU and find those symbols that were rich experientially to each student and which may have not yet have been presented in those I selected.

Researcher Role and Positionality

Kinloch and San Pedro (2013) examine "experiences with language as listening by turning our gaze to how we position ourselves and get positioned by one another, through the stories we exchange" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013, p. 2). In researching the transmission of the

organizational saga by undergraduate students, my positionality is established by various experiences and conditions, some imposed, some self-selected.

I am a white male from a middle-class background and was born and raised in northern New Jersey. At the time this study was conducted, I was 37 years old. My research was conducted in Morgantown, West Virginia, a college town in the Appalachian region. While I have lived in West Virginia consistently for the past fourteen years, I do not have the experience of being from the place where I am conducting my research.

I served as the facilitator for the focus group, leading participants to the questions and teaching them the process of generating their symbols. In doing so, I offered my own brief responses to the PRT symbol as well as one self-selected symbol of WVU to demonstrate how one might approach talking about their experience. My story of the PRT was of my mother's description of them as looking little cars running away from something on their own and saying "run little prt, run!". My self-selected symbol was a logo for the product Bosco Sticks, that my roommate and I would treat ourselves to after a long week of classes. Both stories acknowledged to the group that I had my own experiences as an undergraduate of WVU nearly twenty years ago, and both stories underscored the idea that I was interested in their personal experiences with the symbols rather than a broader intellectual understanding of the symbol.

Two study participants were students in the College of Creative Arts at West Virginia University, where I am employed as the recruitment specialist. I have previously worked with some of these students as they matriculated at the university. I journaled in response to the data collected during the focus group. This journaling will work toward a "co-construction of the data between (myself) and the respondent" (Grbich. 2013, p 99).

Setting

The focus group session took place in a theatre performance classroom in the Canady Creative Arts Center on the campus of West Virginia University. This larger, open room provided the room to collaborate as a group while also affording privacy, as students had room to move into their two-person storytelling groups. Chairs for the focus group were arranged in a semi-circle so that all participants could see one another and communicate visually and verbally. The camcorder was placed behind me on a tripod for the group storytelling session.

In the subsequent one-on-one interviews, I used my office, room 3071 of the Canady Creative Arts Center. The space is comfortable and provides flexibility to meet with each student around their availability within 10 days of conducting the focus group. I met with students at my desk for these follow-up interviews.

Data Collection

Collecting data from a diverse, purposeful sample helped to improve my understanding of which symbols and language were more impactful in the student sensemaking process and how those symbols' meanings were altered based on student experiences.

Before attending the focus group gathering, students applied to participate using a Wufoo form which collected information on their background, including name, gender, legacy status, and state residency (Appendix C). These applications were screened to ensure diversity in exposure to symbols of WVU.

During the focus group portion, a video recording was made of students who shared their experiences with symbols in a storytelling circle. Each took turns telling and listening to one another's experiences.

Froemel: Transmission of Saga at WVU

Following the story circle, students were paired into groups of two for the teamwork

exercise (Appendix 1D) and moved to different areas of the room to minimize overlapping audio

in the recording of participants. Because there was an odd number of participants, I partnered

with one student and engaged in the storytelling activities with them. Data during this portion of

the study was collected via an audio recorder given to each team.

Follow-up interviews with the participants began the following Tuesday and continued

for nine days after the focus group. These interviews were one-on-one between myself and the

participant and took place in my office at the Canady Creative Arts Center. An audio recorder

was used for data collection in these instances as well. The interviews were semi-structured and

worked to extrapolate additional details of students' experience with symbols of WVU and to

provide clarity on stories that were told during the focus group section.

The focus group and interview protocol, as well as the participant intake form and

disclosures, are available in Appendix 1. Throughout the focus group and subsequent interviews,

I noted my thoughts, reactions, and potential biases. These reactions are included in chapters four

and five when applicable.

Data Analysis

The image below diagrams the data analysis in a hermeneutical phenomenological study.

As Peoples states, "phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand phenomenon as a whole…in

hermeneutical phenomenology, the parts inform the whole, and the whole informs the parts"

(Peoples, 2021, p. 56).

Image Retrieved from: https://nesslabs.com/hermeneutic-circle
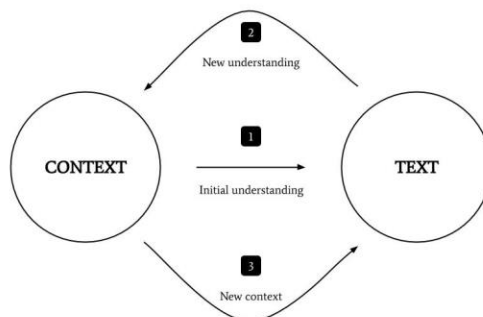
Similarly, this study seeks to understand how symbols cycle through into experience and how experience, in turn, affects the symbols. In approaching and journaling about the data, the hermeneutic cycle will examine symbols in context and how new understanding leads to new meanings.

As a phenomenological study it was necessary to engage participants while withholding judgment and bracketing my own biases and experiences. Bracketing is when "prejudices and judgements are temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself." (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p 27). As an alumnus, a student and employee of the same institution I was studying, it was necessary to remain aware of my own biases and assumptions throughout.

Journaling my own perspective allowed me to consider moments where my own experiences may have influenced my observation of the data. In most instances, these overlaps between my experience and the participant experience were noted and member checking allowed me to verify that my own interpretation did not obscure the essence of the student experience. In select situations, my own experiences created the opportunity to pursue new questions to deepen the data.

When engaging in the teamwork exercises, I partnered with Annie and told some stories of my own experiences with symbols. Annie's experiences were quite different from my own and apart from aiding in a sense of reciprocity in storytelling, they did not appear to influence her stories.

During the follow-up interviews, I allowed for my own experience and positionality to influence the story in select and documented situations, such as when I learned that Steve and I were from the same out of state location and encouraged him to talk more about the connections he made between place and cuisine.

It is noted that there is a constructivist perspective to understanding the participant experiences around symbols wherein "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social world." (Merriam, Tisdell, 2016, 024). This constructivist aspect of participant experiences with symbols, helped to identify the broader phenomenon under study, that is the transmission of the organization's saga.

To understand this process of generating new meaning in symbols, they were filtered through a first-level, thematic coding process to place them into the symbol pools, as described in chapter 1, of social, curated, and academic symbols.

> Social Symbols- Organic symbols, visual or language-based, which direct social aspects of experience.
>
> Curated Symbols - Intentional symbols developed to convey a distinct message by the organization.
>
> Academic Symbols - Organic symbols, visual or language-based, which emanate directly from the academic experience.

The symbols were placed into pools with their related stories to allow for a sociocultural thematic analysis to be conducted. Within the sociocultural thematic analysis, the research considers the "interpretive frameworks that people use to make sense of particular incidents." (Grbich, 2013, p. 216). Thematic analysis was best suited to the first level of coding as it draws a clear line between the type of experience and the symbol. It fits with this study's needs to identify how those experiences might enforce or alter the saga of the institution.

Inductive coding provided a second level to code the emergent subcategories described by students. Through this inductive coding process (Grbich, 2013) the themes emerged from the data. The overlapping themes which emerged became categories to which the experiences could be ascribed.

Using the analysis framework provided by Grbich (2013) and the hermeneutic circle, I have constructed a data analysis flow chart below. The analysis shown below was conducted with focus group and later with the data provided in the follow-up interviews.

```
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Identify Narrative Segment and │
│  Establish Boundaries within the │
│       transcribed text.          │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Bracket peronal experiences and bias │
│      related to the subject      │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Identify the core symbol with which the │
│      student is interacting      │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Identify appropriate symbol pool by │
│   exploring the content and context │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Note changes in student understanding │
│ of the symbol's meaning based on their │
│            experience.           │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Note changes to the way the student │
│ may communicate the meaning of the │
│ symbol in the future based on their │
│            experience.           │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Summarize the student experience with │
│ the symbol, linking and noting overlap │
│  and deviations from other student │
│  experiences with similar stories. │
└─────────────────────────────┘
```

Chapter 5 includes the more significant commonalities and deviations between student experiences with symbols. Additionally, it will include the significant links and deviations around how students might communicate the meaning of their experiences in the future.

Validity and Reliability

This study engaged in crystallization rather than data saturation. As described in Merriam & Tisdell (2016). Within crystallization the variety of the data as well as the differences created by the angle of approach, create new variables in the data. To account for the variety of experience, validity and reliability were achieved in this study through member-checking interviews with each participant. Following the focus group, I reviewed all audio and video

recordings to note critical concepts presented by the participants and any unique or vivid

phrasing which could benefit from further explanation and exploration.

When the participants arrived, the entire 30 minutes of follow-up were dedicated to

clarifying and deepening the data provided in the focus group setting. No new symbols were

introduced for discussion. The statements provided by participants were repeated back to them at

times, and they were asked to verify their accuracy. Other times, I took a more positivist stance

explaining how I, as the researcher might interpret their statement and ask if my interpretation

aligned with the sentiment they intended to express. I intended to note the needed revisions and

include those in the appendix of this study. However, the quotes and interpretations provided to

participants during the follow-up interviews were all confirmed as accurate.

The immediacy with which the follow-up interviews took place, all within 10 days of the

study, helped to confirm that the sentiments being expressed were current and that the

opportunity for events and experiences which would alter those sentiments were unlikely to

occur in that time frame.

Ethical Considerations

The participants' identities were kept confidential, and transcripts were stored in a

password-protected drive and de-identified before analysis. Participants were assured that the

experiences this study seeks to understand need not be inherently positive. As the primary

researcher, I relayed the importance to students that they be aware this study intends to

understand their lived experiences. The potential for a response bias, where "factors that take

place during the process of responding to surveys affect the way responses are provided"

(Lavrakas, 2008, p. 1), required caution to be taken during the follow-up interview. This caution

was needed to ensure that participants understood that the purpose of the interview was not to

elicit an endorsement of WVU or its symbols. Instead, the purpose was to understand how students truly interact with the symbols and language embedded in the undergraduate experience.

Regarding the institution as the study's subject, the data collected does not reflect positively or negatively on any department or person. The experiences the study seeks to understand contribute to saga and, by that definition, are too broad to implicate any person or persons responsible for how students make meaning of those symbols.

Understanding how diverse groups across time receive and interpret the symbology of an institution into the narrative and, ultimately, the saga provides unique opportunities to develop and promote a healthy campus culture and to understand how students make meaning of the organizational design with which they are presented.

This study will reveal both positive and negative relationships to symbols across campus. By mapping how connections are made between symbols and language for different student groups, faculty, staff, and students will be better able to position or reposition themselves in ways to magnify or alter the symbology they are associated with for the benefit of the broader student community.

This study will provide a snapshot of how traditional students at West Virginia University have interpreted symbols and experiences and how their experiences have guided the organizational saga.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings of the study. The theoretical framework used herein combines the perspectives of hermeneutical phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. A hermeneutical phenomenological perspective addresses the essence of student experiences. The symbolic interactionist perspective describes how those experiences inform the symbols and saga of WVU.

The results provided in this chapter are categorized by the emergent themes presented in the data through the second level, inductive coding process. The data will demonstrate how participants receive symbols and though a sensemaking process they emerge as experiential themes. In doing so, it will address the research questions to show what symbols of West Virginia University have shaped current undergraduates' understanding of WVU's identity. As well as what experiences students are having in response to those symbols which are contributing to their lived experience of West Virginia University. The emergent themes identified include the Confluence of University and State, Compulsory Communality, Solitude and Sense of Place, and Experiencing Transparent and Symbols.

The Confluence of University and State explores how experiences with WVU can also be experiences of the state. Compulsory Communality considers how symbols generate a shared experience. In Solitude and Sense of Place, students' experiences of being on their own when encountering symbols and establishing their identity are examined. In Experiencing Transparent and Highly Visible Symbols, students recall the experiences they have had, which are deeply tied to symbols they were unaware of, but which exist as prominent curated and academic symbols.

The history of WVU as presented in other historical texts and studies ((Doherty, Summers, 1983: Lewis, 2013: Swisher, 2019) identified prominent symbology and imagery from

which the selected symbols were drawn. Students were also allowed to self-select symbols during their teamwork exercises. Therefore, while most of the symbols discussed in this chapter were predetermined and prompted, the question of what symbols have shaped the student's understanding of WVU's identity remained valid as some significantly impacted student experiences and the stories they tell of WVU. In contrast, others had little or no demonstrable impact on the participants.

The purpose of using emergent themes as a categorization tool is to demonstrate how experiences with select symbols provide for the dynamic loading with which the student is engaged. This presentation of the data will demonstrate how the participant's reactions to symbols load them with meaning and how this loading relates to broader trends of what creates a feeling of sentiment in students, powering saga transmission.

Participant Demographics

The study utilized a small, purposeful sample of traditional undergraduate students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, with a blend of resident and non-resident, first-generation and legacy students. Participants ranged from sophomores to seniors.

Participant Identifier	Participant Demographic
Participant 1: Mike	Male, Non-resident, 1st generation senior in the theatre program.
Participant 2: Angela	Female, Non-resident, junior, 1st generation junior in the theatre program
Participant 3: Rachel	Female, resident, senior, 2nd generation student in the college of business and economics.
Participant 4: Luke	Male, resident, sophomore, 1st generation, in the anthropology program.
Participant 5: Steve	Male, Non-resident, non-legacy, 2nd generation Junior in the engineering program.

| Participant 6: Jenna | Female, Non-resident, non-legacy, 2nd generation junior in the communications program. |
| Participant 7: Annie | Female, resident, 1st generation junior in the agricultural program. |

Participant Background

Mike is a Bachelor of Arts Theatre major in his senior year at WVU. Mike is a non-resident but grew up around forty miles from campus. He was mentored in high school by his two band teachers who are alumni of the College of Creative Arts. They encouraged Mike to check out WVU. After making two trips to campus, one on a self-guided tour and another during a larger university admissions event, he decided to commit to WVU. Mike became a four-year member of the marching band, a section leader, and directed several plays through the School of Theatre & Dance.

Angela is a non-resident and a junior in the theatre program. She grew up in Pennsylvania, roughly five hours from the Morgantown campus, and was raised within two households, with her biological mother and stepfather and biological father and stepmother. Within one family, Angela is a first-generation student. Because she is the first in her household to leave home to attend college, she considers herself a first-generation student. Angela is a performance major and has spent time in theatre productions, both on stage and working behind the scenes on shows. While she was at first overwhelmed stepping onto the campus, the community within the theatre convinced her to attend, "everyone really convinced me, which they're completely right, that it's a small school feel within a huge university. I see the same people every day and have the same classes with them, and it's very comforting for me."

Rachel is a resident student from the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. She is a legacy student as her father attended WVU. Her mother attended Clemson. Rachel spoke of the 2012 Orange Bowl, which occurred when she was in elementary school, "Let's just say when WVU played Clemson, I was wearing WVU clothes, and my sister was wearing Clemson." She was taught in grade school by Alumni who played Country Roads as a reward at the end of the week. She joined the college of business and economics at WVU and is a senior. She is active in Cru, formerly the Campus Crusade for Christ, and credits the organization as one which created a social structure that helped her to persist as a student at WVU. Rachel is employed as a tour guide at the WVU Visitor Center.

Luke is a resident of southern West Virginia and a first-generation student. He is in the anthropology program and was hired by the faculty to work in an academic lab, and was later promoted to lab manager. Luke spoke about how few students from his area of the state come to WVU, "people, where I am from don't really make it to bigger colleges. They usually stay in that area. It just felt like I escaped." Luke spoke of the experience of being bi-racial in southern West Virginia and how that impacted his desire to pursue opportunities at WVU "being bi-racial and coming from that area, you experience the street life and the academic life. I got to see both parts, and I've always wanted to talk to people and try to inspire more people from my area to pursue higher education."

Steve is a non-resident student who grew up around six hours from campus in New Jersey. He is a junior in the engineering program and is involved in several research projects affiliated with his major. Steve has been an RA and spent some time in his first year with the ROTC program on

campus. Steve considered many colleges before deciding on WVU and did so partly because of positive feedback from classmates who graduated before him and had also attended. Steve converted to a college sports fan after enrolling at WVU. "I never really followed college sports even as a hobby until I started attending." and is a fan of both the football and basketball teams.

Jenna is a non-resident, second-generation college student. Throughout her college selection process, WVU seemed unlikely as her father was an alumnus of a former athletic rival. Jenna has been committed to WVU since an early visit to the campus. As a freshman, she experienced some of the ups and downs that can come with the transition of becoming a college student. Jenna often spoke of taking stock of her surroundings to find peace throughout this process. Standing in front of Woodburn, she would remind herself, "take a deep breath and remember why I'm here and what I'm doing." Jenna is a student in the College of Media and a tour guide for the WVU Visitor Center.

Annie is a first-generation college student. Her family has deep ties to the state, and while she was not born in West Virginia, it is where she attended high school. During high school, Annie became involved with 4-H, the extension arm of WVU. "I started 4-H roughly around the time I moved to West Virginia in 2011. Then the rest of my family joined. My mom is a leader, and we have our little community of sorts through 4-H. Our extension agent has helped me tremendously." Annie had various experiences with the campus before becoming a student. She is a student in the agricultural college and is employed as a resident assistant through residence life.

Findings / Emergent Themes

Confluence of the University and the State

Throughout the discussions with students involved in this study, residents of the state of West Virginia expressed a connection to the confluence of university and state identities centered around the Flying WV. The Flying WV, a trademarked university logo, was interpreted by resident students as a state symbol. For some, it was later in grade school or early middle school that they began to distinguish the logo as that of a distinct institution in West Virginia. Rachel said, "I've just seen it my entire life, but I actually did not know that it was the WVU Symbol until I got a bit older. I thought, 'oh, it's West Virginia.' Looking back, I understand; obviously, it's WVU now. It stretches all the way across the state of West Virginia."

For non-resident students, the confluence of the university and state identity centered around becoming a WVU student and then feeling drawn into a connection with the state. This phenomenon was frequently observed through the song Country Roads, a symbol presented to students during their teamwork exercises. Country Roads is a song by John Denver that references elements of the West Virginia landscape and features the lyrics: "Take me home to the place I belong, West Virginia..." Because of this, it has become an anthem for WVU students. It is played after winning an athletic event, at the commencement ceremonies, and often at the weddings of WVU alums. The WVU Marching Band plays an arrangement of the song before home football games. Rachel spoke of her connection to this song.

> I'm from West Virginia, and my dad went to WVU, so I've known about WVU for a long time. I remember this song when I was ten. I was in fifth grade, and my teacher at the time was a WVU alumnus. If we were all good, then on Fridays in the afternoon, she would let us listen to Country Roads. Well, we got to the point where we did that so often

that, of course, everybody knew the words, so we would all sing it. It was cool that we

have that connection. This is something so awesome that is sung everywhere you hear it

all the time and that people think of West Virginia whenever they think of that song.

Luke recalled a first-year experience, "I remember going to the football game and them

singing it. It makes me feel at home at WVU."

Jenna continued, "It's that unity and something that's able to bring together so many

people from so many places. It's like seeing that Flying WV somewhere, it's like a little home. Or

like hearing country roads, and it's something people associate with the state and this university,

and to sing the entire three minutes after every win, it's just cool."

Families also connected students more deeply to both the state and the university as

students began to feel more at home in the university with their family's support. Luke, from

southern West Virginia, said, "I remember whenever it was gameday, my mom would buy these

little stickers that you put on your face. She would put them on before she would go to work, and

she would ask me if I wanted them too, and I would go to school with them on."

Jenna said, "My dad has this rule on college tours that we're not getting a sweatshirt until

you know where you're going. You can get a shirt but not a sweatshirt. When I was on my visit

here, I was like, "' this is where I need to go,' and he said, "alright, pick out a sweatshirt." Jenna's

dad, a Maryland grad, initially was reluctant to wear WVU gear, "But it was something that I felt

passionate about and embraced by, and I knew it was going to take a bit." Her dad eventually

began to support her by purchasing his gear with the Flying WV, "Starting with a shirt from

Gabe's that was five dollars, he got one and said, 'I'm doing this for you.' And now it's progressed

to him calling and saying, 'hey can you check if there are any new scarves out?'"

Mike is a West Virginia University Marching Band member. The nickname for this group is, *The Pride of West Virginia*. The marching band, which is itself a prominent symbol of the university, impacted Mike's collegiate life in myriad ways. "One of the best feelings is playing Country Roads. Every other year I've been on the back sideline, but this year I was on the front sideline for the home side, and whenever we hit that first note, just seeing everyone start to cheer and hop up out of their seats and bounce along and sing. It's a feeling like no other." Mike spoke more about the feeling of being a marching band member.

It's really this lineage of these hundreds, at this point, thousands of people that have come before you—ever evolving but maintaining that pride and the tradition throughout everything. Just little things, the things we do in the tunnel, or the stories that they tell at band camp and the symbols that we have that reflect these people that have passed through the band and just being a part of that history. It means so much, along with the fact that you get to represent the state. Because I'm not a native West Virginian, but when you're a part of that group, you feel like nothing else matters, like this is the only state that you could have ever been from.

For non-resident students, symbols affiliated with West Virginia University came to be affiliated with the state. Non-resident students came to associate natural settings like Cooper's Rock and Raven's Rock as being a part of WVU. Their role as students translated into a responsibility to represent the state.

Steve reflected on a sense of pride and connection he felt whenever he went home to New Jersey and people recognized the Flying WV on a shirt or hat he was wearing. "I was in Montana this past year, and this guy goes, 'Is that a WVU shirt?' I said, 'yeah,' and he went, 'I'm from Charleston, but I live here now.' And we ended up chatting for 20 minutes."

During the teamwork portion, Annie talked more in-depth about her connection to 4-H, a program coordinated by the WVU extension office. "I started 4-H around the time I moved to West Virginia, and my extension agent has helped me tremendously." Annie's first experience with the Mountaineer was with Natalie Tennant, a West Virginia politician, and former Mountaineer, who visited her 4-H camp.

Responses across the group referred to ways they individually became a symbol of WVU, often transitively through another symbol. Rachel spoke of being at an out-of-state conference when "Country Roads" was played, and the group looked to her as the WVU representative. Furthermore, Steve and Angela told stories of being stopped in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, hours away from campus, when people saw their WVU gear and wanted to hear about their experiences with the university and share their own.

Students were consistently experiencing how the university's notoriety translated to a personal responsibility to connect with others on behalf of the institution and, in doing so, to become a symbol of the university's goodwill.

The Flying WV was for Annie a way in which others could recognize something about her when traveling out of state. "We were walking down the street on vacation, and my mom had a WVU shirt on, and I hear 'let's go Mountaineers!' across the street, and there is a person wearing a WVU hat."

Rachel identified becoming associated with a symbol of WVU on a trip with Cru, formerly Campus Crusade for Christ, to San Diego. She recalled Country Roads being played during an event and the room looking toward her as if it was *her song* as a Mountaineer.

Another symbol, the university's Mountaineer mascot, originates from state lore rather than the college itself. The Mountaineer, as presented at WVU, is a person of the mountains

dressed in buckskins with a raccoon skin cap and a rifle. A student is selected to portray the Mountaineer every year. In this role, they wear the Mountaineer costume and serve as a mascot and an ambassador at university events. Several participants recalled strong connections with the students portraying the Mountaineer. The Mountaineer mascot of WVU has their face exposed and is not only able to but encouraged to speak with people. These attributes contrast with most university mascots, including the Appalachian State Mountaineer, which is presented as a more cartoonish 'hillbilly' character with a foam head preventing anyone from seeing the person inside.

As a member of the Reed College of Media, Jenna had opportunities to interact with the student selected to be the Mountaineer, Timmy Eads. She said the mascot was someone you "make eye contact with and get to know their personality. I think that's why it's cool. That it changes from year to year, it's a new person and a new personality all representing the same thing." She described the symbol's meaning as she perceived it for the people of West Virginia as well, "I grew up between Baltimore and DC, and so there already a lot of teams to get behind. In West Virginia, this is the main symbol for the state. I realized the weight of what it means to be a Mountaineer."

The Mountaineer as a person, rather than a printed graphic, was a point of connection for many participants. In reference to the printed graphic, Angela said, "The first time I saw it, I was like, 'I don't like it.' And I wished it was a cute animal or something. Then when I got here, I thought it was cool that it was a person. Like a student being a mascot. I think it's unique, and not many schools have that."

Mike commented on the participatory elements of the Mountaineer mascot, "being a real person and being a real mountaineer. I love that idea because it gives the community, everyone that goes to a game, it's easy to dress up like a mountaineer, it's easy to *be* a Mountaineer."

Jenna said of the student portraying the Mountaineer, "People make eye contact with you and get to know your personality. I think that's why it's cool that it changes from year to year. It's a new person and a new personality, all representing the same thing. That's really cool to me. I didn't realize that until I started getting to know the Mountaineers better and seeing those things first-hand."

Both resident and non-resident students felt the connections between the state and the university. The depth of experience with symbols like the Flying WV, Mountaineer, and Country Roads, helped to affirm a sense of connection and affection for the state and the university. It provided a way to recognize the codependence of the two entities.

Compulsory Communality

Regardless of residency and legacy status, an overarching theme was that athletics provided a release from the stress of academic life. Participants called it "a relief, an outlet." They also referred to the sense of community building they gained from attending athletic events. Steve said, "You don't really get to feel that sort of comradery with other people at the university quite as much as you do on game day."

The phrase *Game Day* evoked a strong emotional response with descriptions of sights, sounds, and other sensory memories of a game day experience. In describing the experience of a WVU game day, students focused on the social. As Angela stated, "this brings back partying all day and going to games and so many different types of tailgates beforehand. Or going to towers and meeting up with friends and partying and then going to the game."

Moreover, the experience of being a student and its connection with the community created by athletics cultivated interests that previously did not exist. "I was not a big sports fan before coming to college," said Jenna, "it was a world totally different from mine. But when I

came here, I absolutely loved it. Now I eat, sleep breathe, WVU sports. I still don't understand

how football works, but I will be at Milan Puskar Stadium." The value assigned to the game day

symbol, as shown in the data, was often around the communal experience which accompanies an

athletic contest and not the contest itself.

Steve, an engineering major, spoke about game day and the contrast between his

academic life and his feelings during a home sporting event. "I really love just emptying my

brain and being like, yeah, WVU, let's go. I think it's one of my favorite elements of the whole

college experience." Being part of the crowd created an "intense sense of togetherness" with his

fellow students. In our follow-up interview, Steve said, "This is going to sound a little strange

and potentially a little bad, but there's just something very comforting about cult-like fanaticism

of a college sport. How fun it can be just to forget about everything and support a team because

you go to the university it's attached to." This cult-like fanaticism Steve described reflects the

shared experiences and sentiment that Clark (1970) described as foundational elements of the

saga. Additionally, Steve is describing an experience curated by the university, which provides a

counterweight to the stress of academics.

Jenna recalled, "I get so excited to be there, and it's crazy that we all wake up at seven in

the morning on a Saturday to get excited and to go hang out with our friends and things like that.

And then you're there until like 4:00 pm. And it's a huge thing; again, it's something bigger than

yourself that you can be a part of."

"It was so nice to just escape," she said, "I would always call it my escape. And even if I

went to the game by myself to be in the student section and just unplug my mind. Rachel

describes the sentiment of escaping academics through being part of an inescapable community,

"It's hard to feel alone on game day." She describes a decision to enter a community where

communality and commitment are unavoidable. Others also identified how compulsory communality became a factor in their success.

This sentiment of compulsory communality was echoed by Rachel about another campus-affiliated group, Cru, formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ, a branch of a national organization of Christian church outreach on college campuses. Cru was one of Rachel's self-selected symbols, and during her teamwork time, she shared the story of why. As Rachel described, "It's quite honestly the reason I stayed here at WVU."

> After my first semester, it was over Christmas Break, and I was supposed to come back on Sunday, and it was Saturday night. I was sitting on my floor with my back against the bed, crying, like total meltdown, saying, 'I don't want to go back. I hate this place; this is terrible.' Then at the end of the giant meltdown, my mom asked, "Okay, you've calmed down. Do you really feel that way?" And I said Well, I really don't want to leave my friends that I've made.' And most of my friends I met in CRU. These people are growing me in my relationship with Christ and also being really good friends, so between those couple things, I said, 'I do not want to leave this."

As became more common in the self-selected symbols, students tended to identify something personal to them, unaffiliated with the university, but which impacted their ability to persist as a student. Rachel, in this instance, sought out a community where she felt supported by identifying the CRU symbol. By doing so, she allowed herself to engage with a community that changed her relationship with WVU.

Mike is a non-resident first-generation student in the theatre program. He described the experience of first coming to campus at the insistence of his high school faculty member. After checking in at the visitor center, he received a campus map branded with a Flying WV. Mike and

his mom had arrived on campus without a reservation, and so took a self-guided tour. The first experience with the Flying WV Mike described was seeing it printed on his map and the buildings around him. He explored the campus with his mother. His initial emotional reaction was a feeling of frustration. "I did not really have a tour; it was like one of those show-up, self-guided things which I hate. Oh my god. Get rid of those, please. I really hated my first time here." As he and his mom explored the campus, they struggled to find things relevant to Mike's interest resulting in an argument between them.

Mike reflected on an experience with the Flying WV where a strong but negative emotional response was transformed into a strong and positive emotional response. On a return trip to campus for a Discover WVU event, where university employees and students were on hand to talk with Mike, the meaning of the symbol began to shift, becoming less abstract. It was no longer just a graphic on paper as it began to transition in meaning to represent the people he had met on campus and their enthusiasm for their institution. "I went to the gift shop, bought a blue hat with a Flying WV on it, and I wore that hat everywhere. I wore it my entire senior year and embroidered my name onto the brim."

Mike was candid about his experiences with the PRT, and his reflections indicated a mature relationship with the institution wherein he could appreciate flaws. He often smiled when recalling them. He said:

Every time I used the PRT, there would be frozen vomit next to the doors. Especially at

Towers. So, I mean, that was just not pleasant seeing that. Then I would get on it

downtown, and I don't know if this happens to everyone or some people. Maybe I just

have the worst luck, but every time I got on the PRT that said it was going to Towers, it

would take me to Health Sciences, and I would have to ride all the way to Health

Sciences.

His response resulted in laughter from the group and a recognition of other group

members experiencing challenges with the PRT. The seating arrangement made Mike the second

person to tell a story, and he helped to set a tone reflected in other stories by other group

members. The theme emerged that while the PRT was flawed, there was pride in ownership. The

PRT was imperfect, but it was theirs. In the video of the meeting, there is audible laughter when

the image of the PRT is first shown. The students know the story they will share is likely to be

complicated and neither entirely positive nor negative. Many did acknowledge the efficiency of

the PRT when it is working. However, most of their stories highlighted the odd behaviors of the

PRT system and their ability to remain calm and persevere after encountering a challenge created

by a PRT malfunction.

Steve, a non-resident student in the Engineering program, spoke of the PRT in both the

positive, "Look at this cool thing we got" and the negative, "It is outdated. It's an old piece of

transportation technology that we gas up, and it breaks down constantly."

Jenna spoke positively of an experience where the PRT affirmed the idea of being the

protagonist in her own college story, "Every time I get on it, I just put my headphones in, and I

feel like I'm in a movie. I can't believe I'm the main character in this." Nevertheless, she also

acknowledged some technical issues she had experienced, "So me and one of my friends would

go to Beechurst Station, and it stopped at the first spot to let people off, and halfway through,

half of the people got off the PRT, and then the door slammed shut. It took the six of us left on

the PRT, and it didn't stop at the next opening to let people in. it went from engineering to

Beechurst, let some people off, then went all the way to health science and made us get off there."

These Descriptions of how the PRT operated included the terms: outdated, intense, crazy, broken, and stuck, but also unique. This rite of passage created sentimentality around how students described the PRT and an eagerness to share their stories. To have had these experiences, one had to be a WVU student.

In contrast to the narratives which reflected inconvenience brought on by the PRT, students also used the terms: comfort, fun, neat, excited, coolest thing ever, and pride when describing it. While students had experienced discomfort and frustrations because of the PRT, the uniqueness of these experiences, which could only belong to a WVU student, helped create a sense of pride.

Similarly, there were references to party culture throughout the focus group and occasionally in the follow-up interviews. Participants tended to speak more freely about seeing or hearing negative aspects of the party culture rather than participating. Steve, who is from New Jersey, recalled when he first discussed his decision to go to WVU, hearing about couches being burned in celebration. The stories suggested the presence of party culture resulting in property destruction. But these stories, as told by the students, were indicative of the past behaviors of other students which they did not witness directly. They were spoken of as amusing aspects of others' experiences rather than a detriment to their college experience.

In Jenna's stories, as with those of the PRT or of party culture, students demonstrated pride and appreciation for the challenges that they had encountered and overcome. Within these stories, challenges were abated by leaning on the university community. When the stresses of being a college student became too much for her, it was the campus community in Cru that

helped to bring her back. Through this dependence, a stronger connection to the university developed.

As described by the students, their interactions with symbols allowed them to process the experience of being a student more holistically. They were conscious of the formal meaning assigned to the symbol and the personal meaning they had imbued in it. This type of student engagement differs from how it is traditionally viewed. "Engagement-related assessment and research often include the specific type of engagement, such as programmatic enrollment or behavioral measures of activities engaged in, along with a general sense of with whom those engagements take place, such as peers or faculty members" (Smith & Tinto, 2022, p.1). Engagement in this definition is both academically sponsored, and student selected. The stories told by students suggest they are using both curated and organic symbols of WVU to compartmentalize personal growth experiences. These stories suggest community, the feeling of being part of a larger group, is more effective when it is student-led and socially based.

Solitude and Sense of Place

How students connect and disconnect from academics is a component of how they interpret and share the saga of WVU. When students identified their own symbols of WVU, they selected places where they could be alone. The selections demonstrated an interest in exploring the whole of their identity as a student, by allowing time to process the experience privately.

These stories used solitude to balance stress. Jenna and Mike both offered off-campus locations as their symbols. Jenna told of experiences with Woodburn and Raven's Rock, "I had a really weird roommate situation freshman year, and I would just want to get out of my room. I would go sit behind Woodburn or call my mom and sit on a bench and take a deep breath and remember why I'm here and to take each day just one at a time." During a particularly tough

semester, Jenna went further, finding peace and solitude at Raven's Rock, at Cooper's Rock

State Park.

> I didn't go out a whole lot because I was anxious about the whole Covid thing, and I went
>
> to Raven's Rock with two of my close friends. It was the first time I'd been out in a long
>
> time with other people, and this was right when the elections were going on, so it was
>
> like an overwhelming time and just stressful. This was the first day, the first time I felt at
>
> peace in a long time, and I shed a tear. It was just a release, like Raven's Rock took on
>
> another meaning. I went there with my boyfriend before we started dating, and that's
>
> where we started dating and everything, and it's meant a whole lot to me. It's like a
>
> random big rock, but it meant new beginnings and inner peace. I love Raven's Rock.

Mike, who was active as a member of the marching band as well as in co-curricular

activities through the School of Theatre & Dance, chose a local coffee shop, the Blue Moose

café, as a self-selected symbol.

> It's my favorite café. I just love going there. The coffee is good, the food is good, and it is
>
> just a warm vibe and a comforting place. I remember freshman year. We had improv at
>
> the Lair. Before our rehearsal, I would walk from Lincoln Hall all the way downtown to
>
> the Blue Moose because the PRT and buses didn't' run. So, I would walk, and I would get
>
> coffee, I would sit, and then I would walk to the Lair, and we would have improv, and I
>
> would walk back to Lincoln, and that would be my day.

The most common theme which emerged from the self-selected symbols was a sense of

place. Along this theme, of a sense of place. Jenna's other symbol was the nameplate from her

door. "I lived in Summit Hall my first year and could never forget it. It meant a lot to me." The

room number she explained matched the room number where her yearbook activities were held at high school, and this stood out as a symbol that she was home at WVU.

Luke chose Towers and Knapp Hall. "It was just like walking in there for the first time because I've never been away from my mom, lived without her. I felt grown up. I was really excited to stay there and be on my own and to meet new people." Knapp Hall became the place where Luke centered his academic experience.

I spend a whole bunch of time there, probably 20 to 30 hours a week. The professors have given me countless opportunities. I'm a first-generation student, so I don't have as much knowledge about college as the next person. The professors there have welcomed me with open arms and given me opportunities. One professor gave me a job there because they knew my financial situation wasn't the best. Eventually, I got brought up to the lab coordinator, where I could hire other people—I hired a girl that is also a first-generation student. It felt like I was helping someone like me. I would 't feel right if I didn't put it down as a symbol because I'm there all the time.

Steve is a non-resident student from New Jersey and chose a Pepperoni Roll as one of his symbols. "I really like to eat. Pepperoni rolls are something that I'd never really been exposed to before I got here, and they are absolute fire." Part of Steve's connection to place was through regionally specific foods. Angela, another non-resident student, also chose pepperoni rolls. "I had never heard of them in my life before coming to school. I didn't know they existed. Everyone was really dramatic, saying, 'these are the best things ever!'" In our follow-up meeting, Steve discussed this connection further.

I love regional culinary creations because I think it says something about the people who live there and what kind of people they are. I related it to pork roll or Taylor Ham,

whatever you call it, and the bagels in New Jersey. Everywhere I go, I want to know what the food is. What do they consider to be their food item? Pepperoni rolls are just the West Virginia thing.

As I learned when meeting with Steve, we were raised in the same rural county in New Jersey, which helped me make sense of the connection between pepperoni rolls and Taylor ham. Both are foods commonly associated with the working class of their region. Pepperoni rolls are said to have been developed by Italian immigrants who came to West Virginia as coal miners and began baking them to have a stable food that could be easily consumed without utensils for those working in the mines. Similarly, Taylor ham is a food favored by blue-collar workers in New Jersey. Both foods are absent from the menus of national restaurant chains and exist almost exclusively at gas stations and locally-owned delis in their respective states. Steve's attachment to the pepperoni roll symbol exemplifies a student transposing a previously held sentiment that food and place are connected to their college experience.

What seemed to matter to the students was not the visual aspect of the symbol but how they could experience it. Students tended to speak more on symbols that had offered them experiences rather than those with more visual distinctiveness. They referred to the places where they had spent the most time, in other instances, as with Jenna's experience in Summit and Steve's experience with Pepperoni rolls, participants used the symbol they created of WVU as a bridge to their identity away from WVU. Steve connected food to identity in New Jersey and continued to do so at WVU. Rachel connected a room number to her concept of a safe space in high school and extended that into her college experience.

Rachel's time with her friends at Raven's Rock and Mike's going from the Blue Moose to his improv group all occur outside of academic activities' purview. Within each of these

examples, the students created symbols with two distinct attributes. They were symbols of off-campus experiences and presented an alternative smaller community that created a bond with the larger university community.

The data shows that students are drawn to incorporating place into their identity. Having a place where students disengage from academics and reflect on the experience is a vital part of their personal development to embrace their individuality within the collegiate community.

Experiencing Transparent and Highly Visible Symbols

This section describes the symbols R1, land-grant, Woodburn Hall, and West Virginia University's reputation as a "party school." Transparent symbols refer to those symbols that students may encounter, but which do not immediately resonate with the student. Highly Visible symbols are those which are prominent visually, or in stories told about the institution, but are not experienced intensely by the participants.

Party School as a symbol, is highly visible. While a common descriptor of the university in online rankings (Serre, 2019) it is not a university-supported title, nor are there any clear metrics defining it as a party school outside of student opinion. For the administration, one of the more challenging aspects of WVU's story is its national reputation as a party school. Grant Avenue has for many years been a type of shorthand amongst students to describe an area dense with house parties. In their teamwork exercises, Angela, and Mike touch on Grant Avenue as a symbol of WVU. Mike had lived on Grant Avenue with his girlfriend.

> My story from grant avenue is a little different. When people think of Grant Ave, they
> think of big parties, being drunk, stumbling in the streets, teargas, police, things like that.
> But Grant Ave, to me, is where my girlfriend and I lived together when we first met. We
> met a couple of months before COVID happened. Things were going well, COVID

> happened, and her roommate goes home to Wheeling, and I ended up living with her for five months during Covid. We quarantined together on Grant. There were no parties happening. It's just this odd time. The street itself, we would go, and she and I are no huge environmentalists, but we care about the earth. Together we would take these huge bags, and one time we counted how many whippet canisters we could find. We found like 86 outside one house.

Angela remembers an experience when winter weather caused the university to cancel classes, so students began to sled down a snow-covered Grant Ave.

> People took the RA bins, like the bins you move your crap into your dorm room with. This kid had an RA bin and was going down Grant Ave in the RA bin. There were probably hundreds of people there taking videos, and he ran into a cop car, and then I think he got arrested.

Steve spoke of his decision to attend WVU as being based almost entirely on the quality of the academics, with little regard for the party culture.

> Really, other than that, the only thing that I was really kind of cued in on was the party atmosphere here, which, to be honest, I was pretty straight-laced all through high school and even somewhat now. So, I was like, 'all right, well, that's not going to affect me. It's really just more about where it stands academically for me.

> When asked what he had explicitly heard about the party culture in our follow-up

interview, Steve said of the stories his friend, a fellow WVU student, shared, "Oh, the couch burning was one of them. He also said that every time it gets warm, there's like a mini-riot downtown." In Steve, Angela, and Mike's stories, there is a nod to a reputation of party culture without the sense of overly imposing or overt party culture. However, in Mike's memories of

picking up whippet canisters, Steve's knowledge as a high school student in New Jersey that WVU was where couches were burned, and Jenna's witnessing a sledding party that ended with an arrest, the party culture is represented. It is not however described as a direct experience or a highly engaging one.

R1 and land-grant are considered transparent symbols because most students involved in the study were unfamiliar with the terms. Because of this lack of recognition, R1 and land-grant were some of the most difficult to elicit a direct response. However, as this section will describe, while students were unfamiliar with the concepts, they were familiar with university behaviors driven by them. They could describe personal connections to the service and land-grant missions. Rachel was one of the few participants familiar with the concept and was succinct in her description of the R1 status.

R1 means that we are performing the highest level of research. I think 130 universities-ish across the US have that accreditation. So basically, no matter what major or anything, people associate research with STEM most of the time, but research is done. Right now, we are in the Creative Arts building, so that too, or history or English, So it's the thought of doing research across the board. One of my professors, he does resumes, so he does research in regard to resumes.

Luke, her partner for the teamwork exercise, who was not initially familiar with the concept of R1, was able to connect to it after hearing Rachel's Description and began to talk about the research opportunities he had experienced as an anthropology major.

With Anthropology, you have the cultural part of it where you talk to people, and then you have the archeology section. This past summer, I did research in my hometown on

cultural perceptions of cancer and cancer healthcare. Because people in the area tend to

have higher cancer rates, and their knowledge of cancer could play into that.

Steve had a similar reaction, unaware of the meaning of the status and saying that R was

the name of "the software program I use sometimes." After Jenna defined R1 as "A research

institution conducting the highest level of research," he identified a documentary he saw about

the Volkswagen emissions scandal wherein students at WVU discovered discrepancies in the

reported emissions levels on certain Volkswagen vehicles.

That's part of what made me start to consider WVU as a real contender on the

ridiculously long list of schools that I had on my list. The aerospace engineering research

that goes on here is ridiculous too. We have wind tunnels up at the Morgantown airport.

We do wind tunnel testing. We'll put wing sections in there, airfoils, and record data from

it. I had an entire lab class where that's basically all we did. It was amazing.

During their teamwork session, Luke, a resident, was unfamiliar with the land-grant

concept. Rachel, his teammate, and a tour guide at WVU, described it to him.

The gist of it is that the government gives the state a piece of land and says, "here, do

something with that." So basically, the majority of the time, it ends up being a university.

There are three things that specifically our land-grant institution looks to do. We give

back to the community through service. We do research to further the university as well

as the state of West Virginia, and we provide education.

Luke replied, "I'm glad *you* know!". Although he was not familiar with the name of the

R1 concept, Luke was already very much engaged in an activity related to it. When he connected

the R1 concept to the experience of conducting research around civilian knowledge of cancer and

cancer treatment in southern West Virginia, he was engaged in both a research activity and a

service activity. The research being conducted was to the benefit of the state's residents it was researching.

Rachel, also a resident student, talked of being unaware of the meaning of a land-grant until she became a tour guide for the university. "I'd heard of it, but I didn't know what it meant until I was forced to learn what it was to become a tour guide. And then it was one of my favorite things to talk about." Rachel then described the land-grant mission.

The three pillars are service, research, and education. And we're only one of about 115 universities that are land-grant status. It's at the forefront of everything we do. How we were just talking about research, and we always talk about the land-grant status when we are in the agricultural building. We talk about the service dog training classes because I think the class in and of itself shows each of those three points being clearly demonstrated, with students being educated about what it takes to raise a service animal and what it takes to do those things. But then there's research, what it takes to train a service dog, and then a huge part of that class is service. Those dogs pass their service dog exam, and they are sent to a veteran in the state or someone experiencing PTSD, and it's like seeing all three of those pieces of being a land-grant University exemplified."

Annie was connected to the R1 symbols and the land-grant mission through her 4-H and Governor's school experiences. "I was a member of the Governor's School when it was held here at WVU in the summer of 2015. I remember thinking, 'they do a lot of research here. We had groups, and the leader was a Ph.D. student, and they were researching sustainable energy,' and then the next summer, they gained R1 status."

Student recognition of the R1 and land-grant symbols was inconsistent. Of the seven students, only Rachel and Jenna, tour guides at the university, could articulate their meanings.

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However, responses that alluded to R1 and land-grant missions were frequent and vivid. After being introduced to the concept, most were able to directly connect how they had experienced and even benefited from that status, either through participation in outreach programs in their youth or through research experiences after they became a student.

Woodburn Hall was another formal symbol presented to students during the focus group section. The responses to Woodburn were unique in that students often spoke of Woodburn as an icon rather than a location.

Woodburn Hall is highly visible and is one of the most photographed buildings on campus. It is used as a photo opportunity during every prospective student tour, featured on web and print advertisements, and is a popular spot for graduation photo sessions. Woodburn Circle features some of the oldest buildings on campus and, because of this, conveys the picturesque college quad.

Angela commented, "I have never even been to Woodburn like I have walked through the building. I'd love to. I'm sure I'll do that before I graduate, But I think it's beautiful. When my friends and family come visit me, and I show them the campus, we always take a picture in front of Woodburn." This sentiment that Woodburn was an icon, a place to take pictures which most students had little or no experience with through academics, was echoed by others.

Mike and Luke were exceptions to this. Mike reflected on the experience of having classes in Woodburn. However, it was not the content of the class which stood out in his story, but again, the use of Woodburn to symbolize a traditional college experience.

Freshman year, I had my English class there, and the English class was in the basement, which is terrifying. It's not a nice place to be, but the Spanish class, the first time when I walked in, I was like, wow, I'm doing the thing. I'm here at college. This is crazy. No one

in my family has gone to college. So, it's just like the movies, I guess. I don't know. It gave me big, what is the Robin Williams movie, Dead Poet's Society? It just felt like that.

Mike's reference to feeling like he was part of a structured narrative was recurrent in his description of campus experiences. During the follow-up interview, he stated, "first-generation students really only have the media's version, or the portrayal of higher education," as a reference point toward what to expect in college. Mike's transition to campus was also altered by an early move-in date to participate in band camp for the WVU Marching Band. In the follow-up interview, he stated, "it didn't really feel like I was at school. It just felt like I was playing in a band. And then you get into classes, and you're like, 'Oh yeah, I am taking classes now, too'"

Jenna described Woodburn as a respite. A place where one could go to collect their thought and re-center. Sitting on a bench outside Woodburn and staring up at the building, she remembered thinking, "I am at college and doing better than I realize I am." Jenna saw Woodburn as a symbol of stability and of calm. A reminder to "take a deep breath, remember why I am here and what I am doing."

During visits to campus sponsored by his high school, Luke recounted seeing many of the prominent symbols of WVU, including Woodburn Hall. His experience on campus became a juxtaposition to his earlier visits during a high school trip. Luke remembered standing in front of it as a freshman and thinking, "a lot of people in my hometown don't go outside for college, or they don't go to college at all. Every time I walked by it reminded me of the blessing that I get to go to college."

The use of Woodburn as a focal point for advertisements contributed to a sense of distance and disconnect from it. Steve provided a terse response to Woodburn, saying it was "A nice looking building," but "I don't relate to that other than in a superficial way."

Others, like Rachel, who did not have academic experiences in the building, appreciated it more for the look and felt it gave to the campus. Rachel shared, "I love Woodburn. I had an interview one time, and you know how they always love to throw you a curveball question. My curveball question was, 'if you were a building on campus, which one would you be and why?' And I quote, I said, 'I would be Woodburn Hall because I love to have my picture taken'." She continued, "I think whenever you think of WVU and, honestly, West Virginia in general, a lot of people look to Woodburn as that symbol."

R1, land-grant, and Woodburn remain major talking points and visuals when describing WVU. R1 and land-grant provide concise descriptions of the activities in which the university is engaged. While these terms may not be known to all students, what they invoke in the institution's behavior changed the experiences of every student involved in the study. As described by the participants, Woodburn has transitioned from being a place of direct experience to an aspirational symbol.

General Narrative

The participants provided more vivid stories and appeared to engage deeper when speaking of highly participatory symbols such as the PRT and Game Day. Symbols that were more passive or descriptive of the institution, such as land-grant and R1, were initially dismissed but provided vivid stories when students could connect the concept and demonstrate experiential knowledge of the missions related to those symbols.

The emergent themes suggested a process through which students came to belong to WVU. Throughout their stories, students often approached the topic of a particular symbol by acknowledging their initial dislike, whether it be a cultivated symbol like the Mountaineer or an organic symbol like the pepperoni roll. They held in high regard the symbols with which they

had taken an emotional journey. They then elaborated on the journey they had taken with the symbol. This journey took different forms, such as disliking the Mountaineer as he appears on the logo to loving the Mountaineer after engaging with the student assigned to portray them. Alternatively, Angela's "these are pretty mediocre" response to pepperoni rolls, followed by her taking the initiative to make pepperoni rolls for herself, "I learned how to jazz them up. It was super good." Experiences how the meaning of a symbol to each student is changing as they interact more frequently and more deeply.

General Description

Students reported distinct experiences around symbols, which varied according to their exposure and understanding. Resident students were more aware of or had more experiences with the university's service mission through interaction with 4-H and the extension office. After learning of its importance to the state, resident, and non-resident students demonstrated interest and a sense of obligation to participate in the university's mission.

This confluence of university and state was an emergent theme in the data. Participants displayed a sense of obligation to the university and the state. They felt they had a role in representing the state as members of the university community.

The level of reaction varied between symbols. Notably, the R1 and land-grant symbology were far less resonant than others. In several instances, the students learned the meaning of R1 and land-grant during the focus group. Athletic symbols featured prominently, and there were vivid stories around those experiences, the term: "a place to empty your brain," helped frame the sentiment of athletics as an essential part of university life while being perceived as the antithesis of academic life. Participants appreciated experiences that were unique and vivid but not

necessarily negative. These experiences can be seen as rites of passage and were especially

meaningful to them.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of studying the transmission of saga through student experiences with symbols was to understand how the stories students tell of their experiences contribute to the organizational saga of West Virginia University. This research was needed to address a gap in the knowledge around organizational saga in the higher education environment. While previous studies had focused on the role of administrators (Swisher, 2019) and faculty (Clark, 1972) in initiating and perpetuating saga, this study considered the effect student experiences have on saga and how they describe those experiences to others.

The study focused on the dynamic loading taking place through symbolic interactionism. It demonstrated how symbols associated with WVU effectively guided students to develop sentiment around their experiences and that this sentiment was transmittable through stories. Key finding from this research is how the frequency and intensity of exposure to symbols, and the uniqueness of the symbols impacted how students experienced them.

The symbols presented in this study helped participants to anchor their sentiments within experiences unique to being a WVU student. Experiences on the PRT, exploring the mountains around the university, regional cuisine, and integrating university symbology into the culture of being a West Virginian all contributed heavily to the narratives that participants were eager to share. As described in chapter four, these unique characteristics specific to the place and culture of WVU were the most vivid and storied. This chapter reflects on the research questions that guided the study and provides conclusions from the data analysis.

Connection to Theoretical Framework and Summary

The conceptual framework as provided in chapter 1, tracked the journey of an organizational symbol to its contribution to organizational saga. Through this journey, students

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engaged in sensemaking around their experiences with symbols and contributed to organizational

learning through storytelling about these experiences. In doing so, they imbued symbols with

new meaning. This new meaning is then incorporated into other members experiences with

symbols. As sentiment around these symbols develops and they shape the experience of

organizational members, they are contributing to the organizational saga.

Figure 2. (Conceptual Framework)
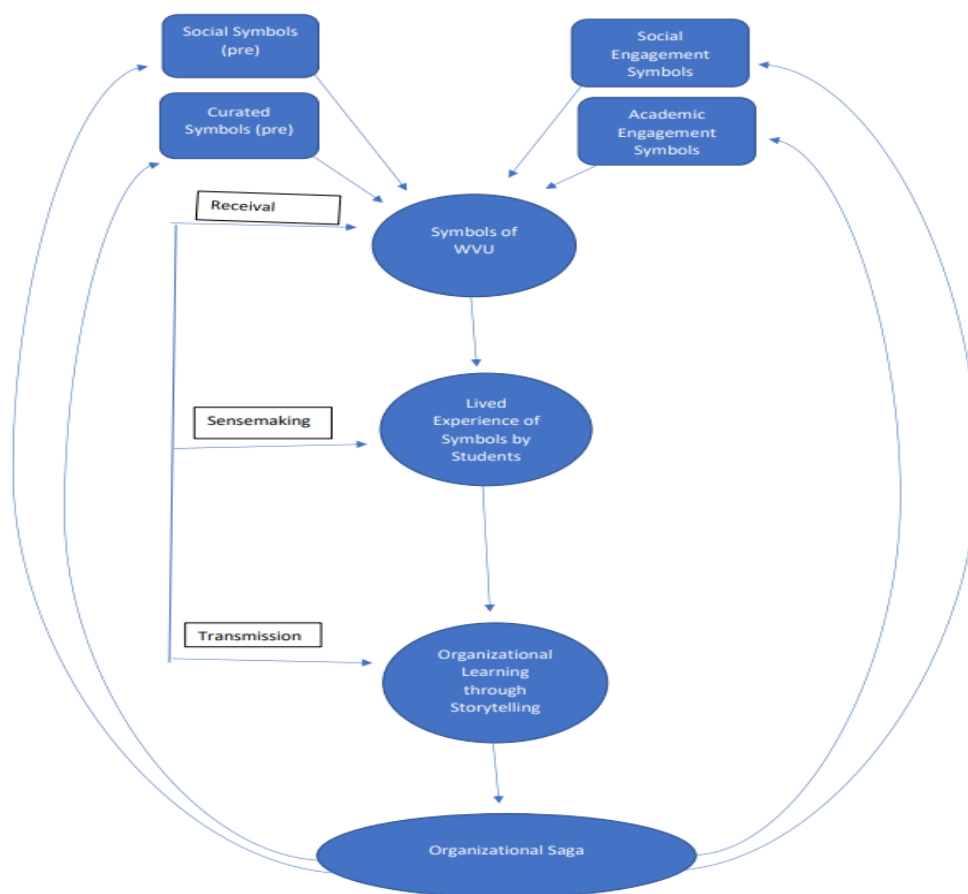
This framework, that organizational saga can be cultivated and shared through stories

shared of undergraduate experiences was derived from the literature which guided this study and

the research questions. Being in the focus group room with the students, I shared the objective of

the research. In sharing the objective, I wanted to elicit stories around the connection between

symbols and experience at WVU. Their stories may be reconstructed with this objective in mind. However, by beginning with the focus group and allowing students to hear one another's stories, I could sense that any preoccupation with the research objective faded and was replaced by a desire to share their experiences with a peer group. While my presence and the knowledge that they were being recorded may have affected which stories students wanted to tell, the arrangement of how those stories were introduced helped to alleviate student concerns about a need for their stories to be severe or consequential. Many laughed while they told stories and commented in the recordings, "that was fun!" They felt comfortable sharing stories and could focus on the stories they wanted to tell.

My preconceived notion from studying symbolic interactionism was that the students would tell stories that demonstrated an existing understanding of the symbols they were presented with based on prior social experiences with those symbols. The more visually prominent symbols would elicit more profound stories of social experiences.

As I analyzed the data, my understanding of the phenomenon was revised. Participants were generally less affected by curated symbols, those which were controlled entirely by the university, and less likely to load these symbols with meaning than they were with highly participatory ones. The PRT, because it could be ridden. The pepperoni roll, which could be eaten, or Country Roads, which could be sung, all elicited deeper connections and more stories of WVU than curated visuals. The students were shown an image of the official university symbol when presented with the Mountaineer. A rugged mountain man in buckskins posed atop a rock. However, participants dismissed this curated symbol and instead focused on an interaction with the human being who portrayed the Mountaineer on campus, offering only a

passing reference to the iconography of the Mountaineer. One said of the graphic, "I don't really like this version of the Mountaineer".

The Mountaineer provided one of the strongest examples of students engaging in the hermeneutic process. While they were presented with a sanitized version of the Mountaineer, the iconography used by the university on t-shirts and other products, they immediately reinterpreted the Mountaineer as a concept. They began to reframe the symbol from impersonal to personal. They discussed in depth what connections they had to the student or students who portrayed the Mountaineer mascot. As Mike stated in the focus group, "My freshman year was the year of Trevor. Always in my heart, the only Mountaineer ever to exist was Trevor." They described what they had felt and remembered. In this way, the students demonstrated the ability to revise their understanding and shape their responses to symbols. This shaping occurred around emotional experience rather than a cognitive understanding of a symbol.

Students were given a brief description of the purpose of the research at the beginning of the study. The preconception they displayed was that any story of a symbol must be a personal story. They were not directed to tell stories of personal experience but rather just a story connected to the presented symbol. In this way, they interpreted each symbol first as a reflection of a personal experience as they began to tell their stories.

Toward the end of a story, the teller's focus often shifted. They tended to move away from describing events to providing reflections. The participants told of how these experiences contributed to the commonality of being a student. As students engaged in storytelling, there was a tendency to bind personal experience to the collective understanding of the symbol. They often revised their understanding around personal to collective experiences: what had happened to each student personally was a component of what was happening to the university.

The results discussed in Chapter 4 were found by analyzing the data and engaging in the hermeneutic cycle. The emergent themes that grew out of the data suggest a more sensory-dependent experience with symbols for them to become emotionally loaded. When students experience symbols in deeply interactive ways with either positive or negative connotations, it increases the shareability of the stories connected to that symbol. These experiences, positive and negative, were the strongest in terms of generating and transmitting organizational saga.

Through the dialogue with the literature and review of the research questions presented in this chapter, the conceptual framework will be applied to understand the processes of saga receival, sensemaking and transmission.

Dialogue with the Literature

This dialogue with the literature explores how earlier findings corresponded or differed from this study and how concepts described in the literature review were applied or modified. The literature review identifies corresponding research areas that influenced the approach. Those areas were Organizational Studies, Symbolic Interactionism, Sensemaking in Organizations, and Organizational Saga.

Stories told by participants often focused on the informal happenings of WVU within its social role. Formal symbols related to structure and policy, which could also imply sets of institutional behavior, were introduced to participants during their breakout sessions. Although these symbols required further explanation for some participants, they eventually resonated.

These formal symbols like R1 and land-grant are both structural and descriptive symbols. Although participants had trouble identifying these symbols at first, after explanation was given, most had stories related to one, if not both, the R1 and land-grant concepts. Discovering these connections demonstrated that while participants may not be aware of the symbol itself, the

meaning of the symbol, as understood by others, can still impact their experiences. In this way, students can continue to load meaning into the symbol through their interactions even if it is not done intentionally.

The following sections explore how the findings addressed the research questions and the connections of the findings to the literature used to guide it. The findings are approached as an organizational study and will describe the impact on organizational culture, behavior, and saga, which emanate from the essence of the student experience.

Organizational studies consider the organization a unique entity that can undergo behavior modifications (Weber & Tribe, 2019). Throughout the focus group participants shared stories that demonstrated an overlap in how they approached each symbol. Stories tended to develop strong themes as more contributions were made. The ability to engage in their own storytelling, based on the precedent set by other participants exemplified the behavior modifications regularly undergone by students.

For example, leading with a humorous story might result in more humorous stories told around the circle, just as a more sentimental story led to similar contributions. The direct experiences remained varied. Participants appeared influenced but not bound to tell a story within the tone or theme of another teller. Understanding their experiences as individuals and group members helped frame how their experiences bond them to the group. These shared experiences, unique to a place and institutional mission, are part of what creates distinctiveness. As Clark (1970) notes, "all organizations have a social role. Ways of behaving linked with defined positions in a larger society" (p. 8). The experiences in the participant stories described the social role of WVU and their desire to participate as members of this distinct social group.

Reflecting on Blumer's (1969) contributions to the concept of Symbolic Interactionism wherein subjectivism allows that individual point of view can alter objects and experiences through the psychological interaction of the individual. The participants' reactions varied due to individual circumstances. The study's design accounted for some of these circumstances, such as resident status, major, gender, and legacy. Other factors, such as race and religious belief, emerged through discussion and impacted the student experience.

Despite the differences within the sample group, consistencies in experience quickly emerged, and elements of the saga began to develop. As Snow (2001) theorized, the repetition of similar individual experiences shifts the broader narrative. As students built on themes related to symbols, such as themes of humor, sadness, and inspiration. They are participating in framing. Framing is a form of sensemaking that allows for the interpretive process to become more routine. So, while experience remains individually distinct, the framing creates a shared understanding of the group of how to interpret the experience.

As a shortcut to sensemaking, framing is vital within a critical sensemaking approach, which Mills and Mills (2010) describe. Critical sensemaking considers the contextual factors that impact experience. Within this critical sensemaking approach, the age and personal development of the participants is seen as impacting their willingness to accept new ways of utilizing framing in the sensemaking process.

For undergraduate students, the sheer number of new experiences and symbols necessitate this framing shortcut in the sensemaking process. Organizations may use organizational structure to harness the power of framing, as suggested by Kezar (2013). This use of framing in directed sensemaking as it occurs within organizations can emerge organically and then become institutionalized. At WVU, the song "Country Roads" exemplifies this. As

described in chapter 4, Country Roads created one of the strongest emotional reactions of any

included in this study. Including Country Roads in heightened moments, a winning football

game, or graduation, for example, helps shape students' feelings about the university and the

state.

This study provides insight into how identity is communicated through the organizational

saga. This transition from an informal happening to an institutionalized act resonates with the

ideas posited by Gioa and Thomas (1996). Gioa and Thomas suggested that symbols become the

vessels for organizational identity. The data from this study suggests that the interactivity of

those symbols for undergraduate students is a critical factor in establishing that organizational

identity.

Organizational saga (Clark, 1972) was a guidepost in this study as it addressed the

rational and irrational aspects of how individuals feel about college. Clark identified a lack of

structure as a boon for initiating saga. This lack of structure, and the need for activity to arise

spontaneously, again speaks to the power of interactivity in intensifying the experiences around

symbols.

While students displayed a sense of sentimentality and warmth toward some structured

symbols, they highlighted less structural elements with greater zeal. The Mountaineer is the most

potent example of this phenomenon, as it is both structured and unstructured. The Mountaineer is

a logo, an image controlled by a marketing team, and in this sense, it is structured. However, the

Mountaineer is also embodied by a live person, which is less structured. Moreover, while other

mascots like the Baylor Bear are static in look and behavior, the Mountaineer is dynamic and

personal. The Mountaineer is a fellow student whose face is exposed, someone who speaks not

only about the institution but speaks to others about their values and can ask questions. The

Mountaineer has an academic major and will someday graduate. It is this personal and unstructured Mountaineer that resonated most with students.

Through the literature around organizational studies, saga, and sensemaking. The research question responses will identify the symbols which most guided the participant's understanding of West Virginia University,

What symbols of West Virginia University have shaped current undergraduates' understanding of WVU's identity?

The symbols that most effectively shaped current students' understanding of WVU's identity are those with which they interacted most frequently and intensely, and which were unique to the organization. The intensity was most prevalent in university spaces where they could have organizationally exclusive experiences, such as the PRT. The impact of frequency on a symbol's ability to shape understanding was most evident in symbols experienced over extended periods, particularly for resident students, as with their long-term exposure to Country Roads and the Flying WV.

Students drew immediate connections and experiences with some symbols but struggled to identify a relationship with others. Regardless of their awareness of the symbol, participants continued to demonstrate connections. Steve, from the College of Engineering and Mineral Resources, demonstrated the ability to reinforce a symbol's attributes without being previously aware of its existence. Although Steve was not aware of the meaning of R1, he was drawn to apply to the university after hearing the story of the Volkswagen emissions scandal. The Volkswagen emissions scandal became international news when engineering students engaged in research discovered that the automaker had engineered the product to return false carbon

emissions readings (NPR, 2015). This finding was a product of the high research activity

associated with being an R1 university.

WVU's identity is derived from the direct experiences and received stories about the

university. This combination of direct and indirect experience means that student exposure to

symbols and their conceptualizations of WVU can be developed over several years before a

student arrives on campus. The effect of this long-term exposure suggests that bold and recent

changes are less impactful on the students than their understanding of the identity as received

through stories long term. For instance, while WVU as a modern institution must engage in

continuous adaptation, as with the recent Academic Transformation (Daily Atheneum, 2021),

student understanding of an organization is more obdurate. What symbolizes the institution to a

student and what they understand that institution to be is closer to the sum of their interactions

than it is their intellectual understanding of organizational structure and design.

The depth of the participant's connection to symbols is often related to the interactivity of

that symbol. This level of interactivity is meant when describing a symbol's *intensity*. Because of

this, less interactive components of organizational structure resonated less during the focus

group. This lack of response to those elements of the structure does not rule out administrative

action as having the ability to impact the student's sense of organizational identity. It does

describe the type of decisions which will resonate more deeply. The development of new

buildings, for example, can be highly interactive. Buildings create places for experience and

become transistors of the organizational saga as students have and communicate experiences

relative to that place.

This understanding of the relationship between meaningful experience and interactivity

provides the administration with a toolkit for reinforcing positive elements of the saga by finding

ways for students to have related experiences. Understanding the impact and intensity of experiences rooted in place and culture may also help the university stabilize an identity that will withstand the organizational shock (Weick, 1995) created as new students enter the organization and bring new ideas and ways of doing. This provides options for the university to engage in finding ways for students to experience the elements of identity attributable to the saga. It also suggests that providing room for greater autonomy, and to allow room for the student's self-efficacy to understand their surroundings can create deeper connections to place than many of those curated by the university.

The participants involved in this study exemplified the capacity of new students to bring about an organizational shock through the distinct experiences they had prior to matriculation and during their time at WVU. The participants were primarily juniors and seniors; they had experienced some profound gaps between what they would expect of a four-year institution's typically vivid campus life and the reality of campus life during the Covid-19 health crisis.

When referenced, as in stories from Mike and Luke, narratives around the pandemic continued to be more closely associated with experiencing place rather than the pandemic itself. There was no mention of direct experiences with the virus or loved ones who had fallen ill during that time. Instead, Mike spoke of volunteering to clean up Grant Street after parties and spending time in a quieter Morgantown.

Luke, who experienced his first year mostly confined to his dorm room, continued to see his dorm as a place where he found independence and moved beyond the restraints of his hometown to seek a better future. Despite the organizational shock experienced during the pandemic, Mike and Luke both told stories that resonated with long-standing elements of WVU's

saga, as a place to explore and find oneself, and of the more exuberant activities occurring on Grant Street.

Within organizational studies, the data presented that how students experience institutional change differs from the administrators' experience. The stories shared by students in this study suggest that student experience is more tightly bound to place than policies. The self-selected symbols, for example, were exclusively bound to place, either buildings or regionally specific items, rather than academics, or leadership within the institution. Because of this, changes that appear massive at the administrative level trickle down in ways either not experienced or not perceived directly by students. In the experiences described by participants in this study, the university's positioning controlled the saga by allowing for experiences in designed times and places rather than directing the experience itself.

What experiences are students having in response to these symbols which contribute to their lived experience of West Virginia University?

The stories that students were drawn to present an element of personal challenge. They were eager to explore times when they had encountered a challenging situation that required them to persevere. They would then describe how their university community helped them overcome the challenge. A student nearly leaving the institution during the mid-year break was brought back by their fortitude and religious community. A first-generation student who worked hard and found his way around campus was assisted by faculty who helped him attain additional financial support. These elements of autonomy and community contributed to the shareability of stories.

This pattern of challenge and support was demonstrated in many of the participant stories, amongst them overcoming PRT mishaps and transitioning from life at home to life with a

college roommate. These challenge stories highlighted their connection to the institution through its people. The focus of many stories showcased the community around them that supported them in overcoming the challenge.

Before students can communicate their experiences around symbols to others, they must first make sense of those experiences. "Critical sensemaking argues that the analysis of sensemaking needs to be explored through, and in relationship to, the contextual factors of structure and discourse in which individual sensemaking occurs" (Mills & Mills, 2010, p. 190).

The students involved in this study described the sensation of leaving home for the first time and establishing their identities at West Virginia University. They are retrospective of how past experiences have influenced the present moment. Within these experiences, students are engaged in the journey of sensemaking, as Weick (1995) described it. To give order and meaning, they are engaged in identity construction as they determine what it is to be a WVU student.

The participants demonstrated a desire to organize their experiences around films, seeing themselves as the protagonist. As described by the first-generation student, Mike, in recalling his time walking near Woodburn Hall, he said, "I'm here, I'm doing the thing," and referenced the film Dead Poet's Society which chronicles the personal journey of young men engaged in academia. Jenna similarly referenced riding on the PRT like being the star in a movie about going to college and allowing her headphones to provide the soundtrack to that film.

Athletics, particularly the Flying WV, become potent symbols of WVU by offering them a way to participate as part of that symbol. The study participants were enactive of their environments; they did not observe others "screaming their heads off" at the football game. They, too, participated in cheering on their team.

Mill's and Mill's (2010) perspective suggests that the sensemaking process is more deeply connected to individual circumstances. The contextual factors of structure and discourse in which individual sensemaking occurs may play a role. These contextual factors are particularly relevant when considering sensemaking in the higher education environment, as it is a unique social and developmental experience. To be a traditional student whose identity is suddenly merged with a nationally known university is a unique contextual factor.

Through a sensemaking lens, WVU was consistently filtered through participant understanding to become an extension of themselves. When they spoke of experiences at WVU, they were enactive in the symbols. The stories demonstrated how symbols drove them to a particular action or sentiment. Their presence around a symbol changed how they felt about it and, in turn, loaded the symbol with new meaning. Statements such as, "I felt at peace" at Woodburn or "Towers was my first time being on my own" indicates this sensemaking process.

Students attributed meaning to those experiences, which were points of transformation. A moment when they became a football fan, overcame a personal struggle, or the feeling joy as they found their place at the institution. In telling these stories, participants were drawn to established symbols of the university, which were static: a building, a logo, or a mountain, for example. A juxtaposition was created between the institutional symbols of stability and personal symbols of change within this sensemaking process.

The student's capacity to make sense of their experiences is part of the process by which they will ultimately determine which events matter to them and why they can also be tied to symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). This process served them in the sensemaking process around symbols.

What are the shared qualities of stories students tell others about their experiences at West Virginia University?

Symbolic interactionism, as described by Blumer (1969), exists on three premises: Human beings act toward things based on the meaning they have for them. That meaning is derived from or arises from the social interaction one has with one's fellows. That meaning is modified through an interpretive process of the person encountering the symbol (Blumer, 1969).

The concept of people interacting with symbols based on the meanings they have for them was most evident in the responses of resident students to symbols that are prevalent statewide. They told stories of growing up singing Country Roads as a reward at the end of the week in grade school and wearing the Flying WV sticker on their face for game day as a special treat. The abundant presence of WVU symbology throughout the state and the admiration the students described parents and teachers showing toward WVU created a solid connection to WVU as a place of pride and celebration.

For the participants, it was clear that social interaction with their peers affected how they interpreted and spoke of symbols on campus. These shared experiences helped reframe them for students—events on the PRT, which might have otherwise been construed as unfavorable, became something else. The PRT breaking down was a component in many of their stories. However, the students laughed when telling the stories of being taken to the wrong station or being in a PRT car when it became stuck on the track. The social interaction around the PRT reframed the idiosyncrasies from impediments to becoming a rite of passage. The social interaction around this symbol has transformed the PRT horror story into a positive attribute, a way for students to prove to themselves and others that they were genuine WVU students.

The individual interpretation and modification of symbols were explored in the most depth through the teamwork exercise in which students selected personal symbols of WVU. Participants identified unique symbols, things, or places found on campus, which through experience, had come to hold a greater meaning to them. In this process, Towers became a symbol of independence and growing up and growing beyond the limits of one's hometown. The stairs from the life sciences building represented a metaphorical and physical rise, symbolizing perseverance.

As the students presented these interactions with symbols, they consistently described a process in which personal experience embedded symbols of WVU with meaning beyond any formal or implied meaning cultivated intentionally by the university. The individualistic nature of those experiences and the student's self-interest in sharing those stories to understand and communicate who they are, has provided a fertile ground for developing sentiment and transmitting saga.

The confluence of university and state exemplifies the process of symbolic interactionism. Students initially acted toward symbols based on the preexisting meanings they had for them. For resident students, this was often the result of family influence, "I remember whenever it was gameday, my mom would buy these little stickers that you put on your face. She would put them on before going to work, and she would ask me if I wanted them too, and I would go to school with them on." For resident students, WVU's symbology was often integrated with symbols of home and family. The symbols of who they had always been.

This conflation of symbology between state and institution creates a more dynamic shift in the meaning of symbols meaning as they reencounter it as a college student. While non-resident students are familiarizing themselves with West Virginia University's symbols for the

first time, the entire student group is beginning to create a shared meaning from the social

interactions between resident and non-resident students.

This collaborative loading of meaning allows the meanings to be modified through an

interpretive process. Students are individually cued by their past and present experiences and

social interactions in ways that can morph the symbol into something more substantial. The

emerging symbol is then loaded with information from the participant's direct experiences and

experiences they have heard about from other students. The sentiment created is created from the

student's feelings toward their experiences and the stories they have been told. If they can

transmit sentiment through telling and receiving stories, it is possible to transmit sentiment to

others in ways that will contribute to the organizational saga.

Significance

The results of this study demonstrate which symbols are most impactful in initiating and

perpetuating organizational saga through the experiences of undergraduate students. Amongst

these findings are that the frequency, intensity and exclusiveness of those symbols' students

experienced were most impactful on their sensemaking around being a student at WVU.

The symbol pools established early in the study, social, curated, and academic were

helpful in early categorizations. However, as the data developed into a clearer picture of the

student experience, the result was that nearly all symbols that presented a meaningful experience

to students had transformed to become a social symbol.

Academic symbols, while initially meant to reference symbols like R1 or land-grant,

were understood only through the intense social interaction students had with those activities,

like participation in a research project with fellow students and faculty or having been a part of

4-H.

Curated symbols designed by the institution to evoke pride or sentiment, such as the

Flying WV, provided a signal to others that one was a group member. Interactions with fellow

Mountaineers while on vacation or being rewarded by getting to dress in the Flying WV as a

cheerleader or wear a Flying WV sticker to school all provided touchpoints wherein one could

deepen their belonging to a social group.

The Mountaineer logo was even disliked by some of the participants. However, the

individual who portrays the Mountaineer at athletic events was beloved because of their social

interactions with the participants.

Within the context of Dandridge et al. (1980), the sensemaking process observed in the

participants turned every symbol into an energy-controlling symbol. The Dandridge et al. study

proposed that Energy-controlling symbols are used internally to inspire or deter behaviors within

the culture. The data in this study showed participants using a descriptive symbol, like the Flying

WV, and system maintenance symbols, like R1, and transforming them into actions. This

reprocessing by the student creates a flow from action to experience to sentiment, resulting in an

organizational saga.

People are drawn to feel a certain way about a university because of the stories they hear

about it. Because of this, it is essential to understand where those stories come from and what

attributes of the stories make them transmittable to others. The significance of this study is its

ability to identify the qualities of the stories at WVU, which have made them enduring and

transmittable as part of the organizational saga. The data collected points to the frequency,

intensity, and exclusivity of university symbols as the top qualities to make an impression on a student, which can then be transmitted through stories.

The study's significance is that it focuses on the student experiences most prevalent in the stories they told. Through these stories, administrators may find ways to allocate resources to generate experiences that will help to perpetuate or originate elements of the organizational saga.

The stories offered by participants in this study were more vivid when describing symbols that, due to the frequency of their exposure, had developed sentiment over time or those experiences that created lasting sentiment due to their intensity and uniqueness. Therefore, for the organizational saga to flourish in the higher education environment, the university should allow for the depth of experience, a high frequency of those experiences, and highlight those experiences which are exclusive to the institution.

This organizational study demonstrates how by creating opportunities for students to engage with symbols of the institution more frequently and intensely, West Virginia University provides opportunities to engage students with the saga. This engagement occurs in ways that fuse student identity with the organizational identity. The more experiences students have of this nature, the more stories are told of the unique and transformative experiences related to the organization. The result is a rich saga and a distinct university.

Limitations

This study was conducted amongst a small, purposeful sample on the campus of West Virginia University in the Spring semester of 2022. The experiences of these students were not directly compared to those of others either at West Virginia University or nationally. Whether the results are more generalizable with student experiences nationally during this time has yet to be verified. The study engaged in the crystallization of the data provided by a small group, in a

single case study with participants, rather than data saturation through an elongated study involving a larger group of participants.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic, which was ongoing during the study, altered much of the student experience due to health and safety restrictions, which inhibited what might be considered an average undergraduate experience.

Within the sample, diversity in major and gender was intentional; however, race was not. One participant stated they were bi-racial, and no other information pertaining to race was collected. The interplay between race and experience was not considered part of this study, and the experiences of people of color may differ based on the historical context of the symbology.

Recommendations for Further Research

All the participants were full-time traditional college students between 18-22 years of age and had both academic and residential life experiences at the university. The conclusion referred to the frequency and intensity of symbols as driving factors to generate the sentiment allowing the organizational saga to be transmitted. Academic trends in recent years have trended toward more online learning. Inside Higher Education reported that between the Fall of 2018 and the Fall 0f 2020, there was an increase of 14.8% nationally of students pursuing at least one course online. (Smalley, 2019). Online and other distance learning modalities and the potential for more asynchronous learning through those formats can diminish some of the experiential formats to which the participants in this study reacted the most. Live athletic events, transportation, dorms, and even dining may effectively be removed as tools to create sentiment and transmit saga through students. Further study may address if and how sentiment is developed in the online learner in ways supporting or different from the established organizational saga of traditional, on-campus students.

Recommendations for Practice

The results of this study call for higher education administrators to consider the intensity of student experiences around symbols' interactivity and uniqueness. To create engaging environments which are generative of organizational saga, administration should seek to first identify that which is unique about the university and the environment in which it is situated. These organic differentiations, the pepperoni roll and the PRT for example, presented some of the most vivid stories from students. The exclusivity of a symbol contributes to its sentiment. Finding ways for students to have rich experiences with symbols exclusive to the institution is critical.

In practice, universities might consider the three key elements of sensemaking/sense giving which Kezar (2013) suggests to move institutions toward transformation: "depth of the process, breadth of engagement across departments campus-wide, and connection to strategies and barriers" (Kezar, 2013, p. 768) These three elements speak to the exclusivity and intensity of experience while incorporating the experiences in a campus-wide strategy.

WVU as with many other colleges, offers an orientation to college course that, in some versions of the class, requires co-curricular activity such as attending a lecture or other academic event outside of regular class hours. Finding ways to use this format to push engagement with symbols may be helpful. Academic advising may also be used as a tool to select coursework that moves students into the environments where this interactivity can occur, may help in creating distinctive experiences for the student that give them stories to tell and in doing so, build the saga of the organization.

Within brand management, the data suggests that current students may have a greater influence on the way that outsiders experience the brand. While targeted and intentional branding may increase visibility and recognition, the ways students are communicating personal experiences

hold more sway in creating distinction. Brand management, like other aspects of the administration discussed in this study, is subject to isomorphic pressures. Brand management is also inherently focused on the most positive aspects of student life and so may not convey the full essence of experience an authenticity as the saga shared by students.

Enrollment management in partnership with marketing, might benefit from a more relaxed branding position that amplifies organic student experience. The diversity and authenticity of student experience with symbols, curated and otherwise, can help to develop new avenues to create distinction and build meaningful sentiment within the brand.

Conclusion

Clark asserts that an organizational saga is "a collective understanding of unique accomplishment in a formally established group. The group's definition of accomplishment, intrinsically historical but embellished through retelling and rewriting, links stages of organizational development. The participants have added affect, an emotional loading, which places their conception between the coolness of rational purpose and the warmth of sentiment found in religion and magic" (Clark, 1972, p. 178). This study was conducted partly to understand how the dynamics of student interactions with symbols helped to differentiate the college experience and guard against the increasing forces of isomorphism to retain this "sentiment found in religion and magic."

This study focused on the experiences of current WVU students. Students now engaged with university symbols to determine how the stories of their experiences contributed to the organizational saga. The saga itself depends on the experiences its students had and how they communicate those experiences. The data gathered through this study suggests that while administration and faculty have control over the structures of the organization, which can create

an environment conducive to positive sagas, it is ultimately the availability of frequent, intense

and unique experiences that will generate the saga, outside the purview of administrative control.

Organizational saga as a tool to create distinctiveness may become a focal point in the

coming years. The effects of normative isomorphism profoundly affect the higher education

landscape. The rising cost of providing higher education translates to higher tuition and increased

scrutiny of organizational behavior and outcomes. These pressures will continue to push

institutions to adopt structures and practices similar to their peer group.

Place and culture exist primarily outside the arena which normative isomorphism can

impact as they are representative of the distinct locations, populations, and history of each

institution. As West Virginia University considers its saga, this study suggests that students, and

their natural inclination to share stories of their experiences, may provide the best venue for

hearing and understanding the organizational saga and how it is being shaped. It is these stories

that, when shared, can convey a sense of place, population, and history which are unique and

meaningful to the university members.

The symbols of WVU often embody these unique attributes. The PRT, the Mountaineer,

and Woodburn are all specific to this place, beloved by its population and critical to

understanding the organization's history. While many components of the student experience

reside outside the control of the administration, understanding how students engage with each

will be critical to remain distinctive in the face of isomorphic pressures.

By doing this, administrations will be better able to intervene with resources that create

structure for saga generation and perpetuation. Just as importantly, they will be able to step aside

as needed to allow for place and the unique experiences inherent to that place to provide a venue

for meaningful experiences and organizational saga to flourish.

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Definitions

Curated Symbols - Intentional symbols developed to convey a particular message by the organization.

Hermeneutics- The theory and practice of interpretation, where interpretation involves an understanding that can be justified. It describes a body of historically diverse methodologies for interpreting texts, objects, and concepts and a theory of understanding.

Social Symbols- Visual or language-based, Organic symbols direct social aspects of experience.

Academic Symbols - Visual or language-based, Organic symbols emanate directly from the academic experience.

Inductive coding: This is an approach in which coding is derived from the data rather than assigning it to pre-existing codes to allow the narrative or theory to emerge from the data itself.

Isomorphism: The process through which professionalism within a specific field influences organizations that are changing over time and becoming more similar.

Land-grant University: A land-grant university is an institution of higher education in the United States designated by a state to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862

Organizational Culture: A distinct population's observed values, beliefs, and traditions.

Organizational Identity- Organizational identity is formed by top leaders establishing core values and beliefs that guide and drive the organization's behavior.

Organizational Learning: The organization's process of gaining knowledge related to its function and using it to adapt to a changing environment and increase efficiency.

Organizational Saga: An organizational saga is a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on the historical exploits of a formal organization, offering strong normative bonds within and outside the organization.

Organizational Shock: New circumstances which bring about different ways of doing things in an organization and alter previously held beliefs.

Phenomenological Study: The study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality. It is directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object.

Research 1: Universities meet benchmarks in research activity and expenditures as measured by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

Sensemaking: Organizational members make sense of unexpected events through a process of action, selection, and interpretation

Symbolic Interactionism is the view of social behavior that emphasizes linguistic or gestural communication and its subjective understanding, especially the role of language in forming the child as a social being.

Thematic Analysis: A method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns

Traditional Student: Post-secondary students under 25 years old who enroll directly from high school, attend full-time, and do not have significant life and work responsibilities (e.g., full-time job or dependents).

Froemel: Transmission of Saga at WVU

Appendix 1A: Participant Intake Form

Participant intake was completed via an online form.

Welcome Paragraph: Please complete the form below to confirm your interest in participating in a research project involving how student experiences on the campus of WVU contribute to the broader story of the university. After you submit the interest form, I will follow up with additional information and disclosures for you to review before confirming your intent to participate. If you have any questions as you complete the form, please contact me at jfroemel@mail.wvu.edu Sincerely, James Froemel.

Data Collected
- First Name
- Last Name
- Email
- Phone
- Preferred Contact Method
- Student's College affiliation
- Major
- Gender Identity
- Residency
- Legacy Status
- First Generation Status
- Focus Group Availability
- Follow-up Interview Availability

Appendix 1B: Participant Cover Letter

Froemel: Transmission of Saga at WVU

Dear Student

Thank you for your interest in becoming a research participant. James Froemel, a doctoral student in the higher education administration Ed.D program, will conduct this research project. James is advised by Dr. Nathan Sorber, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Higher Education.

If you choose to participate in this study, your participation will be entirely voluntary. The study will take place in two parts: a focus group during which you will participate in games based on storytelling and sharing anecdotes about experiences around West Virginia University, and interviews which will delve deeper into how you interpret these experiences. You will be provided to engage in storytelling exercises within the group. What stories you choose to share during this portion will be entirely under your control. The focus group will last up to two hours, and the interviews will be between thirty and sixty minutes. During the subsequent interview, which will take place one-on-one, you may choose not to answer questions and may discontinue your participation at any time.

The study in which you have been invited to participate is intended to provide a better understanding of how West Virginia University student experiences contribute to the story or "saga" of the institution. More specifically, this study aims to identify how symbols guide students' experiences and how the ensuing experiences around these symbols might then reinforce or alter their meaning. The significance of this study is that it presents a way of knowing how student experiences construct the identity of West Virginia University.

This research will include a focus group session as well as individual interviews. Through the focus group, you will be introduced to a group of peer participants and asked to share a first name (pseudonyms are acceptable). Beyond this, your name and any identifying factors will be kept entirely confidential and will not appear in the dissertation. As the principal investigator, I will secure this information on a password-protected drive and will be the only person with access to it. Both the focus group sessions and audio sessions will be audio recorded. Additionally, a portion of the focus group session will be video recorded.

Again, thank you for your interest in this study. I will follow up at least two weeks before the focus group session to provide options for meeting times. The title of this study is "Symbols and Saga of West Virginia University."

Sincerely,

James Froemel

Appendix 1C: Focus Group Protocol

Froemel: Transmission of Saga at WVU

Interviewees: Names, College Academic Year (FR, SO, JR, SR.)

Introduction and Opening

Welcome to the focus group portion of the study. During our time together, I will be sharing with you some symbols of West Virginia University and encouraging you to share stories of your experiences with these symbols. What I mean by 'stories of your experiences with' is anything that sticks out in your mind as an interaction with that symbol. A suitable format for the story might be to think of when you encountered the symbol, what events transpired because of or in the proximity of that symbol, and how you felt about the events that took place. This study concerns your individual experiences but also how we share stories of those experiences. For this reason, I encourage you to tell highly shareable stories that you feel comfortable telling the group and might share casually.

After we have taken some time to share stories, approx. 45 minutes. I will ask you to break into pairs to play a game where you will tell stories one-on-one with a partner based on prompt cards. Taking turns, you will select a card and present a story based on that card. I encourage you to contribute to one another's responses to the cards with your own experiences, as you would when discussing a topic with a friend. If something in the story your partner tells you reminds you of a similar experience, feel free to share it with them.

I want to record our group session with video and will ask you to record your storytelling with your partner using an audio recorder. I will guide the group session and participate in the storytelling exercises with you. During the one-one sessions, I will be moving around to listen in with each group and will also be available should any questions arise during the activity.

Group Storytelling: I will present a series of symbols to you that you have interacted with as students of West Virginia University. I will ask each participant to share a story connected to the symbol displayed. For example, if someone else's story prompts additional connections that you would like to share, I would like you to do so.
There is no set order, and you can speak as often as you need.

Teamwork Exercise: After receiving your cards, I want you to create two new symbols. These might be things that you have seen on campus, a slogan or phrase which is common to hear, etc. Each player will be given five cards, 4 with texts already on them and two blanks. Taking turns, present your partner with a card, face up, and request that they tell you a story about the symbol displayed. Continue this until each player has responded to all cards.

Pre-Written Symbol Cards for Teamwork: R1, Land-grant, Game-Day, Country Roads.

Appendix 1D: Interview Protocol

Froemel: Transmission of Saga at WVU

Interviewee: Name, College, Academic Year (FR, SO, JR, SR)

Pre-Interview Analysis: Before the interview, I will review videos of the focus group and audio of the storytelling games between pairs of participants. From this, I will prepare questions based on specific examples of symbols and meaning-making identified in the stories.

Opening

In preparation for our interview, I have reviewed the recording of our focus group meeting. As we continue, I will be recording our conversation. The audio recording will be transcribed with any personal identifiers removed before destruction. We have allotted one hour for this interview. During that time, I will ask follow-up questions regarding symbols of WVU, which you previously identified through the focus group storytelling games. The research I am conducting concerns how students interact with and symbols of West Virginia University and how these interactions might influence the story or saga of WVU. I am most interested in learning how the symbols we will discuss may have impacted your experiences at WVU.

Interviewee Background

From your intake form, I understand that you are (recap of information provided on the form). Are there any amendments to that information that you would like to make, or is there anything else that you would like us to know about you as a student, e.g., your role as a class officer, Greek life member, etc.?

Interview Structure

Note: I expect variety in the types of symbols students describe and in the stories they tell about them. While it may not be possible to identify interactions from each student within each symbol pool, I will review one of each symbol types with the student. The structure of the questions around the symbols, which will be identified through the transcription and memoing of the focus group section, is provided below.

Throughout this interview, I would like to retrace some of the stories you shared during the focus group session. I will ask you to recall certain symbols and events you described and inquire more deeply about the meaning of these events. What does it mean to you personally when referring to meaning?

You mentioned SYMBOL during your time with the focus group and described an event in which SYMBOL INTERACTION. I want to talk more about how SYMBOL influenced SYMBOL INTERACTION and what that interaction meant to you as a student.

How did you feel when you first encountered SYMBOL?

Have you heard of others feeling a similar way about SYMBOL?

Have you described to others, prior to this study, how you felt when you encountered SYMBOL

Have you told others of your SYMBOL EXPERIENCE before beginning this study?

What concept or story of WVU would be communicated if others heard you tell of your SYMBOL EXPERIENCE?